Conflict Management: A Literature Review and Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Management of conflict is extremely important for the effective functioning of organizations and for the personal, cultural, and social development of individuals. The manner in which the conflict is managed can cause more tension in the situation rather than the conflict itself.

- This literature review analyzes five modes to dealing with conflict along two dimensions of behavior: competing (assertive and uncooperative), accommodating (unassertive and cooperative), avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative), compromising (falls into the middle), and collaborating (assertive and cooperative).

- In a study, technologists preferred a cooperating conflict management style when feelings have not yet escalated, and a compromising conflict management style after the conflict has become heated. The study also showed education level did not have any effect on their preferred conflict management styles.

Conflict at work is certain; however, the result may be influenced by the manner in which the conflict is managed.[1] The volume and intensity of impending conflict is determined by how the conflict is handled.[2] Effective conflict management encourages enthusiasm, boosts morale, and stimulates individual and organizational development; while ineffective conflict management produces more conflict and destructively effects the whole organization.[3] Effective conflict management involves the use of an assortment of styles dependent on the conditions of the conflict.[4]

This article provides an overview of conflict management strategies through a literature review. A study was then conducted of 219 radiologic technologists to predict commonalities in conflict management styles in this particular cohort, taking into account education level. Radiologic technology students who will someday become leaders in the field must know how to effectively manage conflict situations. Possessing a higher level of education can play a vital role in helping employees handle work associated conflict.

Literature Review

Conflict management strategies are the behavioral methods used to resolve conflict.[4] These behaviors are a consequence of both external circumstances and the individual's own method of interaction with people and problems, and are chosen dependent upon the relative significance of one's concern for self, versus concern for others.[5] Management of conflict is extremely important for the effective functioning of organizations and for the personal, cultural, and social development of human beings.[3] The manner in which the conflict is managed typically causes more tension in the situation rather than the conflict itself.[6] Any professional who is concerned with supporting others and the organization in changing negative conflict situations should have an objective of inventive and productive conflict management.

According to Thomas and Kilmann's MODE instrument there are five modes to dealing with conflict along two dimensions of behavior (see Figure 1).[5] The five modes are: competing (assertive and uncooperative), collaborating (assertive and cooperative), compromising (falls
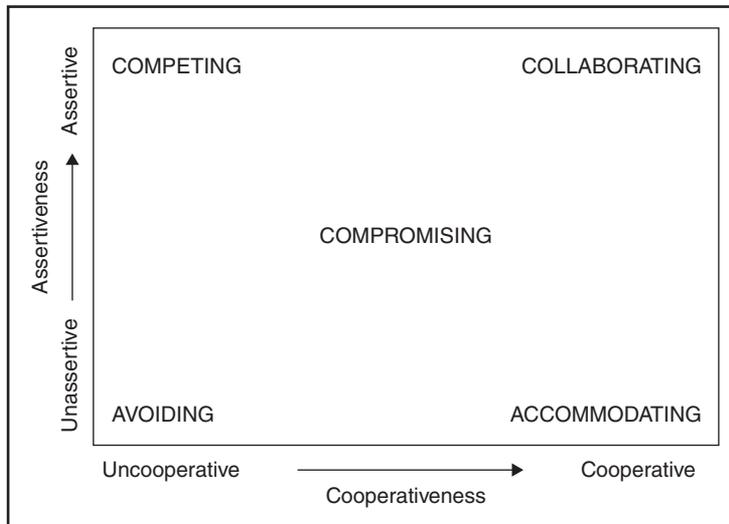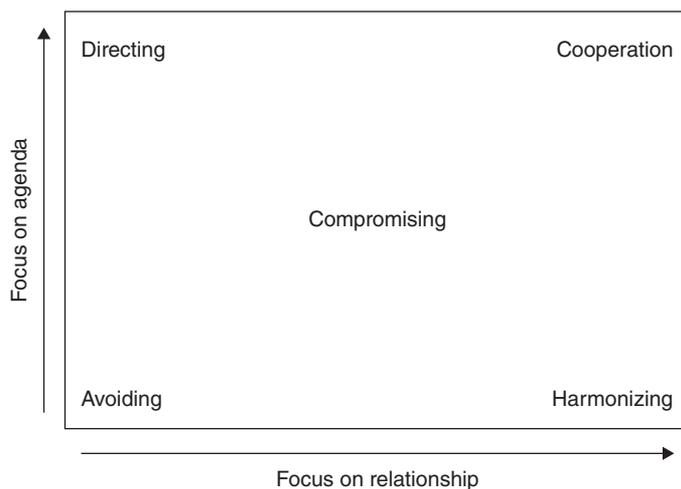
Figure 1 • Five Methods of Managing Conflict

