Conflict Perceptions and Their Role in Managers' Choice of Resolution Style

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Managing conflict has been a central theme in corporate training programs since the 1950s. The main focus of these programs is typically the re-adjustment of disputed understandings, perceptions and attitudes. This conflict resolution approach (Lewin, 1947) is based on the premise that organizational and personal conflicts are problematic and are caused by perspectives that have gone awry. Thus, the strategy is to adjust misunderstandings by building a climate of trust, calming emotions and finding a path to agreement (Coleman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2004).

Today's turbulent managerial environment calls for a different approach. Indeed, managers are constantly faced with uncertain economic times and political workplaces resulting in unfamiliar and rapidly changing situations. Since issues which are central to the organization's mission are inherent in each of these situations, the resolution of these issues, many times, will determine how, or whether, the organization survives. Therefore, today's managers not only face bad attitudes and misunderstandings – they face real differences, dilemmas and threats that reduce effectiveness and threaten the organization's mission and purpose. Given that managers are charged with determining the right path and appropriate action steps, the traditional conflict resolution approach appears to fall short.

While most people can intellectually understand that workplace conflict can be useful, most feel that it is an unwanted experience. Consequently it is not unusual for people to avoid conflict at all costs. This passive behavior leads to ineffective leaders and maladaptive organizational cultures (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). Others may enjoy the thrill that comes from arguing, debating or negotiating, yet this can also produce an undesirable result because it may accelerate into a "win or lose" contest. These different approaches can be termed "Conflict Frames."

Conflict Frames

According to Rhoads (2004), "A frame is a psychological device that offers a perspective and manipulates salience in order to influence subsequent judgment." From this definition we can see that a frame offers a perspective – that is, how an individual will perceive incoming information. A frame will compel an individual to perceive a topic as either a gain or loss (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), healthy or unhealthy (Levin & Gaeth, 1988) or positive or negative (Meyerowitz & Chaiken, 1987).

Frames also manipulate salience, where certain features are easily considered and other features are overlooked or ignored. This is exemplified by the research of Asch (Tesser, 1995). His research showed that there are central traits that important in making sense of not only people, but situations. He argued that impressions are a configuration where the parts fit together – and when we have a frame we will search out and notice information that fits.

The frame and the pieces of information that are made salient by it both affect subsequent judgments, decisions and behaviors. For example, when a solution is framed as a loss (e.g., "X

number of people will die") vs. when it is framed as a gain (e.g., X number of people will be saved"), respondents will overwhelmingly reject the loss framed solution in favor of the gain framed solution (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982).

Following this definition, a conflict frame would be an individual's perspective about conflict (and any conflict-prone situation), that effectively makes him/her prone to noticing certain environmental information which affects the ensuing decisions and behaviors.

Purpose of Conflict Frames

Frames exist in the human cognitive system because they are related to knowledge structures, or schema. Basically, frames focus the individual's attention on data within the schemata – thereby reducing complexity and streamlining information (Sussman, 1999). This allows individuals to make sense of their environment.

If possessing a specific conflict frame prevents an individual from acting fruitfully in the face of a conflict then all opportunities available from conflict situations are destroyed (Neale & Bazerman, 1992). In today's increasingly complex and fast-paced workplaces this will not only lead to individual ineffectiveness but organizational ineffectiveness as well.

If the conflict frames that lead to maladaptive behaviors can be described and measured, then developmental efforts can be used to adjust these frames and increase the probability of adaptive behaviors and decisions.

