Learning material on interpersonal conflict: Rahim's model

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1. Introduction - Rahim's model

Rahim classified organisational conflict as intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup can on the basis of levels at which the conflict occurs. Rahim described these four types of conflict as follows:

1. Intrapersonal Conflict, also known as intra-individual or intra-psychic conflict, occurs when an organizational member is required to perform certain tasks and roles that do not match his or her expertise, interests, goals, and values.

2. Interpersonal conflict, also known as dyadic conflict, refers to conflict between two or more interacting individuals, as manifestation of incompatibility, disagreement or differences between the parties involved in a conflict. It can involve the same or different hierarchical levels or units (Rahim, 2011). Following different styles model of handling interpersonal conflict are discussed.

3. Intragroup Conflict, also known as intradepartmental conflict. It refers to conflict among members of a group or between two or more subgroups within a group regarding goals, tasks, procedures, and so on. It might also occur as a result of incompatibilities or disagreements between some or all members of a group and its leader

4. Intergroup Conflict, also known as interdepartmental conflict, refers to conflict between two or more units, divisions, departments or groups within an organization, regarding, tasks, resources, information, and so on (e.g. line and staff, production and marketing; labour and management.).

2. Two-three-four and five factors model of handling interpersonal conflict

Due to the extent of the ENACT project we will specifically focus on the interpersonal conflict. Following are discussed different styles model of handling interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflicts can be handled with various styles of behaviour. In literature is it possible to distinguish different conflict resolution styles taking into account two-three-four and five factor model. Deutsch (1949) first suggested the two factors cooperative–competitive model in the research on social conflict. Similarly to game theory perspective this model uses a cooperative–competitive continuum to simplify the categorization of conflicts. Deutsch and associated have suggested that the cooperative style compared to the competitive style is more effective in managing conflict, leads to a more functional outcomes, although these studies have not presented evidence of a positive correlation between cooperative style and job performance and productivity. Despite the factor model, it is quite unlikely deal with situations implying purely cooperative or purely competitive conflict, so game theorist have recognised that conflict situations can be characterized by both cooperative and competitive aspects (mixed-motive conflicts), that is very similar to the compromising style proposed by Rahim. Example of three styles of handling interpersonal conflict were proposed by Putnam and Wilson (1982) non-confrontation; (obliging in Rahim), solution-orientation (integrating in Rahim), and control (dominating in Rahim) and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) with the three styles forcing, smoothing, and confrontation. According to Rahim the main limits of those models regards that the theoretical basis for the three-category conflict styles is not clear and statistical instruments and methods for investigating and analyse the factors are not sufficiently robust.

Other two models of the three styles of handling conflict belong to research in the area of marital conflict, respectively developed by Billingham and Sack (1987): reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence; and Rands, Levinger, and Mellinger (1981): attack, avoid, and compromise. However there is no evidence of the relationships between the three conflict styles and organisational behaviour, and individual, group, organizational outcomes.

Pruitt (1983) suggested a four style model of handling conflict based on the dual concern model for self (high or low) and for others (high or low), resulting in the following styles: yielding, problem solving, inaction, and contending. Like the previous models compromising is not recognised as a distinct style. Empirical evidence from laboratory studies (Pruitt, 1983; Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993) has shown that problem solving is the most effective style for managing conflicts, although these studies have not presented evidence of how the four styles can impact on job performance and productivity. Another four styles model of conflict management resulted useful for the conceptualization and operationalization of marital conflict was proposed by Kurdek (1994), and comprises of the

following 4 dimensions: problem solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance.

The first five factor model of handling interpersonal conflict in organizations was conceptualized by Follett (1940). The author first found that conflict was managed in three main ways: domination, compromise, and integration, as well as secondary ways avoidance and suppression.

