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THE ROLE OF CONFLICTS ON TEAMWORK EFFECTIVENESS: A STUDY OF THAI AND GERMAN EMPLOYEES OF AN INTERNATIONAL AIRLINE

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Abstract

Conflicts seemed to be an everyday phenomenon in each organization. Nowadays, many multiethnic organizations realize how importance of conflict on teamwork effectiveness. This study anticipates not only examining how conflicts have an effect on teamwork performance, but also to investigate how flight attendants resolve interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, to suggest an appropriate approach to overcome conflict encountered. Nevertheless, the main objective is not to eliminate it but to learn how to manage it productively. The study adopts in-depth interview approach of qualitative investigation for data collection. Respondents are Thai, and German flight attendants of an international Airline who reported experiencing in conflict with their colleagues in the past two years and the strategy they adopted to manage such conflicts from their own perspectives. The result of the study indicated that the main cause that initiated conflicts for Thai flight attendants is discrimination; whereas German flight attendants mentioned the two major factors that cause conflicts which are lack of communication and misinterpretation. Surprisingly that conflict management styles both of them used is competing. However, both Thai and German

strongly agreed that conflicts play tremendous role on teamwork performance. They believed that it is people who initiate and engage in conflict and determine whether it will finally be productive or destructive. Nevertheless, his study provided some suggestions to de-escalate conflicts that respondents experienced as it is the main goal of its solution.

Keywords

Conflict management, Intercultural conflict, High context- Low context cultures, Multi-ethnic Organization

1. Introduction

According to Wilmot and Hocker (2007), conflict is a fact of human life that occurs naturally in all kinds of settings, especially interpersonal conflict in organization once occurs, it should not be ignored since it would set destructive forces in motion that decrease productivity and spread conflict to others. Conflicts seemed to be an everyday phenomenon in each organization, for instance, conflict of management versus labor, male versus female, one racial or ethnic group versus another. Thus the studies of conflict are considered as a basic human requirement; and the practice of constructive conflict is an essential set of interpersonal skills. The advantage of employees to study organization conflict is to get along well with colleagues, while the supervisor can learn productive responses and get more cooperation from coworkers. According to Brett (2000), conflict is inevitable in all cultures but every culture has evolved in its own way of managing it. Nowadays, many multi-ethnic organizations realize how importance of conflict on teamwork effectiveness; for instance a German Airlines where multinational people work together both on ground and on board. As White (1999, p 471) mentioned that people of different ethnic backgrounds possess different attitudes, values and norms. Increasing cultural diversity in both public and private sector focuses on the distinction between various ethnic groups in their attitudes and performance at work. As the matter of fact that some culture differences may lead to conflict so it is crucial to understand the importance of inter-cultural interaction to avoid misunderstanding that may cause conflict.

The main purpose of the study is not only examining how conflicts affect their teamwork performance, but also to investigate how flight attendants resolve interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, to suggest an appropriate approach to overcome conflict encountered on each flight which will

definitely affect the teamwork effectiveness on board. Consequently, it may have an effect on passenger satisfaction. However, the conflict being researched is the conflict that can be occurred either between the same or different nationalities in the workplace – generally during in-flight operations. Since conflict exists in team interaction, the key to an effective team is to manage conflict productively. The author anticipates that it will shed some light on the questions of how they manage conflict and recommend the appropriate styles of conflict management to create a better work environment and improve team work effectiveness. A greater understanding of conflict is also an essential factor of how conflict can be managed to establish a good atmosphere of team working on board. As Hynes (2016) stated that conflict generally has a negative connotation; however, conflict is a positive occurrence if managed properly.

Research Questions:

1. What are causes of conflict perceived by team members?
2. How the conflicts were addressed and resolved?
3. What are the impacts of conflict on team performance?

