Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Styles

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Abstract. The research was carried out to study emotional intelligence and conflict management styles using employees in the Human Resources Division at XYZ University in Malaysia. Specifically, it aims to examine the correlation of supervisors' emotional intelligence assessed by themselves and by their subordinates. Second, this study explored the relationship between emotional intelligence possessed by the supervisors and styles of handling conflict as reported by their subordinates. Three sets of surveys were used to measure the results: Emotional Quotient Index (EQI) (Self-rating), Emotional Quotient Index (EQI) (Observer) and Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) Form A surveys. From the correlation analysis, there was no significant correlation between supervisors' emotional intelligence ratings of themselves and the ratings given by their subordinates. Results from these surveys also showed that supervisors' emotional intelligence was associated with using more integrating and compromising conflict management styles by the subordinates.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Conflict Management Styles

1. Introduction

Since we are in the new millennium, new ideas about measuring management potential in emotional intelligence skills are emerging (Langley, 2000). These new ideas do not solely rely on IQ and technical abilities alone. People can become more effective participants through social interaction. The workplace is one of the environments in which people learn about behavior and emotions which take on a greater significance in organizational life. In a study of emotional intelligence and interpersonal relations, Schutte's et al. (2001) found that people with higher emotional intelligence have higher empathetic perspective taking and self-monitoring in social situations, social skills, cooperation toward partners, levels of affection in relationships, marital satisfaction, and satisfaction in relationships.

The finding may be considered as important as it suggests that emotional intelligence could be perceived as a desirable quality that leads to interpersonal attraction. This is supported by Mayer, Caruso & Salovey (2000) who found that people with high emotional intelligence could be more socially effective than their counterparts and thus, could be more skilful in motivating people to achieve goals, aims and missions in organizations.

Conflict is a situation where there are at least two differing perspectives, which can lead to nonproductive results or can be beneficially resolved and lead to quality final products. Therefore, learning to resolve conflict is integral to high performance teams and profit achievements. According to past research, there are significant relationships between emotional intelligence and subordinates' styles of handling conflict with supervisors (e.g., Yu, Sardessai, Lu & Zhao, 2006). Subordinates who have supervisors with high emotional intelligence will use the integrating style (both parties find a creative solution to satisfy both parties' concerns) and the compromising style (both parties win some and lose some, in an attempt to reach a consensus) of conflict management.

1.1. Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence plays a vital role in the organizations because 1) emotions that are handled effectively may contribute to how one handles the needs of individuals, 2) how one motivates employees and 3) how comfortable the employees feel at work. Employees who have high levels of emotional intelligence

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are able to accurately perceive, understand and appraise others' emotions and build supportive networks (Salovey, 1999). They are also considered more interpersonally sensitive and understanding (Davis and Kraus, 1997), warm, protective of others, less critical and deceitful, and more likely to turn to the better perceivers for advice and reassurance (Funder and Harris, 1986).

According to Goleman (1998), the five components of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, motivation and empathy. Self-awareness is associated with the ability to recognize one's internal state, resources, preference and intuitions, e.g., a supervisor is aware of which emotions he or she is experiencing. Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage one's internal states, resources and impulses e.g., a supervisor remains calm despite having to deal with violent situations. Motivation represents the emotional tendencies that assist in reaching goals, for example, a supervisor sets his or her motivation high and attains challenging goals while empathy refers to the ability of being aware of other's situations, e.g., a supervisor understands the feelings transmitted via verbal and non-verbal language. Social skills are associated with one's ability to encourage desirable feedback in others, e.g., a supervisor does not let his negative feelings restrain collaboration.