Figure 2 • Five Styles of Responding to Conflict

into the middle), avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative), and accommodating (unassertive and cooperative). Kraybill developed a scale similar to that of Thomas and Kilmann (see Figure 2).[7] Kraybill's five responses to conflict are directing (high focus on agenda, low focus on relationship), cooperating (high focus on agenda and relationship), compromising (medium focus on agenda and relationship), avoiding (low focus on agenda and relationship), and

harmonizing (low focus on agenda, high focus on relationship). This literature review will follow Thomas and Kilmann's MODE instrument due to the majority of past studies using their scale.

Competing

The competing conflict management strategy is seen when individuals follow their own needs and goals to the exclusion of others.[5] Individuals who use a competing strategy try to increase

authority or influence by the use of open hostility.[8] When dealing with this type of strategy frustration, irritation, or argument may be used; and conflicting parties may be fully removed from the situation by use of authority. The conflict could be temporarily lessened when competing tactics are used, but no final resolution is ever agreed upon. Competitive tactics are a "win-lose" situation, where one individual tries to pressure the other to change.[9]

The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory refers to competing as a directing conflict management strategy. When the individual uses a directing conflict management style there is a high focus on the agenda (conflict) and a low focus on the relationship with the other party. The directing style has an "I win and you lose" approach. When individuals use this style they more than likely hold some type of power over the other party involved and are able to demand for the conflict to be resolved in their favor. The directing approach is not always a "bad" conflict management style, it can be useful in emergency situations when decisions need to be made fast. When this style is used by a supervisor it gives the employee a sense of stability to know that their supervisor is constant in their decision making.

Collaborating

Collaborating involves finding a solution to the conflicting situation that satisfies both parties.[5] An effort has to be made to actively pursue effective problem solving actions in order that all parties can accomplish equally satisfying results (win-win).[8] In this strategy, individuals seem to be just as concerned with the wants of others as their own; however, they are not willing to give up their own positions to merely soothe the wants of other individuals. Innovative ideas often emerge when people use the collaborative approach to conflict management. When parties must continue to work together after a conflict has occurred, a collaborative conflict management strategy must be used to continue to work

together in agreement. A collaborative strategy is positively linked to communication satisfaction and partner ability and trust.[9]

The collaborating style is synonymous with the cooperating style under the Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory. This conflict management style has a high focus on the agenda and the relationship with the other party. This type of conflict management style works best when the individuals involved in the conflict situation have a mutual respect and trust one another. When the cooperating style is used both parties are satisfied because both of their needs have been met; however, this conflict management style can take up a large amount of the individuals' time and take away from other important tasks.

Compromising

A compromising conflict management strategy involves trying to find a "common ground" that partly satisfies both parties.[5] With this strategy, individuals realize that every party cannot always be entirely satisfied in every conflict situation.[8] The parties accept that there are times when one must be ready to set apart individual wants and needs in preference for others in order to find a "common ground." In Sportsman and Hamilton's study of nursing and allied health students, the compromising strategy was chosen most, closely followed by avoidance.[4] Reich, Wagner-Westbrook, and Kressel showed educational level was positively correlated with a compromising style and negatively correlated with an accommodating style.[10] The supervisors in their study chose compromising as the most prominent conflict management strategy.