In sum, it is proposed that conflict, per se, should not be deemed as an undesirable state, consigned to be totally eliminated. Instead it should be acknowledged as a result of the complicated world in which we live, especially in the business world. Therefore, instead of concentrating on reducing conflict, emphasis should be placed on the perceptions of conflict, or conflict frames. By determining which conflict frames are adaptive and which are unadaptive (thus leading to good and bad decisions), we can help reduce the negative effects of conflict situations. Although a complete and thorough assessment of the variety of conflict frames available (see Roth & Sheppard, 1995) is beyond the scope of the present research, we seek in the present research to explore the relationship between personal styles and cognitive frames with responses to conflict. We therefore propose the following:

Hypothesis: Those who view conflict as an opportunity to grow, have objectives beyond winning or losing and believe they can benefit regardless of the outcome, will indicate conflict resolution styles that include productive, "win-win" behaviors. Those respondents who view conflict as personally threatening, unnecessary and destructive will indicate conflict resolution styles that are associated with "giving in," avoidance and helplessness. Respondents who view conflict as a threat to their position, an opportunity to overpower and "beat someone else" will indicate conflict resolution styles that are associated with using force, trickery and criticism.

Method

Participants

The respondents in this study were managers (n=247) attending leadership classes. There were roughly the same amount of females (48%) as there were males (52%), with an average age of

45.5 years. All of the respondents had a college degree, with 89% having a Master's degree or above.

Instruments

The *Life Style Inventory*™ (LSI; Lafferty, 1989) was used to measure the conflict frames. The LSI is a survey that assesses how the respondent perceives others' reactions to him/her. The LSI contains 240 items designed to produce 12 scales of 20 items each. Each item describes a behavior or personal style that is like or unlike the respondent. On a scale of 0 (*Essentially unlike me*) to 2 (*Like me most of the time*), respondents were asked to rank each item by how accurately it describes them. The 12 scales and the patterns they reflect are classified into three major clusters, Constructive, Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive, with four styles each (Table 1).

The 12 styles measured by the LSI are placed around a circumplex on which scores can be plotted to generate a profile of the respondent's current view of him/herself. The location of the styles is based on a People vs. Task emphasis and Satisfaction vs. Security needs (Lafferty, 1989).

The styles near the top of the circumplex are those styles, if adopted; permit members to fill satisfaction needs. Styles near the bottom of the circumplex are those that require members to think in terms of security and promote self-protective behaviors. Styles on the right side of the circumplex indicate an emphasis on people, whereas the styles on the left side of the circumplex indicate an emphasis on tasks (Figure 1). Based on the satisfaction/security and people/task

distinctions, conflict frames can be examined in terms of the three general clusters: Constructive, Passive/Defensive, or Aggressive/Defensive.

The style scores are derived by summing the raw scores for each style and converting them to percentile scores that compare their scores to those obtained by others. On the circumplex, the center ring presents the 50th percentile. Scores falling below the 25th percentile reflect weak expectations for the behavior in question. Scores falling above the 75th percentile reflect strong expectations for the behavior in question. Scores that fall close to the 50th percentile reflect moderate expectations for the behavior in question (Figure 2). In practice, when interpreting the LSI results, emphasis should be on the percentile scores, not the raw scores.

Additionally, the respondents completed a supplemental questionnaire that asked them to indicate how likely it is that they will engage in a specific behavior when faced with a disagreement or conflict with another person. The Conflict Response scale contains 22 items which describe possible reactions to conflict situations. Respondents used a scale of 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Always*), to indicate the likelihood of engaging in the described behavior.

These items are categorized into one of three conflict resolution styles. The first resolution style is an Adaptive conflict response style. This style is exemplified by conflict resolution behaviors that identify issues of conflict without escalating the situation into a combat and allows for positive benefits regardless of how the conflict is finally concluded. The second resolution style is Unadaptive: Reactive conflict response style, where the conflict resolution behaviors produce less-than-desired results because it inhibits defining and clarifying the conflict issues. The third

resolution style is Unadaptive: Hostile conflict response style, where the conflict resolution styles produce less-than-desired results because it frequently escalates conflict into a 'win or lose' contest. See Table 2 for sample items.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, inter-correlations among the conflict response styles and the 12 styles assessed by the LSI, with alpha reliabilities on the diagonal. As this table shows, we obtained very good reliabilities for all the scales included here, with an average Cronbach's alpha of .79.