1.2. Conflict Management Styles

The management of conflict can lead to desired organizational outcomes such as fairness, satisfaction, effectiveness, and efficiency (Jameson, 1999). According to Rahim (1986), conflict is defined as an "interactive state manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or difference within or between social entities" (p. 13). He explained that there are five management styles for resolving conflicts: integrating, obliging, compromising, avoiding and dominating. Integrating engages both parties to examine differences, exchange information and create openness to reach an effective satisfactory solution, e.g., both supervisor and subordinates encourage mutual commitment to a project through incorporating each others' ideas into the final agreement. Obliging is identified with one party attempt to minimize the differences and emphasize shared aims for the other party approval, e.g., a supervisor's thoughts are more important than the subordinates in reaching a consensus. Dominating is identified with a win-lose situation, for example a supervisor takes advantage of his or her position in making a business decision while avoiding is recognized with withdrawal solutions e.g., a subordinate refuses to co-operate with his supervisor in a project physically and mentally. Compromising is when both parties involve in give-and-take situation to reach a consensus e.g., both supervisor and subordinates need a fast but temporary solution for a complex issue.

Gross and Guerro (2000) rated the integrating style as the most effective while the avoiding style was the least effective. Graham (1998) supported that integration will always be greater than compromise in managing disputes. The dominating style provokes conflicts in organization, while integrating, accommodating, and obliging lessen conflicts and prove to be effective (Janssen, & van de Vliet, 1996). An organization that encourages participation (integrating) and problem solving (compromising) behavior attains a higher level of performance (Likert & Likert, 1976). Other studies reported positive results of the integrating style of handling conflict, such as high benefits for the parties, better and greater satisfaction of the partner (Korbanik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Tutzauer & Roloff, 1998; Wall & Galanes, 1986) and higher performance for teams that adopt this style in comparison to teams that use less integrative styles (Vigil-King, 2000). Dominating and avoiding are two styles that can lead to disastrous financial results and personal loss if they are driven by less ethical motives (Rahim, Buntzman & White, 1999).

Thus, by taking these two constructs into account, this study aims to investigate the following hypotheses

- H_1: Emotional intelligence of supervisors will be positively associated with subordinates' use of the integrating style of handling conflict with the supervisors
- H_2: Emotional intelligence of supervisors will be negatively associated with subordinates' use of the obliging style of handling conflict with the supervisors
- H_3: Emotional intelligence of supervisors will be negatively associated with subordinates' use of the dominating style of handling conflict with the supervisors
- H_4: Emotional intelligence of supervisors will be negatively associated with subordinates' use of the avoiding style of handling conflict with the supervisors

- H_5: Emotional intelligence of supervisors will be positively associated with subordinates' use of the compromising style of handling conflict with the supervisors

2. Methodology

This research study applies quantitative approach. Surveys were distributed to the employees at Human Resource Division at XYZ University in Malaysia. Altogether, there were 15 males and 27 females who agreed to fill out the surveys. The participants were between 19 and 46 years old. 16.7% of them were 23 years of age, while 14.3% were between 24 and 27 years of age (M = 27.29, SD = 6.21). A total of 38.1% of people had been working with the current supervisor for about 12 months, and 21.4% of people had been working for about 24 months with the current supervisors (M = 25.94, SD = 27.43).

Three different measures were combined to test the hypotheses. The Emotional Quotient Index (EQI) (observer) was applied to measure the emotional intelligence among the supervisors, the Emotional Quotient Index (EQI) (self-rating) to measure oneself, and the Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) to assess the five styles of handling conflict with supervisors. Internal consistency reliability estimates using Cronbach's alpha ranged from .74 for ROCI-II to .96 for EQI (observer).

3. Results and Discussion

From the correlation analysis conducted, there was no significant correlation between supervisors' emotional intelligence ratings of themselves (M = 29.00, SD = 2.17) and the ratings given by their subordinates (M = 30.23, SD = 3.31); r = 0.16, $p > 0.05$. These differences could be explained by the effectiveness of self-reported emotional intelligence. According to Conte (2005), self-reported emotional intelligence was only able to assess personality characteristics rather than assessing intelligence. Therefore, supervisors' emotional intelligence ratings may have had some misleading information about their emotional intelligence, thus leading to different results than what the researcher intended to find.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis of Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Styles

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables				
	Integrating	Obliging	Dominating	Avoiding	Compromising
Self-awareness	-0.20	0.52	1.09	0.71	1.37*
Self-regulation	0.22	0.18	0.36	-0.18	0.03
Motivation	-0.01	-0.40	0.11	-0.64	-0.36
Empathy	0.53	0.17	-0.89*	0.23	0.01
Social Skills	0.01	-0.36	-0.94*	-0.14	-0.76
R^2	0.28	0.09	0.28	0.14	0.28
Emotional Intelligence	0.49**	0.11	-0.21	0.02	0.32*
R^2	0.23	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.10