Conflict Management Strategies

Although the idea of common strategies for managing or coping with conflict has been examined in a number of ways, this study will focus on the assessment and classification of Ralph Kilmann and Kenneth Thomas (DeFleur, Kearney, and Plax, p331-334, 2013). They formulated five distinct conflict styles as follows:

1. **Competitive or Forcing Style:** Characteristic of strongly competitive people who view all conflict as win-lose events; they believe that winning is their goal. This style of conflict management is often used by managerial level because they losing in conflict situation is considered as destructive and viewed as a loser.
2. **Collaborative Style:** Characteristic of people who not only are looking for personal goal in a conflict situation, but they also concern about their opponents' objectives. They are willing to cooperate with their opponents

3. Compromising style: Characteristic of individual who fall somewhere between the competitive and collaborative styles which is based on compromising. The behavior of compromisers in conflicts is sometimes incorrectly interpreted by observers as “giving in”
4. Avoidance Style: People with this style neither expect to attain personal goal nor are they systematically to their opponents’ goal. They refuse to engage in conflict, in other words they just want to escape from the whole confrontation. Avoiders seem to stay away from situation where conflicts are likely to happen.
5. Accommodating style: This is absolutely opposite of the competitive style. They tend to be passive in that they give up reaching their personal goal.

To provide a more explicit picture, below is the summary of Thomas and Kilmann’s communication styles of conflict management behavior (1974) based on Blake and Mouton (1964)’s categories of conflict style as cited in Borisoff and Victor (1989). This is a two-dimensional model based on degree of cooperation to satisfy other’s need, and the degree of assertiveness to satisfy one’s own needs. These five styles of conflict management are represented in the dual concerns model that can be seen from Table 1)

Table 1: Conflict –Handling Styles

Style	Degree of cooperation (concern other’s need)	Degree of assertiveness (concern one’s own needs)
1. Competing	Low	High
2. Accommodating	High	Low
3. Avoiding	Low	Low
4. Collaborating	High	High
5. Compromising	Moderate	Moderate

Cause of conflict

DeFleur, Kearney, and Plax (2013) indicated that there are two main causes which play a part in generating conflict between people. The primary one is consisting of the meanings constructed by each party for the messages transmitted and received during a process of communication. The other cause consists of contextual factors which are physical settings, sociocultural situations, and social relationships that people communicate. As the matter of fact that conflicts actually are not, inherently, either productive or destructive. What should be considered as the more important is how people behave during conflict especially the specific consequences of the process. In conclusion, it is people who initiate and engage in conflict who determine whether it will finally be productive or destructive.

2. Methods

The qualitative research claims to describe life-worlds “from the inside out”, and from the point of view of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Thus author decided to adopt qualitative methods by using in-depth interviews for data collection to enhance the appropriateness and feasibility of the study. Respondents of this study are 6 Thai, and 6 German flight attendants of an international airline who reported having experience in conflicts with colleagues in the past two years. All of them have been working with the organization for more than 10 years. Both Thai and German normally operate international long haul flights; either Bangkok-Frankfurt-Bangkok or Singapore-Frankfurt-Singapore. The two important criteria to select respondents, first and foremost they must have been experiencing in conflict incidence with colleagues and they must willingly share such incidences. The author randomly approached both Thai and German colleagues on the mentioned flights by questioning them whether they had been engaging into conflict situations. Consequently, qualified subjects were purposely selected, and the interviews were conducted during May to July 2016. The venue of the interview was conducted either in Bangkok or Frankfurt.

Pilot study

In order to test the appropriateness, explicitness, and comprehension of questions before the actual implementation of the research, the author conducted a pilot study with some Thai and German colleagues who had opportunities to operate on the same flight by using the same

questions. It is essential in this study that the subjects must have experienced in conflict situation in order to provide valid information of their experiences. Thus, those selected colleagues for the pilot group were qualified. The author conducted the interview by asking them to explain their experience engaged in conflict, and the strategies they selected to manage such conflict from their own perspectives. However, the appropriateness and clarity of both verbal and nonverbal communication when responding to the questions were observed and considered. This method enabled the author to check the pilot groups' understanding of the open-ended question in the format of an in-depth interview. If there was any confusion, corrections were made before beginning the actual interview process.

The pilot groups were able to respond to all of the questions. Only some tiny ambiguous questions had to be modified for more explicit understanding. However, the author noticed that the German group was more enthusiastic about participation, and more accepting of interruptions during the interview than the Thai group. Hence, the author adjusted the interviewing atmosphere to be more relaxing by using friendlier manner and inviting them for a coffee-break to encourage them to share and express more ideas.