The results indicate support for our hypothesis that there are important relationships between conflict frames (as measured by the LSI), and conflict resolution styles (as measured by the Conflict Response scale).

Specifically, Adaptive conflict response style is significantly related to nine aspects assessed by the LSI, including four positive relationships with Constructive aspects (Constructive cluster overall, Self-Actualizing, Affiliative, and Achievement), and five negative relationships with each of the defensive styles (Aggressive/Defensive cluster overall, Oppositional, Power, and Competitive; Avoidance from the Passive/Defensive cluster). Unadaptive: Reactive conflict response style shows a similar pattern, except it is positively related to five aspects of the Passive/Defensive cluster (Passive/Defensive overall, Approval, Conventional, Dependent, Avoidance), one style of the Aggressive/Defensive cluster (Oppositional) and one negatively related to style of the Constructive cluster (Achievement). Likewise, Unadaptive: Hostile conflict

response style: Hostile shows the same pattern as Unadaptive: Reactive conflict response style, except it is positively related to all of the Aggressive/Defensive cluster (including the overall cluster), all but one (Dependent) Passive/Defensive styles and negatively related to all but one (Achievement) in the Constructive cluster.

To further explore the relationship between thinking styles and conflict resolution styles, the respondents were further grouped into high or low Constructive thinkers, high or low Passive/Defensive thinkers and high or low Aggressive/Defensive thinkers. The results of the f-tests show that, indeed, respondents who had a high Constructive thinking style indicated that they would likely behave with Adaptive responses (M=4.96) more so than those with low Constructive thinking styles (M=4.62; F=9.606, df=1, p=.002). Also those with high Constructive thinking styles indicated that they would be less likely behave with Unadaptive: Hostile responses (M=2.15) than those with low Constructive thinking styles (M=2.31; F=5.390, df=1, p=.021). There was not a significant difference between the Unadaptive: Reactive responses (F=.353, df=1, p=.553).

When examining the high vs. low Passive/Defensive thinkers, the only significant difference was in the Unadaptive: Reactive responses, with those low in Passive/Defensive thinking indicating significantly fewer (M=2.98) Reactive responses than those high in this kind of thinking (M=3.36; F=25.470, df=1, p=.000). However when examining the Aggressive/Defensive thinkers the only non-significant difference was with the Reactive responses, where the low (M=3.15) and the high thinkers (M=3.19) did not differ. But there were differences between the high and the low Aggressive/Defensive thinkers regarding Adaptive responses and Unadaptive:

Hostile responses. Specifically, the low Aggressive/Defensive thinkers indicated significantly more Adaptive responses (M=4.96) than the high thinkers (M=4.65, F=8.146, df=1, p=.005). Conversely, for the Hostile responses, the high thinkers indicated a higher amount (M= 2.41) than the low thinkers (M=2.03, F=32.764, df=1, p=.000).

Discussion

The implications of these findings, and the manner in which thinking patterns influences one's ability to deal with conflict situations, is that knowing how one perceives, or frames, conflict instances it is possible to predict the resulting conflict resolution behaviors with some degree of accuracy. Specifically, if a conflict situation is framed in a Constructive manner, where one sees opportunities to move forward, then the resulting behaviors will Adaptive, where issues are addressed forthrightly and a productive conclusion is expedited. Additionally, Unadaptive: Hostile behaviors will be unlikely – therefore the adversarial nature of conflict is reduced.

However if a conflict situation is framed in a Passive/Defensive manner, where one becomes threatened and is motivated to eliminate the conflict at all costs, then the resulting behaviors will be Unadaptive: Reactive, where issues are not defined or clarified – only avoided or surrendered. These behaviors do not lead to productive decisions or conclusions.

