

Cooperative versus Competitive Styles in Conflict Management: The Influence of Perceptual and Motivational Processes

Divya Upadhyay

Summary

The effectiveness of individual employees, teams and entire organizations depends upon how people manage conflicts at work (Tjosvold, 1998). “Conflict is the perception of differences of interests among people” (Thompson, 1998, p. 4). Such conflicts are inevitable when decisions are taken and it is essential that they be managed appropriately. Therefore, understanding individuals’ preferences in managing conflict becomes important.

In this research, we investigate individuals’ preferences for cooperative versus competitive styles from a trait perspective. Specifically, we draw on Construal Level Theory (CLT) as a perceptual process and Consideration of Future Consequences (CFC) as a motivational process to investigate individuals’ preferences for cooperative versus competitive approaches to conflict management.

We examined the influence of construal level (CL) on individuals’ preferences for conflict management styles using behavior identification form (BIF) to measure CL. Through three studies we explored the psychological processes that lead to preferences for competitive or cooperative conflict management styles. To identify conflict management styles, a questionnaire adapted from Stenberg and Dobson's (1987) work was administered to participants. Measures of mediating variables were also taken. Results showed that two distinct processes mediated these preferences: the relationship between construal levels and cooperative conflict management styles was found to be mediated by perspective taking and empathic concerns while the relationship between construal levels and competitive management styles was mediated by impulsivity and aggression.

We examined the influence of temporal considerations on individuals’ preferences for conflict management styles using Strathman et al’s (1994) conceptualization of the consideration of future consequences. We also explored the mediating effect of different decision-making patterns in determining these styles, employing the CFC scale (Joireman, Shaffer, Balliet, & Strathman, 2012) and the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (Mann, Burnett, & Radford, 1997) for this purpose. Results showed that CFC and preference for competitive behavior was mediated by vigilant and hyper-vigilant decision making patterns.

Finally, we examined the influence of perceptual (CLT) and motivational (CFC) processes on preference of conflict management styles during the course of managing a project. Four sources of conflict in a project were taken into account- ‘scheduling’, ‘managerial and administrative procedures’, ‘goals’ and ‘politics’. Results suggest that construal level has no systematic effect on preference for cooperative and competitive conflict management styles while managing conflicts in a project. With CFC, we obtained mixed results supporting the relation between CFC and cooperative conflict management styles. We found some support for the relation between CFC and preference for competitive conflict management styles.

The findings improve upon our understanding of the processes involved in preference for conflict management styles. In particular, it is evident that fundamental perceptual and motivational processes underlie conflict management styles at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and organizational levels. Implications for future research in conflict management and negotiation behavior are discussed.