

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 13, 1986

## THE EFFECTS OF CONFLICT HANDLING STYLES ON NEGOTIATION BEHAVIOR: AN ANALYSIS OF AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of an experiential exercise designed to enable participants to identify how their preferred conflict handling behavior may influence the outcomes of a negotiation. Participants in this study were undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory management class. No significant differences were found between the negotiating outcomes of participants and their preferred conflict style. The implications of the results are discussed with respect to the learning objectives of the exercise and recommendations for modification are made.

### INTRODUCTION

The existence of conflict in corporate settings cannot be avoided. Rather, conflict must be viewed as a variable to be controlled and optimized. Extensive research has been done in regard to conflict behavior. In many studies, conflict handling behavior has been treated as a choice between cooperation and competition, a unidimensional model. However, concern over the limiting applications of a unidimensional model has resulted in the development of a two-dimensional model used to identify and analyze behavioral responses to conflict. This two-dimensional model was developed by Thomas [8]. The Thomas model is an extension of Blake and Mouton's [1] work. Blake and Mouton developed a Managerial Grid and argued that managerial behavior is a function of two variables: concern for people and concern for production. Five management styles are identified on the grid with the most desirable style being a maximum concern for both people and production.

Similar in structure is the two-dimensional model of conflict behavior which identifies five modes of conflict handling behavior depending upon varying intensities of assertiveness and cooperation. Assertiveness is defined as behavior intended to satisfy one's own concerns and cooperativeness is defined as behavior intended to satisfy another's concerns. The five conflict handling modes that Thomas identified are: (1) avoiding (unassertive, uncooperative), (2) competing (assertive, uncooperative), (3) accommodating (unassertive, cooperative), (4) collaborating (assertive, cooperative), and (5) compromising (intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness). The two-dimensional model has been used to study conflict in a variety of organizational settings [2], [4], [6], [7].

The focus of this paper is the analysis of the results of an experiential exercise designed to exemplify the relationship between an individual's preferred conflict handling style measured by an instrument which taps into cooperative and assertive tendencies and the outcomes obtained when negotiating issues in a simulated labor contract agreement. The experiential exercise is founded on a modification of the Thomas-Kilman two-dimensional model but limits the identification of conflict handling styles to three of the five original modes. The three styles identified in the exercise are competing, collaborating, and accommodating. Two of the five modes, avoiding and compromising, are not assessed directly in the conflict style assessment instrument but do receive consideration in the negotiating portion of the exercise.

### STUDY DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

#### The Exercise

The learning objectives of the experiential exercise are (1) to help students understand the differences between the various modes of conflict handling behavior, (2) to increase students' awareness of the relationship between conflict handling modes and negotiation behavior, and (3) to help individuals become more aware of their own preferences for handling conflict and to indicate how those preferences may affect their behavior in a specific conflict setting.

The experiential exercise was conducted in two parts. The first part was an instrument consisting of 18 pairs of statements. The students were asked to fill out an answer sheet by first providing biographical information (Social Security number, major, age, and sex), and then by reading the pairs of statements and circling the chosen statement (A or B) on the answer sheet. The directions requested that the students mark the letter of the statement in each pair which they more strongly believed to be the case. Further, the directions specify that an answer is to be circled for every choice and that the chosen statement is the one they actually believed to be true rather than the one they would like to be true. It was also stated that the instrument was a measure of personal belief and that there were no right or wrong answers.

The answer sheets were collected and based upon the responses to the eighteen pairs of statements, the students were divided into four groups--competing, collaborating, accommodating, and a control group (a combination of borderline cases in which no dominant style was identified).

In the next class meeting, the students were instructed to break off into the four groups. Students were given listings of Social Security numbers to advise them of which group they belonged to. After students were isolated in groups, they were paired off within the group. Essentially, this served to match an accommodator with an accommodator, a collaborator and a collaborator, and competitors with competitors. Due to a small sample size and time constraints, mixed conflict style pairs that is, a competitor vs. a collaborator, were not created.

