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Handling conflict at work – the impact of active and agreeable conflict styles

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the relationships between emotional intelligence (EI), conflict management styles and job performance in a Chinese cultural context.

Design/methodology/approach – The present paper uses a cross-sectional research design. Paper-based questionnaires were distributed to employees working in the R&D department of a science and technology institute in Taiwan. In total, 300 questionnaires were distributed and 248 valid questionnaires were analyzed, with a return rate of 81.4 per cent.

Findings – The results show that EI has a positive impact on job performance. Furthermore, agreeable conflict style positively moderated between EI and job performance, whereas active conflict style has negative moderating effect.

Research limitations/implications – Due to the research design, sample and data collection method, the research results may lack representativeness. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to use a different approach in the future.

Practical implications – Organizations should strengthen employees' EI and conflict management abilities to improve job performance. Organizations can apply the results of this study in accordance with their policy on recruitment, selection and training.

Originality/value – Organizations should strengthen employees' EI and conflict management abilities to improve job performance. Organizations can apply the results of this study in accordance with their policies on recruitment, selection and training.

Keywords Job performance, Taiwan, Emotional intelligence, Conflict management styles

Paper type Research paper

Conflict is a crucial research topic in the fields of organizational behavior and management (Rahim *et al.*, 2001). In any organizational or social activity, conflict is a prevalent form of social interaction. That is, conflict can be regularly observed in organizations and interpersonal relationships, and are inevitably caused by incompatible relationships within an organization. Given this, understanding conflict and how to resolve it are two important issues in current management research. To our knowledge, most of the existing Western research on this topic indicates that

competitive behavior is encouraged in society. Western culture underscores independence and self-affirmation, encouraging direct expression, whereas Eastern cultures value harmonious relationships, preferring to manage conflict through suppression and forbearance, and emphasizing pro-social organizational behavior (Butler *et al.*, 2007; Tsai *et al.*, 2006). When facing conflict, the Chinese emphasize harmony and try to avoid conflict. Therefore, it is interesting to pose questions about whether conflict theory, which stems from Western culture, is able to explain the Chinese reality, which is the purpose of the current study.

Meanwhile, emotional intelligence (EI) has become one of the more widely discussed academic topics over the past decade (Mayer *et al.*, 2000; Salguero *et al.*, 2012). However, the concept of EI is still under debate. Certain EI scholars believe that EI is a construct that significantly overlaps with personality traits (Davies *et al.*, 1998). Yet, other research finds that EI and personality traits differ greatly in terms of definition and measures and consider EI to be an ability (Wong and Law, 2002). In recent years, there has been increasing interest in how ability-based EI affects individuals at work. Hence, this study attempts to provide empirical evidence to show that ability-based EI can be a valid predictor of work-related outcomes.

Moreover, EI and conflict theories have been developed and tested primarily in Western countries. Scant research has focused on examining the relationships between EI, conflict management and work performance in a non-Western setting. Hence, we aim to re-examine these relationships to see whether, in a different cultural context, the associations between these variables confirm previous findings. Accordingly, the goal of this study is to explore the relationships between EI, different conflict management styles and work performance in a Chinese context. By doing so, we hope this article expands the literature on conflict and facilitates the emergence of new insights that make it possible to better understand, and find resolutions to, conflict.

Theory and hypotheses
The concept of EI and its effect on job performance
The concept of EI was first proposed by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and was defined as an ability that guides one's thinking and actions and is comprised of three factors: the appraisal and expression of emotion, the regulation of emotion and the utilization of emotion. Goleman (1995) inferred from Salovey and Mayer's argument and from Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences that EI is an ability that allows a person to maintain self-control, devotion and persistence, as well as to self-motivate. Mayer and Salovey's (1997) definition of EI also included the following abilities:

- the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion;
- the ability to stimulate and/or generate feelings that facilitate thought;
- the ability to understand emotion and possess emotional knowledge; and
- the ability to regulate emotions to promote the development of EI.