The first conceptual scheme for classifying the styles for handling interpersonal conflicts in five types was proposed by Blake and Mouton (1964): forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, and problem solving. The model was based on a two main dimensions: production concern and people concern. These dimensions describe the attitude of the manager of being a task or relation oriented leader, from wich combination result five leadership style (see Fig. 1). Similarly to the leadership grid proposed by Blake and Mouton, it is worth of note to remember that Harsely and Blanchard situational leadership theory concentrates on two key leadership behaviours, whereas the former labelled these two dimensions task and relationship behaviours (Fiore, 2009).
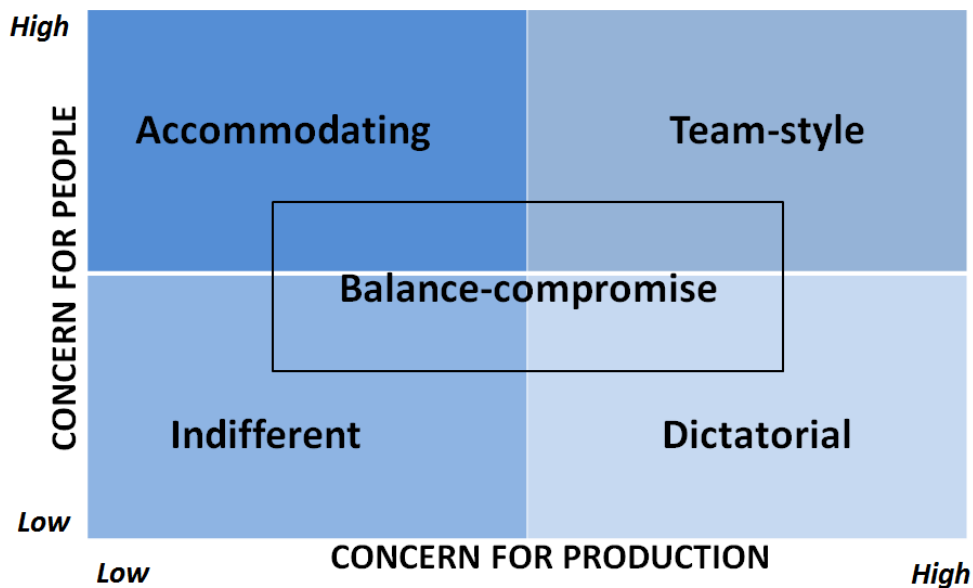
Fig. 1. Blake and Mouton: leadership grid

Blake and Mouton's scheme was reinterpreted and extended by numerous researchers. For example Thomas (1976) extended this model including the intentions of the parties involved, and classified the conflict handling styles using two dimensions assertiveness (attempting to satisfy one's own concerns) and cooperativeness (attempting to satisfy other party's concerns). A combination of the level of assertiveness and cooperativeness dimensions determines the following five conflict handling modes employed by the parties: competing (assertive and uncooperative), collaborating (assertive and cooperative), compromising (moderate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness), avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative) and accommodating (unassertive and cooperative).

The Rahim's five styles of conflict handling model was based on both the grid of managerial styles proposed by Blake and Mouton, as well as the Thomas's five modes model. Rahim and Bonoma (1979) differentiated their five styles of handling interpersonal conflict on two dimensions: 1) concern for self (the degree -high or low- to which a person attempts to satisfy one's own concerns), and concern for others (the degree -high or low- to which a person attempts to satisfy the concern of others). As pointed out by Rahim (2011) these dimensions portray the motivational orientations individuals during conflict. The authors by combing these two dimensions identified 5 conflict handling styles: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. Rahim and Bonoma consolidated and improved their framework by involving over 1,200 managers across the United States (Rahim, 1983). Compared with the model proposed by Thomas (1976), Rahim and Bonoma uses Integrating as Collaborating, Obliging instead of Accommodating, and Dominating as Competing. They labelled the two dimensions (cooperativeness and assertiveness and concern for self and for others) and some styles

differently, but the basic assumptions and principles behind are similar. The strength of the Rahim model also resides in the creation of the ROCI–II (a 28-item questionnaire) designed to measure the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict, with superior, subordinates, and peers.

3. Rahim: five conflict handling styles.

The Rahim's five conflict handling styles are described below (fig.2).

The *Integrating* style, also known as Problem Solving, indicates high concern for self and others. It involves collaboration between the parties that are willing to reach a mutual and acceptable solution through openness, exchange of information, examination and exploration of differences for arriving to a constructive solution that goes far beyond personal and limited visions of the problem.

Rahim highlights the two distinctive elements of this style suggested by Prein (Rhaim, 2011): 1) confrontation that is characterised by open communication, clarify misunderstanding, examining the underlying causes of conflicts; 2) and problem solving. Confrontation is considered as prerequisite of problem solving that implies the identification of appropriate solutions aiming to provide maximum and reciprocal satisfaction of concern of parties involved.

The *obliging* style, also known as accommodating indicates low concern for self and high concern for others. An obliging person neglects and sacrifices personal concern so to satisfy the concern of the other party. This style is associated with a non-confrontation element characterised by the attempt of minimising differences and emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. As suggested by Rahim this style may take the form of selfless generosity, charity, or obedience to the party's order. An obliging person can be defined as a "conflict absorber" terms describing a reaction of low hostility or even friendliness to a perceived hostile act.