3. Data Analysis

The data obtained can be divided into two categories: the personal together with professional demographic data, and the interviewing data.

First, the demographic data were demonstrated in the personal demographic data sheet (see Table 2 and Table 3). The data consisted of details of subjects: their age, gender, marital status, educational background and duration of work with the organization.

Second, the individual interview lasted between 10 and 20 minutes. Each respondent was asked three research questions. During the interview with the tape-recorded, the author encouraged all subjects to talk freely and to share their experiences. Later, all data were transcribed verbatim, some significant statements of respondent experienced the conflict phenomenon. After all data were transcribed, the data analysis based on theoretical framework and related topics were considered. In this study, the author examined some similarities and differences in the data obtained from the interviews with both Thai and German colleagues then tried to systematically discover their

preferred strategies for conflict management which could provide appropriate solutions for their experiences of conflict in the future.

Table 2: Demographic Information of Thai Respondents

Number of Subject	Age (years)	Gender	Marital Status	Educational Background	Duration of Work with Company (years)
1	52	Female	Single	Bachelor Degree	21
2	45	Female	Married	Bachelor Degree	20
3	50	Female	Married	Bachelor Degree	20
4	50	Male	Single	Bachelor Degree	19
5	42	Male	Single	Bachelor Degree	20
6	48	Male	Married	Master Degree	19

Table 3: Demographic Information of German Respondents

Number of Subject	Age (years)	Gender	Marital Status	Educational Background	Duration of Work with Company (years)
1	50	Male	Married	Abitur (Similar to High Vocational Certificate)	26
2	45	Male	Single	Abitur (Similar to High Vocational Certificate)	20

				Certificate)	
3	40	Male	Single	Abitur (Similar to High Vocational Certificate)	20
4	53	Female	Married	Master Degree University in Darmstadt, Germany	23
5	46	Female	Single	Abitur (Similar to High Vocational Certificate)	18
6	30	Female	Single	Abitur (Similar to High Vocational Certificate)	8

4. Findings

The result of the study indicated that both Thai and German flight attendants strongly agreed that conflicts play tremendously important role on teamwork effectiveness. The former stated that the main factor that causes conflicts between Thai and German on board is discrimination, while the latter indicated that the two major causes of conflicts for them are lack of communication and misinterpretation. All Thai participants engaged in conflict with German colleagues; and the reason was discrimination. They believed when conflict occurred between two nationalities; discrimination is always a major problem. One of Thai respondents stated that “I had a conflict with a German colleague; before it get escalated our purser was informed about the situation. I had a feeling that she took German colleague’s side. I considered this as discrimination” According to White (1999, p 473), an organization culture determined the ability of out- group member to perform within

organization. Individuals from minority subgroup face obstacle from prejudice, discrimination and stereotype. Discrimination is behavioral bias toward a person based on the person’s group identity. Minority group size may determine the level of discrimination; while majority group members tend to increase levels of discrimination against minority. In this circumstance, Thai flight attendants considered themselves as minority group; whereas German flight attendants considered themselves as majority group in the organization.

On the contrary to all Thai participants that engaged in conflict with German colleagues, all German participants engaged in conflict with their own nationality. The two major factors that generate conflicts are lack of communication and misinterpretation. One participant mentioned that she told her opponent to help another colleague during the service by saying that “I would be faster working alone”. Her opponent misinterpreted that she blame him for working so slow. In fact, her intention was just to tell him to help another colleague. Due to DeFleur H, DeFleur L, Kearney and Plax (2013, p 329), messages transmitted and interpreted by senders and receiver in the process of conflict are likely to be of low accuracy. In other words, misinterpretation of meaning may be considered as the cause of conflict between people.

It can be concluded that once conflicts happened; it has a negative consequence on teamwork effectiveness in terms of ruined the harmony of the team, delayed the service procedure and destroyed the atmosphere of being “one team” which is the key factor of teamwork. In summary, it can be seen from Table 4 about causes of conflict and conflict management strategies Thai and German flight attendants adopt for their conflict situations.

