A Cross-Cultural Study on the Differences in Conflict Management Process between Chinese Employees and American Employees

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Keywords: Cultural values, Conflict management, Intercultural communication.

Abstract. With the development of globalization, intercultural communication has become unprecedentedly important and frequent. Yet, misunderstandings and conflict are likely to take place during the communication process because of different cultural backgrounds. Since intercultural conflicts are inevitable, how to manage them in a constructive way has become a growing concern in international business. To achieve this, one needs to understand how members of another culture behave during conflict interaction process and why they behave in such a manner. This paper investigates the differences in conflict management process between Chinese employees and American employees, emphasizing five aspects in conflict management process: conflict perception, conflict management strategy, conflict rhythm, face-concern in conflict management and conflict aftermath. The author conducted a questionnaire research and personal interviews to collect data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis on these issues. Altogether, 302 samples were collected in the research, including 122 American employees and 180 Chinese employees. Based on the discussion of the results, the paper comes to a conclusion and puts forward practical suggestions to constructively manage the conflict in diverse cultural environment, particularly under Sino-American cultures.

Introduction

Conflict is pervasive in our lives. It happens at all levels and involves various issues. Conflict can take place anytime as a result of differences in values or beliefs, scarce resources, uncertain environment, and stressful life, etc. As Ting-Toomey defined, “conflict is perceived and/or actual incompatibilities of values, expectations, processes, or outcomes between two or more parties (...) over substantive and/or relational issues.” (Ting-Toomey, 1999:194)

Conflict potentials are supposed to be higher in intercultural communications which involve people from different cultural backgrounds. Since intercultural conflict is inevitable and easy to happen, how to manage them in a constructive way has become an ever-growing concern in international companies. To do this, one needs to understand how members of another culture perceive and behave during conflict interaction process and why they behave in such a manner. Human behaviors, without the exception of conflict management, are modeled by the culture in which they are socialized. Thus, cultural values play an orienting role in determining why members of a culture behave as they do in a conflict episode.

China and America are two countries of great significance on world stage. In recent years, the two countries improved their cooperation in various fields, particularly in business field. Both the frequency and importance of cross-cultural contact between these two countries are unprecedented. On the other hand, these two countries differ so dramatically that conflict
potential during communication between members of the two cultures is surprisingly high. Therefore, in this paper, the author will focus on investigating the differences in conflict management process between Chinese employees and American employees and finding out the relevant cultural aspects underpinning these differences. It is hoped that this study will help the members of the two countries to know the conflict management behaviors of each other and the reasons behind. Based on this knowledge, they could understand each other’s perceptions and behaviors and adjust accordingly in conflict episode. In this way, the conflict between them can be managed in a constructive way and the possible negative impacts of conflict can be minimized.

Research Method

Measurements

To collect data for this study, the author conducted a questionnaire research and personal interviews. The questionnaire was composed of five parts, which correspond to the five aspects of the conflict management process. Multiple-choice questions, open questions and scaling measurement are used in the questionnaire research. It should be noted that, in the conflict management style and face-concern parts, the author employs a 5-point scaling measurement for a series of statements under each style of conflict management and each type of face-concerns, with 5= strongly agree and 1= strongly disagree, in which higher number indicates higher level of endorsement. After collecting all the questionnaires, the author made personal interviews with some participants in order to assist in analyzing the questionnaire results.

Participants

In the study, the author selected the American employees working in America (hereinafter referred to as American employees) and Chinese employees working in State-owned Enterprises (hereinafter referred to as Chinese employees) as the research subjects. Since the two groups are the least to be influenced by the culture of each other, the results of this research would be more convincing. The questionnaires were delivered to the samples in printed form or through Internet. In the end, 122 American employees, 180 Chinese employees returned their completed questionnaires to the author for the analysis.

Results Analysis

Conflict Perception

This part contains three questions, which are designed to find out the respondents’ first impression on conflict; their perceptions on how conflict influence the organizational development; and the relationship between conflict and personal development. The results show that Chinese employees like to connect “conflict” with the following words: “mistrust, war, fighting, quarrel, revenge, hatred, being dangerous”, while American employees prefer to use the words of “differences, communication, convergence, competition, problem solving, being transparent” to describe their first impression on conflict. As for the conflict’ influences on the organizational development, the majority of American employees agree that conflict is a good way of preventing stagnation in organization by encouraging examination of the problem and motivating to solve them. However, most of Chinese employees choose the negative influences of conflict in organizational development. In terms of the relationship
between conflict and self-development in an organization, 86.1% American employees, as opposed to 15.6% Chinese employees agree that the two issues are irrelevant.