Kraybill describes the compromising with a medium focus on the agenda and the relationship with the other party involved in the conflict. When individuals use this type of conflict management style, they possess a sense of fairness and realism. Even though this type of conflict management style may seem like the "best" style, it can often lead to problems.

Over time, individuals will get tired of always getting a little, but never being fully satisfied.

Avoiding

This strategy is used when both parties' distresses are ignored by not addressing the problem.[5] The avoiding strategy is characterized by the acceptance that any effort to either discuss or contest the conduct of another is desperate and pointless.[8] Those who use an avoiding approach have very little concern for their own desires; it is not unusual to find these people purposely removing themselves from situations that could lead to possible disagreements. These individuals are not likely to be self-confident, fail to pursue support from coworkers, and are incapable of taking a strong stand on conflicting issues. Often individuals who use an avoiding conflict management strategy may choose not to reply or develop a state of unawareness. The radiologic sciences students from Sportsman and Hamilton's study chose the avoidance conflict management strategy most often.[4] Several studies have found that nurses tend to choose the avoiding style of conflict management.[1,8] Avoidance can be a valued conflict management strategy when the matters instigating the conflict are of low significance.[8]

One study describes two types of conflict management strategies: agreeable and disagreeable.[1] Individuals who use agreeable conflict management are more likely to incorporate one another's ideas through teamwork and try to fulfill the expectations of everyone. This type of conflict management makes work less conflicting over time. The disagreeable style of conflict management circumvents conflict all together or focuses on having only the individual's ideas and needs met. This type of conflict management results in a hostile and stressed work environment. This study found that nurses working in teams with high conflict were more apt to manage conflict with a disagreeable style (domination or avoidance).[1] Nurses were cautious to become involved in open debate to

resolve the condition. When high conflict was present, nurses were more likely to avoid discussing the condition because of distress or apprehension, or they chose to dominate the condition.

The avoiding conflict response has a low focus on agenda and relationship under Kraybill's scale.[7] In other words, the individual is not concerned with what the conflict is about or the other party involved in the situation. This style is used by individuals who are the silent, non-confrontational type, or by individuals who feel they are simply "too good" to be involved with the whole situation. When the avoiding style is used over a period of time it can lead to stagnation within a department. Individuals will become less involved and feel less accountable for their actions. However, the avoiding approach can be the proper style to use in trivial conflicts with individuals whose relationship is inconsequential.

Accommodating

An accommodating style of conflict management involves neglecting one's own concerns in order to satisfy the concerns of others.[5] This strategy is regarded as the acceptance that the preservation of pleasant interpersonal affairs is more significant than forming disagreements among colleagues.[8] Individuals adopting an accommodating style of conflict management have a high want for recognition and support from others. The accommodating individual is more apt to take a "middle of the road" attitude when an inescapable conflict emerges. These individuals tend to use apology or humor, or express their desires in an indirect way rather than coming straight to the problem.

Kraybill refers to accommodating as a harmonizing conflict response.[7] The harmonizing style has a low focus on the agenda and a high focus on the relationship. Individuals will often use this style when they want to fit in with the other party. When this style is over-used the individual will eventually become depressed due to the fact of always

giving the other party what they want and always losing what is important to the individual.

Situational Issues

According to Sadri, there are four situational issues to consider when choosing the best conflict management strategy: the importance of the issue the conflict deals with, importance of the relationship with the other party, the power one has in dealing with the issue, and the amount of time in which the issue must be resolved.[11] If the relationship is an ongoing one then the importance is high; if the relationship is a one time event due to the conflict or there are alternatives to the person the relationship importance is low. The issue of power in the conflict is determined by who the conflict involves, and can range from high power to low power. For example, a conflict between peers would be of equal power and a conflict between the employee and the supervisor would be of low power. Table 1 describes when the different types of conflict management strategies are best to use by managers.