In previous explorations of EI, the conceptual relationships between EI and different aspects of emotionally related work states have been examined (Jordan *et al.*, 2002). Others have explored the empirical relationships between EI and the emotional context and consequences of work-related conditions (Huy, 1999). Individuals with high levels of emotional stability are described as relaxed (Langelaan *et al.*, 2006). Because of their

calm demeanor, high EI individuals have less need to spend time and energy regulating their emotions. Thus, high EI serves as a resource so that employees are able to address demands in their work environment (Penney *et al.*, 2011).

Research on EI in the work context covers two main focus areas. The first includes EI, work attitudes and certain behaviors, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intention (Choi *et al.*, 2011; Meisler, 2014; Nikolaou and Tsaousis, 2002; Carmeli, 2003). The second includes EI and work performance (Greenidge *et al.*, 2014; Lyons and Schneider, 2005; Lam and Kirby, 2002; Othman *et al.*, 2008; Koubova and Buchko, 2013; Sy *et al.*, 2006; Whiteoak and Manning, 2012).

From the above studies, it is reasonable to infer that EI is a key variable for predicting positive work efficacy or outcomes. People with higher EI transform dysfunctional behavior associated with negative emotions into positive emotions and tend to feel fewer negative emotions. Therefore, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1. EI is positively associated with employees' job performance.

Conflict management styles
Conflict management styles have been described as the degree of concerning one's or others' interest while conflict occurs (Thomas, 1992). In 1940, Follet was about the first to suggest five different styles of conflict handling: domination, compromise, integration, avoidance and suppression (Shih and Susanto, 2010). Blake and Mouton (1964) stated that conflict management styles involve forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising and problem-solving.

However, some scholars have become confused over the appropriate classification of the dimensions underlying conflict behavior (DeChurch and Marks, 2001). Therefore, Van de Vliert and Euwema (1994) attempted to subsume Blake and Mouton's (1964) five conflict resolution styles into two higher categories, namely, active and agreeable conflict management styles. The active conflict management style has been described as "the extent to which conflict behaviors make a reponsive and direct rather than inert and undirect impression", while the agreeable conflict management style has been defined as "the extent to which conflict behaviors make a pleasant and relaxed rather than unpleasant and strainful impression" (DeChurch and Marks, 2001; Van de Vliert and Euwema, 1994).

Active conflict management style
People with a high level of active conflict management typically express their opinions directly and would view this approach as effective for conflict resolution as well (DeChurch and Marks, 2001; Van de Vliert and Euwema, 1994). Most current research investigating Western culture supports this viewpoint. For example, Ting-Toomey *et al.* (1991) investigated five cultures and found that Americans were more willing than Japanese and South Koreans to adopt a dominating conflict management style. Tang and Kirkbride (1986) examined 50 senior government executives in Hong Kong and found that British managers were more willing to use competing and collaborating conflict behaviors. In brief, these studies have pointed that most Westerners prefer competition-oriented conflict behaviors, such as the active conflict management style. Other studies have also shown the positive effects of applying the active conflict management style. For example, DeChurch and Marks (2001) examined undergraduate business administration students at a large southeastern university in the USA and found that the active conflict management style alleviated the negative effects of task

conflict on group performance. In a comparison of Canadian and Chinese students, Ma (2007) indicated that Canadian students perceived higher group member satisfaction when using the win–lose conflict resolution style.

However, empirical research has shown that Easterners do not prefer the active conflict management style. For instance, Chua and Gudykunst (1987) showed that students from high-context cultures use nonconfrontation conflict behaviors more than students from low-context cultures. Some research has also suggested negative consequences of the active conflict management style in the Oriental context. Ma (2007), for example, found that Chinese students perceive low levels of group member satisfaction when adopting confrontation conflict management behaviors. Tjosvold and Sun (2001), who investigated undergraduates recruited from a university in Guangzhou, also demonstrated that coercion and a competitive context weaken relationships and lead to close mindedness.

Hence, we assume that when individuals adopt active conflict management style which is less welcomed in non-western society, the link between EI and work performance will become weaker. Adversely, there is a stronger relationship between EI and job performance for individuals with a lower level of active conflict management style. Therefore, we present the following hypothesis:

H2a. The active conflict management style negatively moderates the relationship between EI and job performance .

