The Overview Study of Conflict Management Styles in Thai Organizations (1984-2008): Analysis in Communication Perspectives

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Abstract

Conflict is a pervasive aspect of organization life. It penetrates competition for resources, co-ordination of system, work distribution, decision making and many other aspects of organizational behavior. This article aims to analyze conflict management styles in Thai organization and also to analyze the impact of communication on conflict studies in Thai organizations by using Miller's (1999) communication perspectives approach. The data analysis was based on 49 works gathered from master degree theses, independent studies and term papers (1984-2008) which examined the topic mentioned. It was found that compromising was the most commonly used conflict management style in Thai organization followed by collaboration, avoidance, accommodation and competition, respectively. The results also showed that the human relations approach and human resources approach have dominated the studies of conflict communication in Thai organizations. Most studies focused on differential perception on conflict styles in superior-subordinate relationship. For variables concerned, the study revealed that actor attributes and context were mostly employed in the studies in order to explain communication role in Thai organizational conflict. The analysis also showed that climate, organization size and conflict view are variables which have more predictive power on conflict strategies. On the other hand, variables such as sex, age and experience showed inconsistent findings.

บทคัดย่อ

ความขัดแย้งได้แผ่ขยายไปอยู่ในทุกอณูชีวิตขององค์กร ความขัดแย้งมักแทรกซึมอยู่ในการแข่งขันเพื่อให้ได้มาซึ่งทรัพยากร ความร่วมมือของระบบ การกระจายงาน การตัดสินใจและ

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พฤติกรรมในองค์กรอีกหลายลักษณะ บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์รูปแบบการจัดการ
ความขัดแย้งในองค์กรไทยและวิเคราะห์มุมมองการสื่อสารที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการศึกษาความขัดแย้งใน
องค์กรไทยผ่านแนวคิดการสื่อสารองค์กรของ Miller (1999) โดยวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากวิทยานิพนธ์
สารนิพนธ์และภาคนิพนธ์ระดับบัณฑิตศึกษาที่มีการศึกษาในหัวข้อดังกล่าว จำนวน 49 เล่ม ซึ่งมี
การศึกษาตั้งแต่ปี พ.ศ. 2527- พ.ศ.2551 ผลการวิเคราะห์พบว่า องค์กรไทยมีการใช้รูปแบบการ
จัดการความขัดแย้งแบบประนีประนอมมากที่สุด รองลงมาเป็นการร่วมมือ การหลีกหนี การยอม
ตามและการแข่งขันตามลำดับ ผลการศึกษายังชี้ให้เห็นว่าแนวทางการศึกษาแบบมนุษยสัมพันธ์
และทรัพยากรมนุษย์เป็นมุมมองการสื่อสารที่มีอิทธิพลสูงต่อการศึกษาความขัดแย้งในองค์กรไทย
การศึกษาส่วนใหญ่เน้นการรับรู้ที่ต่างกันเกี่ยวกับการใช้รูปแบบความขัดแย้งในความสัมพันธ์
ระหว่างผู้บังคับบัญชาและผู้ใต้บังคับบัญชา สำหรับตัวแปรเกี่ยวข้องที่มีการศึกษาเพื่อนำมาอธิบาย
บทบาทของการสื่อสารในความขัดแย้งขององค์กรไทยมากที่สุด คือ ลักษณะของบุคคลและบริบท
นอกจากนั้นยังพบอีกว่าบรรยากาศ ขนาดขององค์กรและมุมมองต่อความขัดแย้งเป็นตัวแปรที่มี
อำนาจในการทำนายกลยุทธ์ความขัดแย้งได้มากกว่าตัวแปรอื่นๆ ขณะที่ตัวแปร เช่น เพศ อายุและ
ประสบการณ์ยังไม่พบผลที่แน่นอน

Introduction

Conflict is a pervasive aspect of organization life. It involves relationships between two individuals, or groups in an organization, and among organizations. Chris Argyris (1964 cited in Wilson, Goodall,JR. and Waagen,1986: 140) believes that the major cause of conflict in organizations is the tension between desires for individual growth, identity, and independence and the management of units of production.