Table 4: *Cause of conflict and Conflict Management Strategies adopted by Thai and German*

Nationality	Perceived cause of conflict	Conflict Management Strategies
Thai	Discrimination	Avoiding
		Competing
German	Lack of communication	Competing
	Misinterpretation	Compromising

The finding also indicated striking result that Thai and German flight attendants adopt similar strategies in conflict management which is competing. According to Hall (1976) and

Hofstede (1980), high-context cultures that value collectivist goal, such as Singapore and Thailand are indirect; rely on contextual cues and situational knowledge resulting in the use of implicit reference and indirect speech and actions. Thus, high-context collectivists are more likely to choose indirect approach such as compromising and avoiding in a conflict situation. These two dimensions (high- and low-context, and individualist-collectivist) of cultural variability have relevance for communication behavior in conflict management. However, the results of this study showed that instead of using avoiding styles of conflict management Thai preferred competing which is contradict to the theory of Hall and Hofstede. This striking result may be due to the intercultural setting. As Drake (1995), found that when negotiating in intercultural setting, American and Taiwanese did not necessarily adhere to style predicted by norms based on the cultural dimension. Moreover, Chan and Goto (2003) also discovered that people did not choose a conflict style which was congruent with their cultural values when in conflict with others from different ethnicity to themselves. For example, Hong Kong Chinese employees were more cautious and used the less confrontational strategies in order to maintain positive relationship with their superiors. In contrast, they would be likely to use more confrontational strategies that could have more detrimental effects on the relationship with superiors from United States and mainland China. Chan and Goto attributed this to the in-group /out-group distinction. This aspect supports the viewpoint of all Thai flight attendants who mentioned that they felt discriminated by German colleagues.

It can be summarized that conflict is a multilevel and complex phenomenon that most of the time cannot be satisfied with only one strategy but requires a compound set of steps and components (Mujtaba and Prause, 2015.) In other words, there is no single appropriate or inappropriate way to deal with conflict. No matter what types of strategies will be used, the most significant idea to be aware is identifying and confronting conflict at an early stage seems of paramount relevance since conflicts which occurred among colleagues on board tremendously affect teamwork performance. Consequently, it possibly affects passengers' satisfaction on that flight. Thus, conflict resolution should be a priority among flight attendants so that it will not negatively influence passengers' satisfaction.

5. Limitation of the study

Despite the fact that this study was carried out using the qualitative method based on phenomenological perspectives, the researcher required a great amount of time and effort to

thoroughly discover the appropriate respondents for an in-depth interview. The main reason was not all German and Thai flight attendants experience having conflict. In addition, after the respondents have been properly selected, time constraint was another problem. Due to working condition on board, it was not convenient to conduct an interview. Thus, the interview was organized either after landing in Frankfurt, Germany (German home-base) or in their layover in Bangkok. Some of selected respondents had a short period of time of connecting flight back to their residence. Consequently, they cancelled the interview. The author, finally, must look for another respondent. Furthermore, in order to avoid any intervening factors that may result from the author who also working in this organization, the author tried the best not to interfere, or convince the respondents in some point of view. But in fact, the author may unintentionally encourage or discourage the expression of particular facts and opinions. However, the questions deal directly with people perspective and behavior which considered very sensitive. As a result, some respondents may hesitate to criticized or give exact information during an interview.

6. Contribution

As mentioned earlier that conflicts can not only arise between the different nationalities, but also can be found in the same nationality. Thus the author anticipates that this study will tighten the relationship between co-workers, simultaneously will also improve their teamwork effectiveness for the benefit of both organization and passengers' satisfaction. Since it provides better and broader perspectives for them to look at conflict in different dimension; leading to more effective in dealing with conflict. It also assists them to prepare themselves to cope with conflicts in order to arrive at a better conflict solution. Nevertheless, author believes that the result of this study will be beneficial for other multi-ethnicity Airlines and organizations to at least strengthen and enhance the two distinctive cultures relationship so that they can create a better quality of working leading to better productivity of the organization. As the more organizations implement the work team concept to strategize and solve organizational issues, a greater understanding of conflict is necessary.

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