Dominating Style, also known as competing, indicates high concern for self and low concern for others. A dominating person stands up for own rights and ignore others' needs and expectation; try to defend personal positions that he believes being as correct and right. This is a win-lose style expression of a forcing behaviour in order to win one's position.

The *avoiding* style, also known as suppression, indicates low concern for self and others. Therefore an avoiding person fails to satisfy personal concern as well as the concern of the other party. It has been associated with withdrawal, buck-passing, sidestepping situations. As suggested by Rahim this style may take the form of postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation. This style often reflect little concern toward the issues or parties involved in conflict, and the attitude to refuse or denying to acknowledge the existence of a conflict in public.

The compromising style indicates intermediate concern for self and others. The styles sees both parties involved in give and-take or sharing solutions, whereby both parties accept to give up something to make mutually acceptable decisions. Compromising style

may involve splitting the difference, exchanging concession, or seeking a quick, middle-ground position. A compromising person or party gives up more than a dominating but less than an obliging person or party. Similarly a compromising person or party addresses an issue more openly than an avoiding person or party but does not explore alternative solutions as an integrating person or party.

Rahim suggested that would be possible to get more insights if using the taxonomy of game theory for reclassifying the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict: integrating style can be reclassified to a positive-sum on nonzero-sum style, compromising to a mixed style, and obliging, dominating, and avoiding to zero-sum or negative-sum. Although he indicated this possibility he warns on the risk of using the taxonomy "win" and "lose" used by the game theory for this reclassification. This may be misleading, as matter of fact, Rahim highlights that each of the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict may be appropriate, depending on the situation, therefore considered as a situation dependent "winning style".
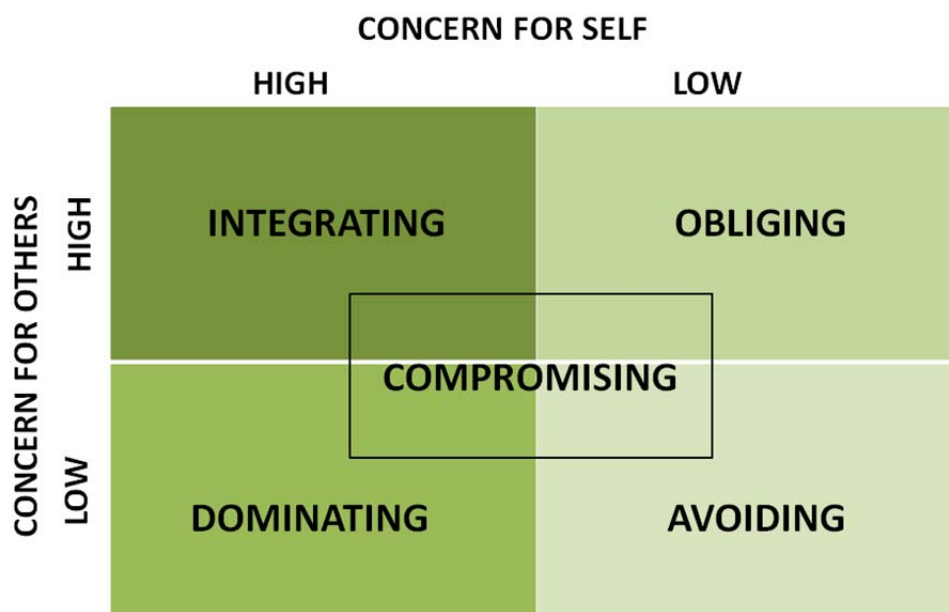

Fig. 2. Rahim and Bonoma's two-dimensional model of five styles of handling interpersonal conflict.
Adapted from Rahim, A., & Bonoma, T. V. (1979). Managing organizational conflict: A model diagnosis and intervention. *Psychological Reports, 44,* 1327.

3.1. Advantages and disadvantages of using the five styles in different situations

Rahim insists on the value of training on how using the different styles of handling conflict to deal with various situations effectively.

For example the *integrating* style can be useful for effectively dealing with conflicts involving complex problems or strategic issues, and when decisions cannot be taken by a single individual thus the value of the differences (skills, information, experience) of both

parties involved can be useful to define the problem, and identify effective alternative solutions. This style can be unappropriated when immediate action is required, and there is no time for problem solving, when the task or problem to solve is simple. Moreover the style can be not effective when the parties are unconcerned about outcomes or when they have not experience of problem solving.

The *obliging* style can be useful when the party is not familiar with the issues involved in a conflict. It may be useful when the party is unconcerned about outcomes, and for preserving a relationship that might be more important that the immediate outcomes, yet as a strategy when a party is willing to give up something with the hope of getting some benefits in the future. This style is not appropriate if the issue involved in a conflict is important to the party, and when there is a belief that the other party is wrong or acting unethically.