Hocker and Wilmot (1985: 20) stated that communication is the central element in all interpersonal conflicts. This Communication underlies the sources, goal, strategies, tactics, relationship, and contact systems that shape the nature of conflict and conflict management.

Thomas and Pondy (1977:1100) suggested that communication helps to understand conflict management among principal parties. It is the basic constituent of conflict. In other word, activity of managing a conflict occurs through communication. More specifically, communication undergirds the setting and reframing of goals; the definition and narrowing of conflict issues; the development of relationships between disputants and among constituents; the selection and implementation of strategies and tactics; the generation attack, and defense of alternative solutions; and the reaching and

confirming of agreements.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of conflict management is being used in Thai organizations?

2. What type of communication perspectives influence the study of conflict in Thai organizations?

3. Which factors were used in the study of communication role in conflict situations?

Theoretical Framework

Communication Perspectives

Miller (1999: 211) reviewed the communication perspectives applied to an understanding in organizational conflict as provided in the follow:

Classical approach: This approach view conflict as a breakdown communication. The conflict interrupts normal organizational functioning. The approach views that misunderstanding causes a lack of fidelity in information flow between sender and receiver. For organizational efficiency, conflict should be effectively managed.

Human relations approach: Conflict is viewed as negative as is evidenced by faulty relationship among organizational members. Conflicting parties are encouraged to avoid conflicts or compromise in order to harmonize work relations.

Human resources approach: This approach view that conflict is the mean for growth and development in the organization. Conflicting parties are encouraged to collaborate on solutions that will satisfy both parties and contribute to better organizational functioning in the future.

System approach: Conflict is conceptualized as cycled activities escalating or de-escalating the intensity of disagreement. Conflict is varied the interdependencies created through communication network structure.

Cultural approach: The approach is based on and can be revealed through differential metaphors and value systems of individuals and groups. Organizational cultures vary in terms of the level of conflict.

Critical approach: The approach focuses on meaning, specifically on the structures of meaning that embodies and reinforces domination. Conflict

reflects deeper imbalances of power based on class structure, economics, or gender and reveals and sustained through organizational discourse. It discovers the meaning of symbols hidden in structure of domination. According to the approach, communication enters as the cumulative effect of various messages form hidden structure, and provide critical insight into the domination pattern.

Miller has linked conflict concept through communication which is divided into two categories. The first category consists of founding approach which includes classical approach, human relations approach and human resources approach. The second category consists of contemporary approach which includes system approach, cultural approach and critical approach. The researcher has used these six approaches as a framework to analyze type of communication perspectives which influence conflict study in Thai organization. This will lead to the understanding of how individuals or groups in Thai organization perceive about conflict.

Conflict management styles

The word "conflict" is from Latin word "confligere" which means fight, warfare, incompatibility or opposition. Hocker and Wilmot (1995) define conflict as an expression of feeling or fighting between two parties, whom are aware about their goals' incompatibility and is worried if another party achieves their goals.

When facing conflict, people will choose differently conflict management styles. Blake and Mouton (1964) explain that conflict styles refers to a characteristic mode or a habitual way that a person handles a dispute. They also suggest that behavior and orientations of people are based on concern for self and concern for others. These considerations represent an widening concept of the competitive and cooperative dichotomy that existed early conflict research.

Blake and Mouton (1964) describe conflict management styles as follows:

Collaboration, problem-solving or confrontation: This style describes individuals who work for an integrative solution, and direction face conflict. Collaboration takes place when an individual simultaneously cooperates and asserts one's own goal. This approach aims to satisfy both

conflict parties and to maximize the benefits both parties by focusing on win-win approach.

Competition or forcing: It is an individual's behavior which asserts only one's own goal without cooperating with the counterpart. This win-lose approach results in the win of one party and the lost of the other, usually through the use of position power, assertiveness, verbal dominance, and perseverance.

Accommodating or smoothing: this strategy relies on feelings of happiness instead of accomplishment of production results. An individual tries to cooperate or satisfy the other party by scarifying one's own goal since the individual does not want to cause an interpersonal dispute or discrepancy. This person is likely to be highly communicative, friendly, and even charming, but unable to deal directly with conflict.