Once the students were located in one of the four groupings, they were given a packet consisting of background information for a mock company, descriptions of five major bargaining issues, explanations of union and company negotiator roles, and a list of negotiation rules. After the students read and were familiar with the material, they were randomly paired and assigned the role of either a company negotiator or a union negotiator. Both negotiators had access to the same fact pattern and information. At this point, the pairs were given approximately 30 minutes to negotiate an agreement. Participants kept track of negotiations on individual analysis of negotiations records sheets provided to each member. When time was called, all negotiations were ended and debriefing took place and records sheets were collected.

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The debriefing procedure took place immediately after the students finished the negotiating portion of the exercise and consisted of an explanation of the purpose of the exercise and a synopsis of the expected outcomes. In addition, the underlying conflict handling mode in each group was identified and a summary of Thomas' explanation for each mode was handed out. Discussion was stimulated to draw forth student response and feedback. Attention was focused on differences in attitudes and behaviors reflected by students' comments regarding their preferred conflict styles and negotiation outcomes.

### The Sample

The exercise was conducted in a class of approximately 90 undergraduate students enrolled in an introduction to management course. The course consisted of two sections of approximately 45 students each. Participants worked individually for 30 minutes during one session and in pairs for 60 minutes during a second session. The exercise was introduced and administered by one instructor. Likewise, the follow-up class discussion was led by one instructor and involved a series of question-answer interactions between the instructor and the students and among the students themselves.

A total of 89 students participated in both parts of the session and 75 provided complete responses to both instruments. Fifty-six percent of the respondents were males and 44 percent female. Their ages ranged from 19 to 38 with a mode of 20 and a median of 21. Sixty-two percent of the respondents were majors in the College of Business.

### Expected Results

It was expected that the conflict mode instrument would identify distinct sectors of the classroom sample as displaying accommodating, competing, and collaborating tendencies in conflict situations. In other words, in a given group of people there will be an expectation of different styles of conflict handling behavior shown.

The experiential exercise was designed with the intent of demonstrating that individuals who displayed certain conflict handling modes as indicated by their performance on the conflict mode instrument would exhibit identifiably different behaviors in a conflict situation. For example, one might expect individuals that prefer the competing style of conflict resolution to fail to agree more often in the negotiation, while collaborators may tend to agree on issues rather than merely to compromise. Accommodators may come to an agreement but it may tend to be judged as a less than optimal package by the parties.

## RESULTS

For the most part, the results obtained from the application of the exercise from a theoretical and statistical perspective were disappointing. Contrary to the belief that the eighteen-item questionnaire would identify participants with distinctly different conflict style preferences, only 55 percent of the respondents had a preferred conflict style. The respondents appeared fairly homogeneous in terms of their responses to the instrument. Out of a possible 12 responses indicating a preference for competing, 22 of the respondents had scores of eight or greater. Twelve respondents using the same criteria were classified as accommodating, while 15 were identified as collaborators. Forty-five percent of the respondents had no clearly identifiable preferred conflict style.

It was hoped that the results would be able to provide a basis for discussing differences between those individuals who did not reach an agreement, those that agreed to either a company or union position, and those that compromised. However, only one pair of negotiators failed to agree on the terms of their contract so no analysis of their characteristics is made.

The expectation that the preferred conflict styles of the negotiation pairs would effect the outcomes achieved on the five issues was not supported. Table I shows very little difference between the results of respondents who indicated a preference for competing, accommodating, and collaborating.

A Chi-Square analysis of the relationship between conflict style and outcome found no significant differences. While there were differences in the level of agreement and compromise obtained on different contract issues negotiated by the respondents, the conflict resolution preferences as identified in this exercise had no significant influence on the issue outcomes of the negotiation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The implications of this research are two-fold. First, the results of the exercise certainly did not reinforce in a direct manner the literature in the area of conflict handling behavior [8], [2], [4], [7], [3]. Second, even though the actual results were not consistent with the expected results, the objectives of the exercise for the classroom were met and the exercise can be used as an effective pedagogical aid.

Addressing the schism between the expected and actual outcomes, it is necessary to look for possible explanations for the findings. The results showed first that there was little evidence of strong distinctions between conflict handling behaviors. And second, the distinctions that could be drawn to isolate accommodators, competitors, and collaborators had little impact upon negotiation tactics and outcomes. Regardless of the conflict handling style indicated by the conflict style instrument, most of the students tended to resort to a compromising posture in their negotiations.