Agreeable conflict management style
People with a higher level of agreeable conflict management typically tend to avoid to openly discuss differences of opinion and trying to satisfy all members' expectations (DeChurch and Marks, 2001). Most Asians adopt collectivism, considering the interests of others when conflict arises (Peng and Tjosvold, 2011). Hence, it is reasonable to contend that people and organizations would benefit from the agreeable conflict management style in the Asian context.

Previous research showed that Westerners are willing to adopt agreeable conflict management style and that it also has positive effects on both organizations and people. For example, Weider-Hatfield and Hatfield (1995) examined employees in the USA and found that a more integrative style led to a greater perception of interpersonal outcomes (e.g. belonging). DeChurch and Marks (2001) found that people adopting the agreeable conflict management style significantly weakened the negative effects of task conflict on group member satisfaction.

Hence, we assume that when individuals adopt agreeable conflict management style which is more welcomed in non-western society, the link between EI and work performance will become stronger. The above arguments lead to the following hypothesis:

H2b. The agreeable conflict management style positively moderates the relationship between EI and job performance.

Method
Samples
The participants of this study are employees working in the R&D department of an institute which is in charge of developing novel defense-related science and technology in Taiwan. R&D projects usually involve a team of researchers or several teams

simultaneously. These researchers must often work on their own as well as collaboratively to come up with new ideas or solve problems. Therefore, we consider them appropriate for the variables used in the present study.

Through purposive sampling, we distributed paper-based questionnaires with the assistance of the human resources management department. Furthermore, to avoid common method variance, records of employees' job performance were provided by the human resources management department.

A total of 300 questionnaires were sent out, and 262 questionnaires were returned within a month. A total of 14 invalid questionnaires were excluded due to incompleteness, thereby providing 248 valid questionnaires (return rate: 82.67 per cent).

Measures
Emotional intelligence. This study uses the EI scale developed by Wong and Law (2002). This 16-item scale includes four dimensions: emotional self-assessment, emotional assessment of others, emotional utilization and emotional regulation. Sample items include "I understand why I have certain feelings most of the time" and "I am good at controlling my own emotions." All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.91.

Styles of conflict management. We applied the 28-item Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II)[1] (Rahim, 1983) to measure the participants' conflict management style. Sample items include "I usually try to satisfy the needs of team members' and 'My team members and I yield to each other in order to reach a compromise." All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, with scores from (5) strongly agree to (1) strongly disagree.

We then formed active and agreeable conflict management styles following Chanin and Schneer's (1984) computing. The scores for active and agreeable conflict management styles were computed as follows:

$$\text{Active conflict management style} = (\text{Dominating} + \text{Integrating}) - (\text{Avoiding} + \text{Obliging})$$

$$\text{Agreeable conflict management style} = (\text{Integrating} + \text{Obliging}) - (\text{Dominating} + \text{Avoiding})$$

Job performance. Evaluation of job performance included objective data from the personnel records and subjective measures from supervisors. For objective measures, we evaluated employees' project target achievements for individuals and teams, numbers of patents registered and numbers of research articles published. For subjective measures, we retrieved annual performance appraisal records of supervisor evaluations on employee job involvement with the team, dedication to the job and team members' satisfaction. We then computed both scores and ranked them in order. Furthermore, we assigned those performing in the top 25 per cent four points, those performing at 26-50 per cent three points, those performing at 51-75 per cent two points and those in the bottom 25 per cent one point. Subsequent data processing determined these scores as continuous variable data types for statistical analysis.

Instrumentation
The scale items adopted in this study were all developed in English. Considering the native language for the participants is Mandarin (Chinese), and to prevent the respondents from misunderstanding the meaning of the questions, prior to the test, the authors discussed the content of the scales with other professionals and scholars and translated the English version of the questionnaire into Mandarin. The translated version of the scale was then translated back into English to ensure the consistency and quality of the translation and prevent possible errors caused by mistranslation. To ensure that the respondents truly understood the meaning of the questions, the authors distributed the questionnaire to 30 respondents within the R&D unit for a pilot test and asked these respondents to provide feedback and opinions on the content of the questionnaire for further possible adjustment and correction. These 30 respondents were excluded from the final survey.