Avoidance or withdrawal: It shows avoiding behavior through the individuals's fear, apathy, and insensitivity. This strategy is likely to be the worst possibly choice among other strategies because nothing happens and nothing is resolved. An individual tries to stay away from the dispute or stay neutral and does not get with the conflict.

Compromising: It is a method of reducing conflict rather than resolving it. The communication tends to show bargaining techniques, such as offer and counteroffer, give and take, and appeals to the common good of the organization. Actually, both sides generally are less satisfied with the outcome than their earlier expectation. Thus, with compromise, they find an intermediate position, difference reduction and half-way meet with the opponent.

In relation to the study of communication perspectives concerning conflict in Thai organization, the researcher analyzed data by using four independent variables. Putnam and Poole (1987: 549) has explained that these variables have a role in linking communication concept to the conflict which is found most in organizational conflict. The variables consist of 1) actor attributes, for example, predispositions, needs, personality traits, beliefs, attitudes, skills and cognitive styles; 2) conflict issues, specifically, substantive aspects of the conflict, emergence of conflict, the interests or "root issues" of those in conflict; 3) relationship variables, for instance, trust, power, target of conflict, and interdependency between communicators; and

4) contextual factors, for example, organizational climate, precedent or past history, organizational norms, standard operating procedures, organizational complexity, marketplace factors, and legal-political constraints.

The relationship between communication and these four variables is bidirectional. In some cases actor attributes, conflict issues, relationships or context variables influence communication processes, whereas in other cases communication constitutes and shapes one or more of the four components. Patterns of influence vary across the four arenas.

Method

The researcher surveyed master theses, independent studies and term papers which studied conflict in Thai organizations from every university in Thailand. 49 research conducted between 1984 and 2008 were found and were analyzed using content analysis method. The data were compiled, and divided into four categories of conflict management style according to the concept of Putnam and Poole (1987: 549)

The researcher divided the data analysis into 3 main sections in accordance to the research questions.

In the first section, conflict management was analyzed by using the 5 approaches: collaboration, competition, accommodation, avoidance, and compromising. The approaches were found in 49 works studied. The results were then tallied and presented as an overall picture of the conflict management approach employed by Thai organizations in chronological order.

In the second section, Miller's 6 Communication Perspectives, which includes classical approach, human relations approach, human resources approach, system approach, cultural approach and critical approach, were used to analyze the methodology used and conflict management perspectives of Thai organizations in the 49 works studied and also to find out the correspondence of Miller's communicative perspectives to that of the conflict management approaches used in Thai organizations.

In the final section, the researcher analyzed the communication factors that effected the conflict in Thai organizations in all the 49 works. Putnam and Poole's (1987: 549) approach was used as the framework for analysis. The approach suggestedfour main factors or variables which are actor attributes, conflict issues, relationship variables, and contextual factors.

Results

Research Question 1: Conflict management styles in Thai organizations

On the analysis of 49 findings in the studies, it is found that compromising is the most used conflict management style in Thai organization followed by collaboration, avoidance, accommodation and competition, respectively, as displayed in the following table.

24 research findings reported the use of compromising conflict management, followed by 19 research findings which used collaboration conflict management, 3 research findings reported the use of avoidance conflict management and 3 reseach findings reported the use of accommodation conflict management, whereas no research findings reported on the use of competition conflict management style in Thai organizations.

Conflict styles	Number of studies*
compromising	24
collaboration	19
avoidance	3
accommodation	3
competition	0
Total	49

*Note: Number of studies that indicated and ranked the stated conflict management style as the first conflict management.

For example, in examining conflict management styles of secondary school headmasters, Bongkot Yuvanatemiya (1995) found that 'compromising' was the most commonly used style, followed by accommodating, avoidance, competition, and collaboration, respectively. Correspondingly, Pattarapol Mahakun's (1999) results revealed that presidents of sub-district executive committee and primary school headmasters used similar conflict management styles while Nanong Kungnoi (2001) and Sackarin Khaison (2005) found that primary school headmasters and Chief Officers of Primary Care Unit in Chaiyaphum Province regularly used 'collaboration,' followed by 'compromising.'