Yet, the *dominating* style may useful when an immediate action is needed, or when an unfavourable decision taken by one of the parties involved in a conflict may be harmful to this party itself. Yet it might be used by supervisors dealing with subordinates who have not technical expertise to make decisions, and when the implementation of unpopular courses of action is needed. This style is unappropriated the issues involved in conflict are complex and there is enough time to make a good decision, by using problem solving, and when the issues are not important to the party. If used by parties equally powerful it may lead to impasse.

While, avoiding style may be appropriate when confrontation with other parties although the negative effect on the relationships between the parties exceeds benefits the resolution of conflict. It may be also useful when the task or problem to solve is trivial or simple. The style may not be appropriate to use when the issue involved in a conflict is important to a party, when party it is given responsibility to make decisions, or when prompt action is required.

The *compromising* style is advantageous when the goals of the conflicting parties are mutually exclusive, and when an impasse occurs between parties equally powerful (e.g., labour and management during the negotiation process). It can be used when it is difficult to reach a consensus, parties need a temporary solution to a complex problem, conflicts are protracted for long time, or other styles have been used and found to be not effective in resolving the issues. This style is unappropriated the issues involved in conflict are complex and there is enough time to make a good decision, by using problem solving. Often the use of compromising style for dealing with complex issues fails to reach durable long-term solutions. This style may not be appropriate when the conflict involves dealing with values.

3.2.   *Integrative and distributive dimensions in Rahim's styles model*

Those five styles identified by Rahim can be organized according to the integrative (integrating–avoiding) and distributive (dominating–obliging) dimensions (Rahim, 2011), introduced by Walton and McKersie (1965). The integrative dimension represents the amount of satisfaction (high-low) of concerns received by both parties (self and others).

Within this dimension, the integrating style attempts to increase the satisfaction of the concerns of both parties by finding solutions to the problems mutually acceptable. The avoiding style leads instead to the reduction of satisfaction of the concerns of both parties and result in the failure to solve their problems.

The distributive dimension represents the amount of satisfaction (high and low) of the concerns received by only one of the parties (self or others). Within this dimension the dominating style attempts to obtain high satisfaction of concerns for self (and low for others). The obliging style attempts to obtain low satisfaction of concerns for self (and high satisfaction of concerns for others). The compromising style represents the point of intersection of the two dimensions, that is, which represents an intermediate position where both parties receive a moderate level of satisfaction of their concerns from the resolution of their conflicts (See fig. 3).
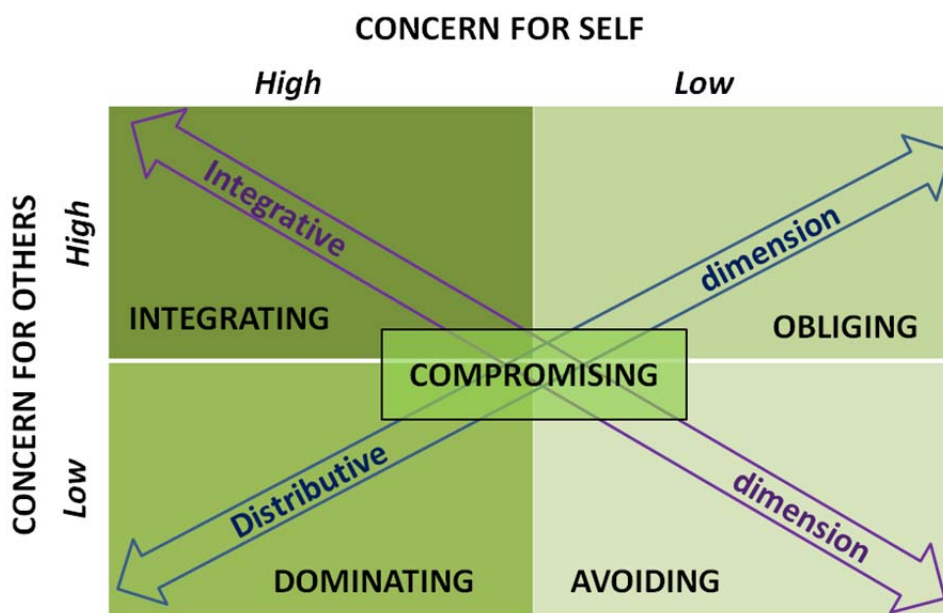

Fig. 3. Integrative and distributive dimensions of the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict
Adapted from Rahim, A.(2011). *Managing conflict in organisations*.

4. References

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