Likewise, if a conflict situation is framed in an Aggressive/Defensive manner, where not only is one threatened and motivated to win at all costs, but one is motivated to overpower the other, then the resulting behaviors will be Unadaptive: Hostile, where the conflict escalates into a

'win/lose' contest – at the expense of a productive solution. Additionally, the likelihood of Adaptive behaviors being performed decreases.

This research has significant implications for the present day world of work. It is a given that conflict is inevitable – it is a normal part of being human. How conflict affects people at work is determined both by circumstance and by the conflict frame. Is conflict viewed as a help or a hindrance? Will it lead workers to more creative and productive relationships or will it destroy relationships? Whether conflict impacts workers positively of negatively depends on how it is framed.

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Table 1.
Descriptions of the 12 Styles measured by the Life Styles Inventory. *

Constructive – Styles promoting satisfaction behaviors	
Achievement	Measures interest in and ability to attain high-quality results on challenging projects. This is characterized by the belief that conflicts are to be expected and can be useful in achieving goals and practical solutions to problems.
Self-Actualizing	Measures a strong acceptance of oneself and an equally strong acceptance of others. This reflects the view that conflict is not just a practical reality but a vital force for personal and social development.
Humanistic Encouraging	Measures interest in and ability to inspire people. This represents the belief that people are basically well intentioned and want to work through their differences in reasonable and fair ways.
Affiliative	Measures how much relationships are valued and the ability to form and sustain them. This is characterized by the belief that conflict is a natural part of living and working together; as long as people value their relationships, they will find ways to work out their differences.
Passive/Defensive – Styles promoting people-security behaviors	
Approval	Measures the need to be approved of by others in order to increase or sustain feelings of self-worth. This is characterized by the belief that self worth is dependent upon others' approval and acceptance; therefore, one shouldn't take a stand if it puts him/her at odds with others.
Conventional	Measures the level of preoccupation with maintaining a low profile by strictly adhering to rules. This is characterized by the belief that being a 'good' person preserves one's feelings of status and security; conflict is seen as disruptive and disorderly.
Dependent	Measures the degree to which one feels his/her efforts do not count. This is characterized by feelings of powerlessness in the face of conflict and the need to seek out relationships with 'protectors.'
Avoidance	Measures the tendency to withdraw or flee from conflict situations. This is characterized by the belief that conflicting with others is unnecessary and destructive.
Aggressive/Defensive – Styles promoting task-security behaviors	
Oppositional	Measures the tendency to use the strategy of disagreeing with others to gain attention. This is characterized by the belief that acceptance and respect are gained through constantly demonstrating one's competence; escalate conflict situations by assuming the role of critic and prosecutor.
Power	Measures the tendency to associate self-worth with the degree to which others can be dominated. This reflects the belief that people are basically motivated by power and control. View conflict as a power struggle for supremacy; accumulate power and use force to pursue their interests.

Competitive	Measures the need to establish a sense of self-worth through competing and comparing oneself to others. This assumes that conflicts are contests by which one can either gain or lose status; their position of superiority tends to escalate legitimate differences into 'win/lose' situations.
Perfectionistic	Measures the degree to which one feels driven to be seen by others as perfect. This is characterized by strong internal conflict which adversely affects how they handle conflict with others.

*From *Life Styles Inventory™ Conflict* by J.C. Lafferty, 1989, Plymouth, MI: Human Synergistics. Copyright © 1989 by Human Synergistics. Adapted by permission.

Table 2.
Illustrative Conflict Response Items. *

Please circle one response for each of the items below. When you have a disagreement or find yourself in conflict with another person, how likely is it that you will…	RESPONSE OPTIONS: 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. About half of the time 5. Often 6. Almost always 7. Always

Adaptive	Unadaptive: Reactive	Unadaptive: Hostile
…look for a compromise solution to get things resolved.	…try to overlook it to prevent the conflict from escalating.	…not waste time negotiating because it usually doesn't warrant the attention.
…put yourself in the other party's shoes to better understand where they're coming from.	…give in to the other party's demands.	…only care about winning.