Research Question 2: Type of communication perspectives that influenced the study of conflict in Thai organizations.

The findings revealed two influential communication perspectives: human relations approach and human resources approach.

Considering the method of conflict management under organization communication perspectives it was found that employees in Thai organization usually handle conflict by compromising as compromising is closely related to human relations approach. Conflict, according to this approach, is viewed as negative. Compromising is seen as a conflict reducing mechanism and not as a mechanism for solving the conflict. Each party will be encouraged to avoid the conflict or compromise for organization harmony and unity. For example, the study of Pornsak Chotpinit (2000) found that the executive of Public Health and executive of most hospitals chose compromising as well for their relationship.

Two studies corresponded to the human resources approach. From the study of Pattasarn Sridaoreung (1996) and Pakkamon Khamdee (1995), it was found that the samples perceived conflict in a positive way and also brings creativity to organization. One interesting point is that these research were about the study of 'private' organizational context while the previous case of human relations approach is related to governmental organizations. This shows that the types of organization, private or governmental organizations could affect the organization communication concepts, and influence the conflict management styles accordingly.

In addition, from a communication perspective, compromising is mostly used by members of Thai organization. It is likely that when facing conflict, Thai employees use a strategy for reducing conflict rather than resolving it. For communication in this situation, both parties tends to display bargaining techniques, such as counteroffer, give-and-take, and appeals to the common good of the organization. Even though both sides try to reduce goals and requirement, conflict in Thai organization still appeared. In addition, this strategy also demonstrates the inequality in Thai organization, in other words, Thai society.

Compromising is the style of conflict management that is compatible with Thai culture, which usually tries to avoid conflict, avoid fighting and tries to accomplish a compromise to get over the problem. This may be the

concept of Thai communication style. Everyone is looking for a new way of communication with creativity, but they choose to handle conflict with a compromise that emphasizes maintaining relationships of two parties or emphasizes face-saving.

Research Question 3: Variables of communication related to conflict management styles in Thai organizations.

From the analysis of the conflict management in Thai organizations from 49 sources, it was found that there were 3 main communication factors or variables that concerns conflict management styles. The factors that were mostly studied were actor attributes, while context factors and relationship variables were slightly found. Conflict issues variables were not found in this analysis. The details are as follows.

1) *Actor attributes*.

From the analysis of actor attributes variables, it was found that gender, age, education and psychological maturity variables had no correlation with conflict management styles. For example, Bongkoch Yuwatemee (1995), Narong Kungnoi (2001), and Sackarin Khaison (2005) and Pattarapol Mahakun (1999) reported that gender, age, and education did not influence conflict management style of school-headmaster and presidents of sub-district executive committee.

Nevertheless, two studies revealed contrasting results from other works studied. Wipawee Jiamboos' (2001) studies of conflict management style in secondary schools and Suwadee Tapatanont's (1999) examamination in primary school headmasters' conflict found that 'age' was slightly related to the selection of conflict management style.

2) *Context factors.***

The majority of the research findings indicated that management experiences and organization size were not related to conflict management styles. It was also found that there were no studies conducted on other contexts variables or factors.

To illustrate this, Nipon Chaideetong's (1999) study showed that directors of provincial offices of general education both with high and low management experience in all three organization sizes (small, medium, and

large) employed collaboration, compromising and accommodation styles in a high level and competition and avoidance styles in a medium level. Similarly, Wipawee Jiamboos (2001) and Sekroj Tuantawin (1998) reported that sizes of secondary schools are not associated with conflict management styles.

However, in terms of organization atmosphere, a negative relationship between competition style and organization atmosphere was found. Interestingly, a study conducted by Pornsak Chotipinij (2000) found the relationship between context factor and conflict management styles. He found that organization sizes were associated with conflict management styles of district public health office management and hospital directors. District public health office management of small-size organization used avoidance style to a lesser extent from those from medium-size organization and used collaboration style to a greater extent than those from large-size organization. Medium size hospital directors used avoidance styles to a greater extent than those from large size hospitals.

3) Relationship variables.