Results
Descriptive statistics
Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations of all measured variables are presented in Table I. For the study variables, EI is positively correlated with job performance ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and agreeable conflict management style ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$), while job performance was positively correlated with agreeable conflict management style ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), but negatively correlated with active conflict management style ($\beta = -.25$, $p < 0.001$). For the reliability, the Cronbach's alpha reached 0.91, indicating very good internal consistency (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

Hypotheses testing
The hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). This study uses SEM path analysis to verify the effects of individual EI on job performance. *H1* stated that EI is positively associated with employees' job performance. The SEM result indicates that the path between EI and job performance is significant and demonstrates positive effect ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, *H1* was supported.

H2 predicted moderating effects of conflict management styles on the EI–job performance link. For the moderating hypothesis, we used SEM multi-group analysis to

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender[a]	0.84	0.36	–						
2. Age[b]	4.58	1.38	−0.00	–					
3. Tenure[c]	3.40	1.11	0.19**	0.79***	–				
4. EI	3.77	0.43	0.05	0.01	0.05	(0.91)			
5. Conflict – Active	−0.53	1.11	−0.02	0.07	0.11	−0.05	–		
6. Conflict – Agreeable	0.59	1.12	0.07	−0.05	−0.01	0.16*	−0.10	–	
7. Job performance	2.82	0.71	0.02	−0.11	−0.03	0.35***	−0.25***	0.25***	–

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$;**$p < 0.001$; [a]Coded as male = 1; female = 0; [b]Coded as 1 = below 30; 2 = 31-35; 3 = 36-40; 4 = 41-45; 5 = 46-50; 6 = above 50 (in year); [c]Coded as 1 = below 10; 2 = 11-15; 3 = 16-20; 4 = 21-25; 5 = above 25 (in year); n = 248. Numbers in parentheses represent Cronbach's alpha value

Table I.
Means, standard
deviations,
correlations and
reliabilities

separately verify the moderating effects of the conflict management style (activeness and agreeableness) on the relationship between EI and job performance. Following Jöreskog and Sörbom's (1996) two-stage analytic procedure, we used median splits of the moderator variable to produce two groups (low vs high). We also tested the homogeneity of the unconstrained model for the different groups (the measuring models of the two groups were not homogeneous). If the chi-square value of the unconstrained model is lower than that of the constrained model, and the difference achieves significance, then this indicates an equivalency of measurement models and the existence of moderating effects (Palmatier et al., 2007; Obschonka et al., 2012).

H2a predicted that the active conflict management style negatively moderates the relationship between EI and job performance. The multi-group moderation test shows that high and low active conflict management style groups differed significantly ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 4.62, p < 0.05$). The positive effect of EI on job performance was higher for the low active conflict management style ($\beta = 0.48$) than for the high active conflict management style ($\beta = 0.07$). Therefore, H2a was supported.

H2b states that the agreeable conflict management style positively moderates the relationship between EI and job performance. The multi-group moderation test shows that high and low active conflict management style groups differed significantly ($\Delta\chi2(1) = 4.57, p < 0.05$). The positive effect of EI on job performance was higher for the high agreeable conflict management style ($\beta = 0.43$) than for the low agreeable conflict management style ($\beta = 0.14$). Therefore, H2b was supported. The results of moderation were summarized in Table II.

Discussion

This study investigates the relationship between EI and job performance, and the moderating effects of two conflict management styles activeness and agreeableness. After analyzing the data from 248 participants, we found that EI is positively related to job performance. This result was consistent with previous research, confirming that employees with higher EI have better job performance (Law et al., 2004; Wong and Law, 2002; Sy et al., 2006). This also signifies that employees with higher EI are more adept at understanding and using their own emotions and perceiving the emotions of others, thus promoting job performance. As employees with high EI are adept at manipulating and utilizing their own emotions, they have more experience and confidence in managing and controlling their occupational objectives and resources, which impacts proactively and positively on work outcomes. Additionally, employees with high EI are better at "managing upward" (Sy et al., 2006). In other words, employees with resources (such as EI) are more adept at managing relationships with managers, and influence

Path tested on EI and job performance	β of Low group	β of High group	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df = 1)
Moderating effect of active conflict style	0.48***	0.07	4.62
Moderating effect of agreeable conflict style	0.14*	0.43*	4.57

Table II.
Results of moderation of conflict styles on EI and job performance

Notes: β represents the standardized path coefficient for that group; $\Delta\chi^2$ represents the difference in χ^2 between the constrained and the free models for the path being tested with 1 degree of freedom; *$p < 0.05$. ***$p < 0.001$

their managers to assess their performance more positively. Previous research has shown that better employee–manager relationships positively affect managers' performance assessments of an employee (Janssen and Van Yperen, 2004; Kacmar *et al.*, 2003).

