

Extension Administrators Approach to Conflict Management: A Study of Relationships Between Conflict Management Styles and Personality Type

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Conflict is a reality in everyone's life and should be considered a natural process that occurs daily. For most, conflict has negative connotations, invokes negative feelings and often leads to destruction (Lindelov and Scott, 1989). "Whether the effect of conflict is good or bad depends on the strategies used to deal with it" (Rahim, 1986, p. vi).

Dealing with conflict between and among individuals can be one of the most frustrating and uncomfortable experiences for administrators. According to Schmidt and Tannenbaum (1960), when conflict occurs "strong feelings are frequently aroused, objectivity flies out the window, egos are threatened, and personal relationships are placed in jeopardy" (p. 107). Robbins (1974) stated that "any attempt by an administrator to alter a specific conflict position requires that he [sic] be knowledgeable of its origin. An understanding of the source improves the probability that the proper resolution or stimulation technique will be selected" (p. 29).

Cooperative Extension Service administrators are constantly dealing with conflict situations such as "allocation of funds to positions, travel, supplies, etc. [Additionally], . . . poor job design and unclear reporting relationships can cause conflict over work arrangements" (Buford and Bedeian, 1988, p. 185). Different work groups within the Cooperative Extension System can become entangled in conflict if they pursue different goals and objectives. Extension district directors are in positions where they are prone to encounter conflict situations with their state director during their administrative duties. Jones and Melcher (1982) concluded that managers not only need to analyze the conflict situation to determine the appropriate conflict management style but should also be aware that the personality of each part in the conflict must be taken into

consideration.

A need existed to determine the psychological type preferences of Extension District Directors and how these preferences influence their interpersonal conflict management style with their state director. This knowledge could assist extension administrators when they are building teams, encouraging creativity among faculty, building group dynamics, exploring job satisfaction, and/or examining work productivity of faculty.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this descriptive correlational study was to determine the conflict management styles and the personality type preferences of District Directors in the Cooperative Extension Service's North Central Region. The study also examined the relationships that existed among the conflict management styles and personality type preferences and selected demographic characteristics of District Directors. The specific objectives of the study were to:

Describe the Extension district directors according to the demographic characteristics of gender, age, educational degree, major area of study and tenure.

Describe the conflict management styles (i.e. integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising) of the extension district directors.

Describe the psychological type preferences (i.e. extroversion or introversion, sensing or intuition, thinking or feeling, judging or perceiving) of the extension district directors.

Describe the relationships between the extension District Directors' conflict management styles and their psychological type preferences.

Procedure

The participants in this descriptive correlational study were the 68 Extension District Directors within the Cooperative Extension's North Central Region. Permission to conduct the study and to ascertain an accurate list of names and addresses of the District Directors was obtained from each of the 12 states in the North Central Region via mail.

Two self-report questionnaires, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) Form G and the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventories-II (ROCI-II) Form A, were used to measure the variables of interest. The MBTI was used to assess the psychological type preferences. Four dichotomous scales are used throughout the MBTI: extraversion (E) or introversion (I) -- reflects whether a person's attitude is oriented primarily toward the outer world or the inner world; sensing (S) or intuition (N) -- describes the function of how information is perceived; thinking (T) or feeling (F) -- describes the preference for making judgments; and judging (J) or perceiving (P) -- describes the attitudes toward dealing with the outer world. Eight numerical scores are derived which were transformed into eight nominal categories.

The ROCI-II Form A measures five independent conflict management dimensions that represent styles of handling interpersonal conflict, which are measured on a summated five point Likert scale, with one indicating strongly disagree and five indicating strongly agree. The five conflict management styles are integrating: a win/win solution -- acceptable to both parties; obliging -- satisfying the concern of the other party; dominating -- a win/lose orientation or forcing one's position; avoiding -- withdrawing, passing-the-buck or sidestepping the situation; and compromising -- both parties give up something to reach a mutually acceptable solution. ROCI-II Form A measures how an organizational member handles conflict with his or her superior.

Both instruments were field tested to ensure face and content validity using five extension

administrators within the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. Reliability and internal consistency were calculated for the MBTI and ROCI-II Form A utilizing extension personnel for four states. The MBTI test-retest product-moment correlations were .96 EI, .95 SN, .77 TF and .90 JP whereas the split-half reliabilities with the Spearman-Brown correction were .83 EI, .89 SN, .83 TF, and .77 JP. The ROCI-II Form A test-retest product-moment correlations were .40 integrating, .93 obliging, .95 dominating, .77 avoiding, and .69 compromising whereas the Cronbach's alphas were .84 integrating, .78 obliging, .72 dominating, .80 avoiding and .56 compromising.