Education and Conflict Management Styles

With the introduction of the CARE bill, individuals will be required to possess a formal education in medical imaging. Over half of all radiology programs in the country reported full enrollment and had to turn an average 39.5 students who are eligible away from the program. This number is only going to rise due to the CARE bill.[12] These students might someday become leaders in the field and must know how to effectively manage conflict situations.

Possessing a higher level of education can play a vital role in helping new employees adapt to the uncertainty of organizational life and handle work associated conflict.[13] Students benefit from learning conflict management strategies by being able to recognize types of conflict and making the proper communicative answers to the conflict. Conflict management education should be included from the start of the professional socialization course.[14] Conflict management strategies are either acquired or taught. When supervisors were taught about conflict management strategies their stress levels decreased significantly because they had the tools (ie, communication skills) to deal with the conflict.[15,16]

In a study of nurse managers, education level showed to play a part in the conflict management style used by nurses.[17] Nurses with master's degree or a bachelor's degree with specialized diplomas showed to use a compromising conflict management style. The nurse managers having only a bachelor's degree with no specialized diploma used an integrating style, and the nurse managers with only a diploma used a dominating conflict management style. Another study of nurses yielded similar results: nurses with a bachelor's degree were found to be more thinking and less competing, and managers with associate degrees showed to be more competing and more feeling.[18] The nurses possessing associate degrees were usually in lower level positions which could make competing essential in their workplaces. Al-Hamdan stated that "knowledge confers power," and that someone with a lower education level could feel powerless when related to someone with a higher education level (university degree).[17] When people are in positions of power and only possess a diploma, they tend to try and accommodate their supervisors and avoid conflict because they have no knowledge of conflict management strategies.

Most people in the healthcare field are taught technical skills for the delivery of healthcare services, but are not formally educated in relationship building skills.[19] Relationship building skills are crucial to negotiation, interpersonal communication, and collective problem solving among coworkers. Educators can help prepare students for dealing with conflict by first discussing the different types of conflicts they will most likely face in the work setting.[13] Students' communication strategies for dealing with conflict can be enhanced by educators. Students will be prepared to deal with conflict as an employee when they experience it as a student in a learning environment.

Survey Methods

The survey adopted for this project is Style Matters: The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory, which is divided into two sections: calm and storm. The calm section deals with the respondents' conflict management style in the beginning of the conflict situation when feelings have not yet escalated. The second section of the survey, storm, deals with the respondents' conflict management style after the conflict has become heated and gotten stronger. After the responses are

■ TABLE 1. Situational Issues for Conflict Management Styles				
	Issue Importance	Relationship Importance	Time Limits	Power Over Issue
Competing	High	Low	High	High
Collaborating	High	High	Low	Moderate
Compromising	Medium	Medium	Low	Equal
Avoiding	Low	Low	N/A	Equal
Accommodating	Low	Low	High	Low

Source. Adapted from Sadri G. "Conflict's here. Now what?" *Industrial Management.* 2012;54(3):23.

■ **TABLE 2.** Preferred Conflict Management Style (n=37)

Calm	Storm
Cooperating	Compromising
Compromising	Cooperating
Harmonizing	Harmonizing
Avoiding	Directing
Directing	Avoiding

calculated, each respondent will have a preferred conflict management style for the calm and storm settings.

Similar to the conceptual arrangement for methods of managing conflict by Thomas and Kilmann, the Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory also has five styles of responding to conflict on a two-dimensional level (see Figure 1). Where Thomas and Kilmann used competing, collaborating, and accommodating; Kraybill has used directing, cooperating, and harmonizing. The two dimensions Kraybill's model uses are focus on agenda (assertiveness in Thomas and Kilmann's model) and focus on relationship (cooperativeness in Thomas and Kilmann's model).