From the results, we can see that most of the things Chinese employees relate to conflict are negative. In contrast, Americans tend to relate conflict to neutral or positive things. Socialized in the collectivistic society, Chinese people root the concept of relationship in their minds and stress harmony in their work life. In China, conflict is thought to be a major source to destroy the harmony. They usually provoke quarrel and fighting, spread hatred and revenge among people. Moreover, personal relationship in China has become such an important social resource that, to some extent, a person’s career promotion or reward is determined by whether he or she has good relationship with others in the organization or not. As Hofstede pointed out “relationship precedes task in collectivistic society (Hofstede, 1991)”, Chinese employees are more likely to view and deal with the conflict from relationship point of view.

Conflict Style

Conflict styles are assessed by Rahim’s (2001) Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI-II). Based on the dual-concern model, Rahim (2001) classifies conflict management styles into five categories: integrating (high concern for the self and high concern for others), compromising (moderate concern for the self and for others), obliging (low concern for the self and high concern for others), dominating (high concern for the self and low concern for others), and avoiding (low concern for the self and low concern for others).

Avoiding style is measured by four statements, e.g., “I try to stay away from disagreement with colleagues”.

Compromising Style is measured by four statements, e.g., “I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse”.

Dominating style is measured by four statements, e.g., “I sometimes use my power to make decisions to win a competitive situation”.

Integrating style is measured by four statements, e.g., “I try to investigate an issue with my colleagues to find a solution acceptable”.

Obliging style is measured by four statements, e.g., “I generally try to satisfy the needs of my colleagues”.

As for avoiding style, more than 80% Chinese employees in contrast to less than 10% American participants are for it. This indicates that the American employees are much less avoiding than Chinese employees in conflict situations. For individualistic and masculinity-oriented Americans, avoiding equals to disengaging and passive. The higher level of avoiding by the Chinese can be easily explained by their collectivistic cultural values, which emphasize interpersonal harmony and face-keeping. By eluding the conflict issue or conflicting party, Chinese employees avoid the confrontational contact, which is viewed as negative to interpersonal relationship in conflict management.

As for compromising style, the results show no marked differences between American employees and Chinese employees. However, the reasons behind are not the same. Personal interviews reveal that Chinese employees prefer this style for the sake of harmonious relationship in the workplace. However, American employees agreeing with this style indicate that their purpose is to resolve the problem. An American employee from IT industry said: “It is not easy to resolve the differences, particularly when both two parties are strong. Sometimes we need to find a middle way to reach a compromise (personal interview, February. 23, 2015)”.

As for dominating style, results show that about 48% of American respondents have expressed their preference on this style. This trend can be explained by American individualistic and masculine cultural values. Being individualistic, American employees are
more likely to insist on their stance and get the results expected in conflict situations. On the other hand, about 20% of Chinese respondents tend to adopt dominating strategy in managing conflict, because dominating style is thought to damage the personal relationship and group harmony. However, the Chinese, as collectivistic as they are, can choose the confrontational or dominating style, depending on their goals and concerns about interpersonal relationships.

As for integrating style, as 91% American respondents versus 40% Chinese employees agree with this style. In a low-power-distance society, the American people tend to minimize the inequalities among social members and emphasize the equality and freedom. For them, everyone has right to raise different ideas and opinions even before supervisors. At the same time, the supervisors show more consideration on the subordinates’ ideas when difference happens. On the other hand, American people are low-uncertainty-avoidant. They are more willing to take risks to face the conflict outcomes which may be unpredictable. That is one of reasons why American employees tend to “explore their differences and search for resolutions that transcend their own limited version of possible solutions. (Edward Elgar, 2005: 183)"

As for obliging style, the Chinese employees are more obliging than the American employees in managing conflict. This result is consistent with the conflict management style of collectivistic cultural members, who tend to sacrifice their own interests in order to reach a settlement in a conflict situation, a typical strategy of keeping group-harmony and saving face. However, American employees are supposed to be assertive, ambitious and tough, typical traits of individualistic and masculine society. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are found to be much less obliging than the Chinese counterparts.

**Face-concern in Conflict Management**

Face is a claimed sense of self-respect in an interactive situation. Face concerns in conflict management are assessed by twelve items written by Ting-Toomey and Oetzel. (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2003)

Self-face concern is measured by four items, e.g., “I am primarily concerned with protecting my self-image”.

Other-face concern is assessed by three items, e.g., “my concern is to act humble in order to make the other person feel good”.