There is evidence that there are several kinds of situational factors which are more important predictors of conflict behavior than are individual predispositions [5]. Blake and Mouton [1] assume that parties approach conflict situations with some dominant style or orientation, and a back-up style in case of initial failure. The "win-lose orientation" is hypothesized to be a major determinant of conflict behavior. One explanation for so many participants resorting to compromising behaviors is that perhaps the situational variables in the negotiation exercise forced individuals to assume a conflict posture rather than a problem solving orientation. If their dominant style did not result in their desired outcome, finishing negotiations, and reaching an agreement, then they fell back on their back-up style. Under this supposition, compromising was apparently the back-up style of many of the students. The situational factors of the negotiation simulation seem to influence the conflict handling behavior of the exercise participants more than their dominant conflict style predispositions. This explanation seems plausible since labor-management relationships tend to naturally be perceived as a conflict situation requiring parties to exhibit compromising behavior. In this exercise, two opponents had equal or nearly equal power and were committed to mutually exclusive goals. Further, the

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decisions were made under time pressure, reducing the opportunities to develop collaborative solutions.

may very well have been the case that their primary goal was not to negotiate a favorable contract, but rather to finish as soon as possible and talk to classmates.

One suggestion to overcome the motivational problem is to involve some "real" stakes. For example, a bonus point system could be set up so that the negotiator who achieves more demands gets more points. The major reason for making this modification is to give students greater incentive to become involved in the role playing, rather than encouraging them to "give in" because they don't really have anything to lose or gain. Other than a bonus point system, this exercise does not lend itself very well to a grading system.

In conclusion, the results of the exercise were not what were expected, however, the exercise was useful in terms of demonstrating its learning objectives and helping to involve students in discussion. The exercise served as a means to stimulate thought and speculation as to why the expected results were not achieved.

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TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS IN EACH PREFERRED CONFLICT STYLE GROUP THAT AGREED OR COMPROMISED ON FIVE NEGOTIATION ISSUES

NEGOTIATION ISSUES												
Conflict Mode	Hospital and Medical Plan		Wages		Sliding Pay Scale		Night Shift Differential		Vacation Pay		Compro- mised	Agreed
	Agreed	Compro- mised	Agreed	Compro- mised	Agreed	Compro- mised	Agreed	Compro- mised	Agreed	Compro- mised		
Competing N = 19	32	68	68	32	100	0	63	37	90	10		
Collaborating N = 9	22	78	56	44	78	22	22	78	56	44		
Accommodating N = 13	8	92	46	53	85	15	62	38	77	21		
Fixed N = 34	12	88	40	59	79	21	71	29	65	35		
Total N = 75		$\chi^2 = 5.00$		$\chi^2 = 3.15$		$\chi^2 = 4.29$		$\chi^2 = 5.73$		$\chi^2 = 4.47$		

A simpler explanation is that compromising was the dominant conflict handling predisposition held by many of the students, but that the modified conflict mode instrument failed to accurately identify this behavioral tendency. If this were the case, the expected results could possibly be achieved if enough participants could be identified who truly exhibited conflict handling tendencies other than compromising.

Even though the exercise did not produce the desired outcomes, some of the learning objectives were addressed. One learning objective was to help students understand the conflict handling modes. This was accomplished through debriefing, explanation, and discussion. Another objective was to increase students' awareness of the relationship between conflict handling modes and negotiation behavior. This goal was met indirectly by demonstrating how their conflict handling modes and negotiation tactics and outcomes were not related and explaining the theories that purport that their modes and behaviors in negotiation should be related. The objective of helping individuals increase their own awareness of conflict handling tendencies was achieved by discussing the results of the conflict style assessment instrument and their perceptions of the styles they used in the exercise. By filling out the analysis of negotiations record sheet, students were forced to think about their behavior and their perceptions of their negotiating opponent.

The current study was limited by the sample used in the administration of the experiential exercise. It is imperative that in order for the exercise to be effective, the students must take the role playing seriously. The undergraduates used in this study had no incentive to bargain in earnest. It