The questionnaires were mailed to the district directors. After appropriate follow-up procedures were initiated, completed surveys were obtained from 66 of the 68 administrators for a total response rate of 97.1 percent. External validity was not a concern for the outcome measures since the results of the study were not generalized beyond the population. The four major threats to external validity of frame error, sampling error, selection error and nonresponse error were addressed. Frame error was controlled through use of an up-to-date list of district directors. Sampling error and selection error were controlled through use of a census whereas nonresponse error was controlled by comparing early to late respondents (Miller and Smith, 1983). No significant differences were found between early and late respondents.

Data were analyzed with the SPSS/PC+ computer program. The statistical procedures of frequencies, percents, means, standard deviations and Phi's were utilized. All measures of association were interpreted utilizing Davis' (1971) descriptors.

Findings

The demographic variables of gender, age, educational degree, major area of study and tenure were included in this study. Of the 66 individuals that provided data, the majority (75.8%) were male whereas less than one-fourth (24.2%) were female. The mean age of the district directors was 50.1 years. Nearly three-fourths (71.2%) of the district directors held a master's degree whereas one-fourth (25.8%) held a doctoral degree. The majority (74.2%) of the respondents' major area of

study for their highest academic degree was in the social sciences. Average number of years employed in extension was over 22 years whereas nearly 40 percent had less than five years experience in their current position. Average tenure as an administrator, including service in other organizations, was 11.9 years with nearly 40 percent having less than ten years of administrative experience.

The conflict management styles of the district directors utilized with their state director, as self-reported on a summated five-point Likert scale, are shown in Table 1. As a whole, the respondents perceived their most prominently used conflict management style to be the integrating style with a mean score of 4.32. The next most used conflict management style was compromising with a mean score of 3.79. The obliging conflict management style was the third most used style with a mean score of 3.68 for district directors. Dominating was the fourth most used conflict management style with a mean score of 3.13. The avoiding conflict management style was reported to be the least used with a mean score of 2.96.

Table 1. Summary Statistics for the Conflict Management Styles (n=66)

Conflict Management Style	Mean	SD
Integrating	4.32	.47
Obliging	3.68	.59
Dominating	3.13	.57
Avoiding	2.96	.77
Compromising	3.79	.48

Note: 1 =Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree

Table 2 indicates that 27.3 percent of the population was of the ESTJ personality type. The ENTJ personality type accounted for 15.2 percent whereas 10.6 percent preferred the ISTJ personality type. An individual with an ESTJ personality preference tends to be practical, realistic, matter-of-fact, has a head for business, likes to organize and run activities and makes a good administrator if they consider other's feelings. Those individuals who prefer the ENTJ personality preference are more apt to be hearty, frank, leaders in activities, good at reasoning and public speaking, well informed by may appear more confident than their experience warrants. An individual with an ISTJ personality preference is more likely to be serious, quite, practical, orderly,

matter-of-fact, logical, realistic, dependable, well organized but will work toward a goal regardless of distractions (Myers, 1987).

Table 2. Type Table of District Directors (n=66)

	Sensing Types		Intuitive Types	
	With thinking	With feeling	With feeling	With thinking
Introverts	ISTJ n=7 %=10.6	ISFJ n=2 %=3.0	INFJ n=1 %=1.5	INTJ n=4 %=6.1
	ISTP n=1 %=1.5	ISFP n=1 %=1.5	INFP n=1 %=1.5	INTP n=3 %=4.5
Extraverts	ESTP n=20 %=3.0	ESFP n=0 %=0.0	ENFP n=3 %=4.5	ENTP n=5 %=7.6
	ESTJ N=18 %=27.3	ESFJ n=5 %=7.6	ENFJ n=3 %=4.5	ENTJ n=10 %=15.2

Due to the small sample size and the majority (68.3%) of the district directors preferring the integrating conflict management style, the conflict management styles were collapsed into two nominal categories of integrating and "other styles" for data analysis (Table 3). The eight Myers-Briggs Personality Type preference scores were converted into the nominal categories of extraversion or introversion, sensing or intuition, thinking or feeling, and judging or perceiving.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Preferred Conflict Management Styles (n=66)

Conflict management style	f	%
Integrating	45	68.3
Obliging	8	12.1
Dominating	1	1.5
Compromising	2	3.0
Two conflict management styles equal	6	9.1
Three conflict management styles equal	1	1.5

Table 4. Relationship Between Conflict Management Style and Extravert/Introvert Personality Preference (n=66)

