



CENTERIS - International Conference on ENTERprise Information Systems / ProjMAN - International Conference on Project MANagement / HCist - International Conference on Health and Social Care Information Systems and Technologies, CENTERIS / ProjMAN / HCist 2017, 8-10 November 2017, Barcelona, Spain

## Conflict Management Style of Team Leaders in Multi-Cultural Work Environment in the Construction Industry

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### Abstract

A project delivery challenge arises in temporary (multi) organizations (TMOs) when the team is multi-cultural in character. One particular element that can influence team effectiveness in such environment is the way conflicts are handled. Recent research implies that different styles of conflict management have different impacts on team effectiveness, some being positive and some negative, and that the impact is often mediated by other factors. Nevertheless the impact of conflict handling style on team performance in TMO multi-cultural environments in East Asia has not widely been considered. As a result, this study investigates how conflict management can contribute to effectiveness in such environments, through the mediation of the level of team coordination, by gathering data from 126 team leaders and supervisors and 378 members nested in different multi-cultural projects in the Malaysian construction industry. The findings suggest that managing conflict cooperatively help to build the ideal positive share to team performance in multi-cultural environments in Malaysian construction industry, while a high degree of team coordination is also existing. The findings also advocate that the avoiding conflict management style may incorporate a positive result when it comes to team overall performance and that the effect of adopting avoidance conflict handling is also mediated by the level of team coordination.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the scientific committee of the CENTERIS - International Conference on ENTERprise Information Systems / ProjMAN - International Conference on Project MANagement / HCist - International Conference on Health and Social Care Information Systems and Technologies.

*Keywords:* Conflict management; Team performance; Team coordination; Temporary-multi-organizations; Construction Industry; Malaysia

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## 1. Introduction

Studies on conflict management proposed that conflict is a common feature of group activities and inherent to a wide range of interactions of team members [1,2]. Stress and anxiety to reach an agreement [3], power differences [4], complexity of the task [5], culture and leadership models employed by team leaders [6] all affect the manner in which conflict ought to be handled. The literature likewise signifies that the success of coping with conflict has a strong influence on project performance, mainly in temporary business environments such as the construction industry, which is centered on projects [7].

On the other hand, conflict is not only found to be harmful to teamwork activities but also to be incredibly helpful in some team-based work settings [2, 8, 9, 10]. Team members' understanding of how their goals could be influenced by self and peers' actions clearly influences the structure of interactions and the success of conflict management [11]. As mentioned earlier conflict by itself is not always unfavorable. For this reason conflict ought not to be specifically avoided but instead should be thoroughly managed to be able to gain the optimum results [12]. In addition, it has been marked that the way a group of people deals with conflict significantly affects group performance [1, 2, 8, 10]. As a result, the adopted method of conflict management in group environments may influence the way teams are coordinating. However, prior researched in Western contexts propose that in the temporary organization commencing projects the coordination of a team influences the team efficiency along with the overall project performance [13]. Though these relationships have not been widely tested in other cultural contexts, such as East Asia, the objective of our study was to investigate the associations between conflict management strategies, team coordination, and performance of multi-cultural teams that structure temporary organizations to be able to undertake projects. Our knowledge of the mechanisms whereby team leaders exert influence at the team level, by means of conflict management and coordination, is still confined [14]. Consequently, by investigating the conflict management practices, team coordination, and performance of project teams our study has significant theoretical contributions.

## 2. Conflict-handling Styles

Conflict-handling models have already been determined by means of different techniques that individuals or leaders may apply when interacting with peers or subordinates in contrary social or business relationships [15]. Effectual styles that result in conflict resolution improve work solidity, encourage emotions of self-efficacy between team members, reduce the probability of unfavorable conflicts in long term works, and likewise lead to long term company's economic development [16, 17].

A considerable number of theoretical models of coping with interpersonal conflict have been recommended i.e. [16, 18, 19]. These theorists, however, developed based on the revolutionary work of Blake and Mouton [20], who categorized conflict managing practices into five styles: forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, and confrontation. The authors even further arranged these five approaches under two wide dimensions, namely: 1) concern for people and 2) concern for task. In 1976, Blake and Mouton's designs for handling conflicts was reevaluated and refined by Thomas (1976, cited in [20]). Thomas also arranged the approaches of dealing with conflict into five styles and he also determined two main dimensions: 1) cooperativeness, within which individual's concerns are higher for peers; and 2) assertiveness, when self-concerns are more significant. Along with these two dimensions, five distinct conflict resolution models were presented, which are named as: cooperative, competitive, accommodating, avoiding and compromising [18]. The aforementioned styles have been depicted in Figure 1 and can be summarized as follows:

- Cooperative (high concern for others and high concern for self. So-called integrating and win-win)
- Competitive (low concern for others and high concern for self. So-called dominating and win-lose)
- Accommodating (high concern for others and low concern for self. So-called obliging and lose-win)
- Avoiding (low concern for others and low concern for self. So-called inaction/ignoring and lose-lose)
- Compromising (mid-range on both concern for others and concern for self. Partially win-partially win)

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