The study subjects were a sample of radiologic technologists from six local hospitals in the Shreveport and Bossier City areas. A total of 219 technologists were administered the survey electronically.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the technologists that participated in the survey preferred a cooperating conflict management style during the calm setting. The storm setting showed the technologists to prefer a compromising conflict management style. The study also showed the education level of the technologists did not have any effect on their preferred conflict management styles. See Table 3.

The technologists' preferred conflict management style for the calm setting was cooperating (Table 4). On the Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory scale this relates to having a high focus on the agenda and a high focus on the relationship with the other party involved in the conflict. The cooperating conflict management style is synonymous with the collaborating conflict management style from Thomas and Kilmann. The collaborating style is high on the assertiveness dimension and high on the cooperating dimension. Both cooperating and collaborating have "win-win" outcomes. This conflict management style is appropriate to use when both parties must continue to work together; hence the high focus on relationship.[8]

For the storm setting, the technologists had a more compromising conflict management style (Table 5). This style has a medium focus on the agenda and a medium focus on the relationship with the other party.[7] Thomas and Kilmann also refer to this style as compromising. This style requires for both parties to reach some form of "common ground" where both are partly satisfied.[8] The compromising conflict management strategy can be classified as functional conflict due to the fact that new ideas are created through the resolution process.[20,21]

The education level of the technologists did not show to have any significant effect on conflict management strategy. The findings of this study are inconsistent with previous studies of nurses that showed the education level does play a role in conflict management style.[17,18] Most of the technologists from this survey possessed a bachelor's degree, which could contribute to the findings being insignificant. See Figure 3. However, even though the results were insignificant in education level contributing to conflict management style, the results show that cooperating and compromising were the preferred conflict management style of the technologists. Since most of the technologists from this survey possessed a bachelor's degree, it would make sense that the overall conflict management strategies were cooperating and compromising. Individuals with a higher education are able to handle work associated conflict more easily.[13] The results from this survey coincide with Al-Hamdan's

■ **TABLE 3.** Conflict Management Style by Education Level (n=37)

Education Level	f	Calm	Storm
High School or Equivalent	1	Compromising	Directing
Some College	10	Compromising	Cooperating
Associate Degree	8	Compromising	Cooperating
Bachelor Degree	15	Cooperating	Cooperating
Graduate Degree	3	Cooperating	Compromising

Note. Less than high school was omitted for this table due to no technologists selecting this education level. The calm setting represents the time period before the conflict situation is heated, while the storm setting represents after emotions have gotten high.

■ TABLE 4. Calm Frequency (n=37)

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Cooperating	20	54.1	54.1
Directing	3	8.1	62.2
Compromising	6	16.2	78.4
Avoiding	2	5.4	83.8
Harmonizing	6	16.2	100.0
Total	37	100	

■ TABLE 5. Storm Frequency (n=37)