Furthermore, results of *H2* also show that the conflict management styles moderate the relationship between EI and job performance. Specifically, the relationship between EI and job performance becomes negative when people adopt a high level of active conflict management style. Conversely, the relationship between EI and job performance becomes much stronger when people adopt a high level of agreeable conflict management style.

Most extant literature supports the positive effect of this conflict resolution behavior in Western culture (Ma, 2007), and what the literature has yet to adequately discuss is the negative moderating effect of active conflict management style in the Taiwan context. It is reasonable to imagine that if collectivistic Taiwanese people emphasize group values and collective interests and further a harmonious relationship, they are uncomfortable with a high level of aggressive negotiating behavior. Although EI can enhance job performance, people who adopt a conflict management style that does not align with Taiwan's local culture and norms may experience cognitive dissonance. Consequently, people who adopt competitive win–lose solutions diminish the positive influence of EI on work. Alternatively, EI may have no positive effect on an individual's performance.

From a theoretical perspective, this study increases our understanding of the relationships among EI, job performance and conflict management styles. Also, compared to previous studies, the current findings offer different perspectives by utilizing Asian samples, hence, advancing our understanding of conflict management styles in a cross-cultural context. We also provide insights on conflict management styles. Most conflict management studies discuss the five conflict management styles. This study uses two dimensions of conflict styles to explore their moderating effects, providing more concise results and a clearer picture.

Implications for management
In terms of EI, employees should possess high EI to recognize and manage their own emotions and the emotions of others, exploit and moderate emotions and positively influence job performance. We recommend that organizations use the EI inventory or design a scenario test when recruiting employee candidates to determine their ability to control and exploit emotions, as well as to understand their flexibility in responding to change, their courage to accept challenges and their emotional ability to unite a team. Concurrently, organizations can provide current employees with EI training to strengthen emotional self-management. They can also provide regular encouragement for, or arrange participation in, activities pertaining to interpersonal relationships. These steps assist in improving EI and positively affect job performance.

Limitations and directions for future research
Although the research results of this study contribute to the literature, there are still some research limitations of this study. First, this study is a cross-sectional analysis, which has limits in inferring the causal relationships between different variables.

Therefore, future studies should adopt a longitudinal design to obtain a more robust conclusion.

Second, this study utilizes samples from a single organization, and so the results may not be applicable to other organizations. Thus, we suggest that future research collect data from other private enterprises and different industries in the interest of confirming whether the empirical results differ.

Third, this study utilizes the questionnaire survey method as its main data collection method, which may not be able to explore the psychological feelings of respondents very well. Therefore, the authors suggest that future research go a step further in investigating the determinants of EI, or conflict style via a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, such as interviewing employees and managers simultaneously for in-depth exploration, which should help to provide a further understanding of employee attitudes at work as well as their creativity.

Conclusion
This research extends and enriches our understanding of EI, conflict management styles and work performance in the cultural context of Taiwan. First, our study contributes by providing empirical support for previous theoretical arguments highlighting the ability-base model of EI and confirming that ability-based EI can be a valid predictor of work-related outcomes. Second, our findings further our understanding of how different types of conflict management styles interact with individual factors, such as EI, to produce a positive impact on work outputs in an Asian context, and particularly in Taiwan.

Many multinational companies are relocating workers to Asia nowadays. It is therefore important to understand how to face conflict in the workplace outside of the USA, especially in Asia, such as in Taiwan. From this study, we are able to learn that preferred styles of conflict management can differ greatly in a society that values harmony and group cohesion. Direct confrontation can be perceived as very rude, making the conflict worse and delaying resolution; yet, concern for others can improve the workplace atmosphere and enhance performance.

Note

1. *Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II, Form A*: Used with permission from the © Center for Advanced Studies in Management. Further use or reproduction of the instrument without written permission is prohibited.

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