*The illustrative items are presented in an order that is different from the order in which they are presented.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities (on the diagonal) and inter-correlations among variables.

Variables	M	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Conflict Response Style Scales																				
1. Adaptive	4.8	0.9	*.67*																	
2. Unadaptive: Reactive	3.2	0.6	.23*	*.64*																
3. Unadaptive: Hostile	2.2	0.5	-.27*	.23*	*.70*															
LSI Scales and Subscales																				
4. Constructive Cluster	31.1	4.4	.22*	-.08	-.18*	*.83*														
5. Humanistic-encouraging	32.0	4.8	.12	-.05	-.21*	.81*	*.84*													
6. Affiliative	32.2	5.5	.23*	.05	-.17*	.79*	.68*	*.89*												
7. Achievement	30.8	5.8	.15*	-.17*	-.06	.75*	.45*	.31*	*.86*											
8. Self-Actualizing	29.5	5.7	.19*	-.06	-.16*	.88*	.57*	.61*	.65*	*.85*										
9. Passive/Defensive Cluster	12.6	4.0	-.04	.39*	.19*	-.03	.05	.18*	-.18*	-.12	*.82*									
10. Approval	13.3	5.7	.09	.36*	.12*	.06	.11	.33*	-.22*	.00	.77*	*.81*								
11. Conventional	15.4	4.7	-.03	.31*	.18*	.03	.04	.15*	-.04	-.05	.82*	.44*	*.77*							
12. Dependent	16.1	5.1	-.07	.30*	.10	.03	.09	.20*	-.08	-.08	.87*	.61*	.63*	*.75*						
13. Avoidance	5.6	4.4	-.17*	.29*	.24*	-.25*	-.12	-.15*	-.23*	-.30*	.75*	.33*	.60*	.55*	*.82*					
14. Aggressive/Defensive Cluster	9.4	3.8	-.20*	.12	.44*	-.02	-.19*	-.21*	.24*	.07	.25*	.07	.25*	.14*	.37*	*.83*				
15. Oppositional	5.8	4.6	-.20*	.24*	.36*	-.24*	-.26*	-.27*	-.08	-.17*	.42*	.18*	.36*	.30*	.57*	.79*	*.83*			
16. Power	4.2	4.1	-.26*	.10	.46*	-.13*	-.22*	-.30*	.09	-.01	.12*	-.06	.15*	.03	.33*	.84*	.65*	*.83*		
17. Competitive	10.1	5.0	-.13*	.07	.34*	.04	-.14*	-.04	.19*	.10	.20*	.22*	.17*	.09	.17*	.81*	.51*	.56*	*.79*	
18. Perfectionistic	17.3	5.1	-.08	-.01	.28*	.22*	-.01	-.12	.52*	26*	.06	-.11	.14*	.03	.17*	.81	.45*	.60*	.55*	*.77*

Note: N=247, * $p \leq .05$, two-tailed.

Table 4
Conflict Response Styles by Thinking Styles (Conflict Frame)

Conflict Response Style	Thinking styles (Conflict Frame)					
	Constructive		Passive/Defensive		Aggressive/Defensive	
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
Adaptive	4.62a	4.96a	4.86	4.73	4.96b	4.65b
Unadaptive: Reactive	3.20	3.15	2.98a	3.36a	3.15	3.19
Unadaptive: Hostile	2.31a	2.15a	2.17	2.30	2.03b	2.41b

Note: Judgments were made on a 7-point scale (1=*Never*, 7=*Always*). Means in the same row that share a subscript differ at the $p \leq .05$.