Personality preferences		Conflict Management Styles			Phi
		1 ^a	2 ^b	3 ^c	
Extravert	N	28	18	46	
	%	60.9	39.1	100.0	
Introvert	N	17	3	20	.24
	%	85.0	15.0	100.0	
Sensing	N	19	17	36	
	%	52.8	47.2	100.0	
Intuition	N	26	4	30	.36
	%	86.7	13.3	100.0	
Thinking	N	34	16	50	
	%	68.0	32.0	100.0	
Feeling	N	11	5	16	.01
	%	68.8	31.3	100.0	
Judging	N	32	18	50	
	%	64.0	36.0	100.0	
Perceiving	N	13	3	16	.16
	%	81.3	18.8	100.0	

1^a=Integrating

2^b=Other styles

3^c=Total

As shown in Table 4, nearly 61 percent of the extraverts and 85 percent of the introverts preferred the integrating conflict management style. Approximately 40 percent of the extraverts and 15 percent of the introverts preferred to use another conflict management style. A low association (Phi=.24) was found between conflict management style and the extravert/introvert personality type preferences. Introverts were more likely to use the integrating conflict management style.

Nearly 87 percent of the intuitive district directors and 52.8 percent of the sensing district directors favored the integrating conflict management style. Other conflict management styles were preferred by 47.2 percent of the sensing district directors and 13.3 percent of the intuitive district directors. A moderate association (Phi=.36) was found between conflict management style and the sensing/introvert personality type preferences. Intuitive district directors were more likely to use the integrating conflict management style.

Sixty-eight percent of the district directors preferring the thinking personality type preference and 68.8 percent of the district directors preferring the feeling personality type preference tended to use the integrating conflict management style. Thirty-two percent of the district directors preferring the thinking personality type preference and 31.3 percent of the district directors preferring the feeling personality type preference were more inclined to utilize an other conflict management style. A negligible association (Phi=.01) was found between conflict management style and the thinking/feeling personality type preferences.

Approximately 82 percent of the district directors with a perceiving personality type preference and 64 percent of the district directors with a judging personality type preference tended to utilize the integrating conflict management style. Thirty-six percent of the district directors with a judging personality type preference and nearly 19 percent of the district directors with a perceiving personality type preference tended to employ another conflict management style. A low association (Phi=.16) was found between conflict management style and the judging/perceiving personality type preferences. District directors with a perceiving personality type preference were more likely to use the integrating conflict management style.

Conclusions and Implications

It was concluded that district directors prefer to use the integrating conflict management style when confronted with a conflict situation. This is supported by Chanin and Schner's (1984) findings that concluded people prefer to use one conflict handling mode over the other modes, regardless of the situation. This finding does not support Lee's (1990) findings that managers reported using the obliging style with their superiors. This implies that (a) the district directors in the North Central Region were more willing to collaborate and problem solve with their state directors (superiors) to find an acceptable solution to a conflict situation or (b) the state directors (superiors) provided an atmosphere where the district directors felt more comfortable using the integrating style. Utley, Richardson and Pilkington (1989) concluded that personality does play a role in conflict management styles but that

the importance of the target individual may have been more important.

District directors who favored the introvert, intuitive and perceiving personality type preferences were more apt to use the integrating conflict management style than were the extravert, sensing, and judging personality type preferences. The thinking/feeling personality type preferences did not affect the choice of conflict management styles. Rahim (1983) found that out of 20 correlations between the five conflict management styles and the personality type preferences, only seven showed a low association. "This indicates that there are some weak but significant relationships between personality and the styles of handling interpersonal conflict" (p. 19).

Recommendations

The review of literature, the findings of this study, and the subsequent conclusions and implications led to several recommendations. First, district directors need to understand the strengths and weaknesses inherent within each of the five conflict management styles and work toward being able to appropriately use each style depending upon the situation. Second, extension administrators need to recognize and appreciate the diversity of personality type within their organization as this awareness can lead to (a) a better understanding of group dynamics, (b) building an empowered team, and (c) managing conflict in a constructive manner.

In addition, further research is needed to determine the qualitative aspects of an administrator's choice of conflict management style. Since this study dealt exclusively with the quantitative aspect of conflict management styles, a qualitative aspect should be added to future studies to insure a triangulation of results. This would involve case study analysis, face-to-face interviews, and/or direct observation with the participants to help assess other potential extraneous variables and to assure the accuracy of the self-reporting of conflict management styles. It is recommended that this study be replicated in the other three regions of the Cooperative Extension Service. Comparisons of the results of the four populations could be made.

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