Mutual-face concern is measured by four items, e.g., “I am concerned with respectful treatment for both of us”.

The purpose of this part is to test the participants’ face-concern tendency in managing conflict. Results show that an absolute majority of Chinese employees tend to be more other-face concerned and mutual-face concerned in conflict situation. This can be explained by the collectivistic cultural value and particular “mianzi” phenomenon in China. In China, whether a person can claim and maintain face is determined by others with the standard of social and moral values, which emphasize interpersonal harmony. Ability to maintain group harmony is thought to be a major source of face claim. If a person insists on self-face concern in conflict, the relationship between the conflicting parties will become tense, even break up. Such an outcome would make him lose face. However, American people think in terms of “I”. All concepts surround the core idea of “self”. Furthermore, “face” is judged by something more objective and specific in America, such as task fulfillment, persuasion of others and completion of a project. Therefore, in conflict episode, they tend to concentrate on the issue aspect in conflict to claim face for them, instead of showing much face concern for others.

**Conflict Management Rhythm**

When asked about the rhythm of conflict management, 69.7% American employees as compared to 21.1% Chinese employees prefer to set a schedule and clear goals for conflict
management for improving efficiency and impartiality. 82% American employees choose to approach the conflict in a linear-sequential way by solving conflict one after another, while 73% Chinese employees prefer to deal with the conflict in a spiral-holistic way. All of the data indicates that the American employees who follow M-time patterns usually adopt a task-oriented time concept. They tend to emphasize agenda setting, specific and clear goals in conflict management process. However, the Chinese employees who follow P-time patterns tend to involve many things and people together in conflict management. They emphasize more on the interaction rhythm among conflicting parties instead of solving the problem as soon as possible, which may be influenced by their collectivistic cultural values.

Conflict Aftermath

With this part, the author aims to find out the respondents’ views on the standards for “successful conflict management” and to what extent a conflict experience will affect next conflict situation with the same party. The data reveals that for Chinese, successful conflict management mainly includes in-group support, recovery of relationship, relationship acknowledgement and interpersonal harmony. For American employees, completing the task in conflict, resolving the conflicting differences, being understood by others, high efficiency, generating new ideas or new directions, and honest communication in conflict interaction are thought to be the major outcomes of successful conflict management. The results also show that 59.8% American employees, compared with only 11.7% Chinese employees think that the previous conflict experience leaves less than twenty percent degree of influence on the next situation. For Americans, because the person and the issue in conflict are separate, they seldom transfer the bad feelings in the previous situation to the next one. When new conflict takes place, they’d like to take it as a fresh challenge and analyze the conflict situation from a different angle. However, the Chinese employees tend to combine the person and the issue in conflict together. If the previous experience is satisfying, they may take friendly attitude and minimize the negative aspects in next conflict situation with the same person. However, previous bad experience may trigger face-losing, mistrust, even hatred towards the conflicting party. When new conflict with the same party arises, they will be more likely to take hostile attitude from the beginning and make retaliation in the conflict process.

Conclusions

Socialized in two different cultures, American employees and Chinese employees perceive and behave differently in the conflict management process. Conflict in China is thought to be threatening to both organizational development and self-development. In order to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationship, Chinese employees like to adopt indirect strategies, such as avoiding, obliging, and compromising, to deal with conflict. Face is quite important in Chinese culture. Therefore, the conflict outcome is defined as productive when both conflict parties can claim win-win results on the face issue in addition to task agreement. However, conflict in America is viewed as a positive thing, generating new ideas and initiatives. Integrating strategy is the most preferred one for Americans in the conflict management process. Communication in the conflict process is regarded as dissatisfying when the conflict parties are not willing to deal with the conflict openly and honestly. When no tangible goals are reached or no plan of action is developed, the conflict outcome is perceived as unproductive in American culture. Having an appropriate knowledge on the conflict management differences between Chinese and American culture may minimize the cultural shock and prevent the conflict from escalating.

Throughout the paper, the author emphasizes on the cultural reasons in conflict
management. Actually, conflict management depends on many other factors in addition to cultural values both for the Chinese and American employees. Briefly speaking, cultural values are the factors that orient the conflict management. It is the combined force of cultural values and other factors such as the stake of the conflict, individual personality, and the specific context that finally decide how a conflict should be managed by each individual cultural member. Therefore, a more synthetic and all-around perception is needed in handling conflict with members from different cultural backgrounds.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by the North China Electrical Power University’s Teaching Reform Project (No.2014JG72): Case-Based Teaching and Learning in Cross-Cultural Business Communication.

References