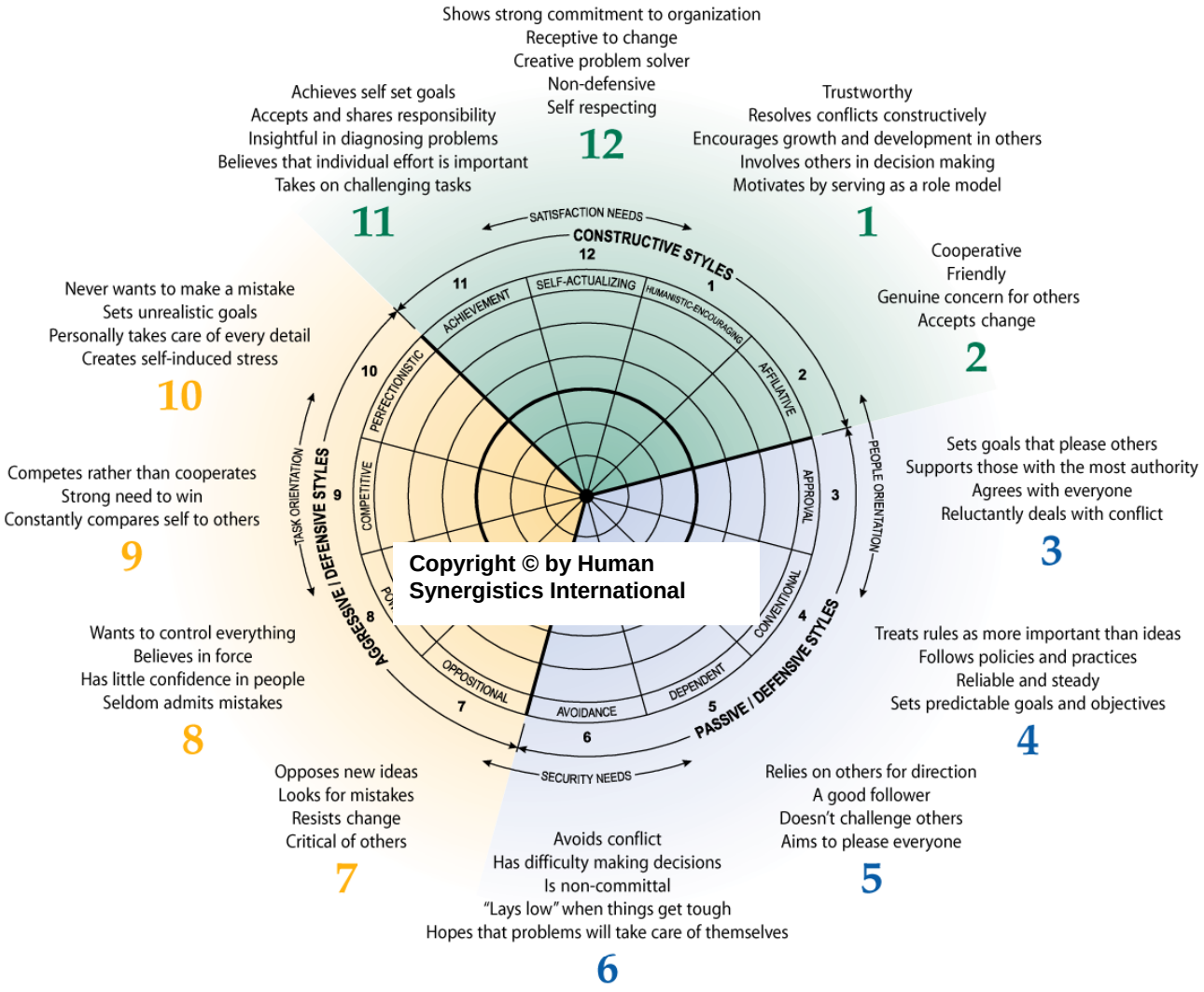

Figure 1. The *Life Styles Inventory (LSI) Circumplex* allows an individual to profile his/her score against a normed score. From *Life Styles Inventory TM* by and J.C. Lafferty, 1989, Plymouth, MI: Human Synergistics. Copyright 1989 by Human Synergistics, Int. Adapted by permission.