Notes: Regression coeeficients are shown. N = 42; df = 5; *$p < 0.05$; **$p<0.01$

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to see if supervisors' emotional intelligence (total score) and its domains respectively could predict subordinates' styles of handling conflicts with their supervisors. Results showed that emotional intelligence of supervisors significantly predicted subordinates integrating styles of handling conflicts with the supervisors; F (1, 40) = 12.23, $p < 0.01$, thus H_1 is accepted. This explained that the more emotional intelligent their supervisors were, the more they used the integrating styles. This result was supported by Weider-Hatfield and Hatfield's (1995) findings in which subordinates that used more integrating styles experienced less intrapersonal, intragroup and intergroup conflicts than low integrating subordinates. Barbuto and Yu (2006) also discovered that integrating was positively related to intrinsic process motivation, and motivation was one of the five domains of emotional intelligence.

Empathy was one of the emotional intelligence domains that was able to predict negatively the dominating style; $t(36)$ = - 2.62, $p < 0.05$. Another domain that could predict subordinates' dominating style

of negatively handling conflict with their supervisors was social skills; $t(36) = -2.12$, $p < 0.05$. Similar to empathy, the negative relationship indicates that the higher the supervisors' social skills, the lesser use of the dominating style of handling conflicts by their subordinates. To support this result, Schutte et al. (2001) discovered that people who had higher emotional intelligence had higher social skills. With the ability of interacting and communicating with other people effectively, subordinates would feel accepted and comfortable in reaching a consensus with their supervisors, thus there would be no need for subordinates to be dominating. This possibly could create a huge conflict over their supervisors.

Emotional intelligence was also able to predict a compromising style of handling conflicts with a positive significant relationship; $F(1, 40) = 4.40$, $p < 0.05$. The compromising style also could be predicted by supervisors' self-awareness; $t(36) = 2.33$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that the higher self-awareness the supervisors had, the more the compromising style would be used by the subordinates. In Kabanoff's (1989) theoretical review of compromising, he found that compromising conflict management was favorably viewed, especially for less competitive people because they portrayed it as a sign of strength. Rahim et al. (1999) also found from their study that employees in a moderate stage opt more for the compromising style when handling conflicts than the employees in the highest and lowest stages of moral development. From these two literature reviews, it could be assumed that subordinates in the Human Resources Division are coming from a moderate/conventional background and less competitive in reaching a consensus. H_5 is then accepted because of the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and the compromising conflict management style.

The results also revealed a negative borderline relationship between motivation and subordinates' avoiding style of handling conflicts with their supervisors; $t(36) = -1.93$, $p > 0.05$. The avoiding style is normally used by people with relatively high value and culture, for example, employees in China (Morris et al., 1998) and in Saudi Arabia (Elsayed & Buda, 1996). Nowadays, employees in Malaysia are encouraged to speak out their opinions and thoughts in order to produce fruitful and productive decisions, although a large portion still refrains from doing so. Thus, the hypothesis of a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and avoiding styles (H_4) is then rejected because only a marginally results was shown.

H_2 and H_3 are rejected because there was no significant relationship between subordinates' dominating and obliging styles of handling conflicts and emotional intelligence of supervisors. Both obliging and dominating styles have their pros and cons in the workplace; it is appropriate when the other party has more power (McShane & von Glinow, 2005) and it is not when both parties have equal powers. Therefore, the subordinates may adopt these styles when they feel they have to speak up or obey their supervisors, but in the mean time, they realize they have to agree or object over a particular issue if they want to achieve an effective solution.

These findings are similar to Yu, Sardessai and Lu (2006) in which integrating and compromising conflict management styles can be most predicted by emotional intelligence. However, it was found that dominating fails to show any significant relationship, which differs from the finding by Yu, Sardessai and Lu (2006), in which they found that supervisors' emotional intelligence is able to predict subordinates' dominating style positively.

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