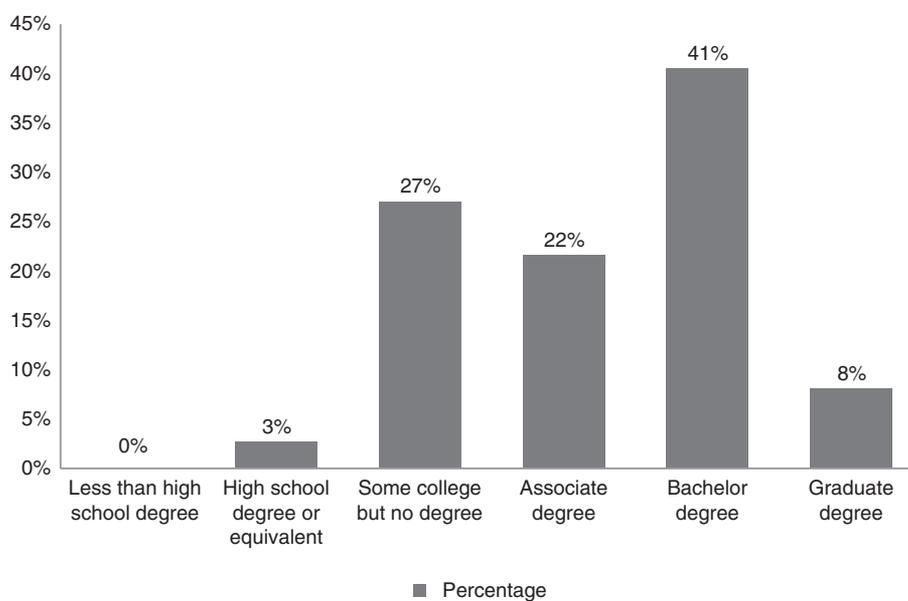|	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Cooperating	23	62.2	62.2
Directing	5	13.5	75.7
Compromising	6	16.2	91.9
Avoiding	1	2.7	94.6
Harmonizing	2	5.4	100.0
Total	37	100	

■ Percentage

Figure 3 • Technologists' Education Level (n=37)

study that showed nurses with a master's degree or bachelor's degree used a compromising conflict management strategy; however, Al-Hamdan's study showed that education level has a significant effect on the conflict management style used.[17]

Although the different education levels did show different conflict management styles in the both the calm and storm settings, they were not statistically significant. One might assume that the cooperating conflict management style is best because of the high focus on the agenda and the relationship, but this is not always true.[7] When a person is attempting to cooperate, time is taken away from other tasks that may be more important than the conflict; however, cooperation can build trust between the conflicting parties. The compromising conflict management style is the middle of all of the five styles. This style can be used to resolve conflicts more rapidly and create an emphasis on equality. When the compromising style is used for a conflict that requires more discussion, it can fail because no party gets what they really want. When technologists are educated in conflict management styles, they are able to recognize the situations where cooperating and compromising conflict management styles would fail.

Significance of Findings

This study did show that technologists possessing a bachelor's degree used a cooperating conflict management style in both the calm and storm settings. Cooperating from Kraybill's Conflict Style Inventory scale is equivalent to collaborating from Thomas and Kilmann's scale. When individuals use a cooperating conflict management strategy, there is better communication between the two parties because the individuals are trying to work out the problem so both parties can win.[8,9] By using a cooperating conflict management style innovative ideas are developed due to the individuals using a collaborative approach to solve the conflict.[11] The cooperating style creates functional conflict because the

results are positive (win-win outcome). By educating radiologic technologist students about conflict management styles they will be able to manage conflict in a functional and constructive way.[22] When the conflict is over patient care and the cooperating style is used, not only do the opposing parties win, but the patient benefits also.[23] Cooperating conflict management styles require the problem to be tediously thought out by all conflicting individuals and coming together to mutually agreed upon resolution.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First was the low response rate. The survey was sent to 219 technologists selected by convenience sampling, but only 41 responded. Of those 41 responses there were only 37 completed surveys. The low response rate could be due to the fact that one of the facilities was undergoing new ownership, and another facility had just gone through Joint Commission inspection. Another limitation of the survey is that over 40% of the respondents held bachelor's degrees. This data was not spread out evenly among different education levels.

Because of the small sample size the results of this survey cannot be generalized to the entire radiologic technologist population. A larger, random sample should be used in order to generalize the results. By having a larger sample size the education level of the technologists would also be diverse which could lead to more significant findings.

Conclusion

This study did not show education to have a significant effect on the type of conflict management style used by radiologic technologists; however, being educated in the different conflict management styles can only benefit individuals. Learning the different conflict management styles will enable individuals to be flexible in their response to the conflict situation.[7] Learning the different conflict management strategies will enable others to understand the value and recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each style. There is always a correct conflict management style in different conflict situations.

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