From the analysis of relationship variables, it was found that postion was the only variable studied. The findings in the studies all corresponded that position is related to conflict management style.

For example, Montika Kaewtongkum's (1996) study indicated that position is associated with conflict management styles of professional nurses who were ward heads. Most of the ward heads used compromising and avoidance styles to deal with conflicts. Ordinary nurses, however, used accommodation to deal with conflict. The older the nurses were, the less accommodation styles and the more avoidance style were used. The longer the nurses worked, the less accommodation styles were also used.

Conclusion and Suggestions

From the analysis of 49 research conducted on conflict management styles in Thai organizations, the following conclusions can be drawn. Member of Thai organizations mostly use accommodation as conflict management style followed by collaboration, avoidance and accommodation respectively, whereas, competition was not found.

When Miller's 6 communication approaches were employed in the analysis of 49 research and studies, it was found that conflict management style used by Thai organizations mostly corresponded with Human Relations approach and Human Resources Relations respectively. It can be explained that Human Relations approach encourages members to avoid conflict or accommodate the conflicts for the purpose of organizational unity. This type of approach ranked the highest according to the analysis of the 49 research and studies. However, few studies' results corresponded with the Human Resource relation which viewed conflict as positive and creative.

Nevertheless, when considering as a whole that members of Thai organizations accommodate conflicts, it reflects that the members in Thai organizations chose to reduce conflicts rather than resolve the conflicts. Although the accommodation approach reduced the needs of both parties to a certain extent in order to reach the common grounds but this same approach reflects the inequality. Those in higher power or status lose less whereas those in the lesser power or status lose more. Those having lesser power or status are in a disadvantaged situation. Thus, those in a lesser power or status usually are not willing to accommodate to the conflict which in the end may lead to a dysfunctional organization.

With regards to the communication factors that effected the conflicts in Thai organizations, the analysis of the 49 research and studies revealed that there were 3 major factors or variables that have been studied. The 3 factors are: actor attributes, relationship variables, and contextual factors, whereas conflict issues were not found in this analysis. According to the analysis, contextual factors and relationship variables were related to conflict management styles, while the actor attributes factors' findings are inconclusive.

The analysis conducted in this research revealed certain gaps which will be noted, discussed and recommended for further research.

1. Various communication approaches should be used: The approaches currently used in Thai organization conflict research are limited to two approaches; human relations approach and human resources approach. These two perspectives cause researcher to perceive communication as only a channel of information transmission in spite of the fact that, in the conflict context, communication has broader meanings and roles. In addition, communication is a dynamic process. For example, communication has roles

in conflict definition, development and termination. As a consequence, research should also use other perspectives such as cultural perspective or critical perspective to complement the understanding of conflict in Thai organizations.

2. Under-examined variables should be paid more attention in order to better predict conflict management styles : Most of the research in Thai organization conflicts focus on actor attribute factors. These studies seem to consistently indicate that the actor attributes factors including gender, age, education and emotional maturity are not related to conflict management styles although the minority of studies indicate small relationship. As a consequence, the other three factors—conflict issue, relationship and contextual factors—should be seriously studied so that we may have a better understanding of conflict in Thai organizations because these three variables may predict conflict management style better than actor attribute factors. In other words, the use of one group of factors may not be able to make a prediction but the use of several factors, or the combination of several factors, may be possible.

For example, the relationship factor should be studied when the third party or a respected elder is involved in the negotiation when conflict arises in the organization as this is the characteristics of the Thai culture where respected elders assist in the negotiation of conflict. This should be further explored that in what type of conflict does the need of the third party arises. The study in this particular aspect would assists in a better understanding of conflict management styles in the Thai organizations. In the case of contextual variables, of which we have less understanding, may be studied in terms of organization atmosphere, historical background of organization, tales in organization, organizational norms, structural complexities and internal and external factors influencing interpersonal and intergroup conflict.

3. There should be more emphasis on message: Previous research in Thai organization conflicts appears to focus on actor attributes and conflict management style and pay scarce attention to the message itself although the message is a vital component of communication. Message could either reduce or increase conflict. For example, there should be a study of message in terms of characteristics of organizational conflict, conflict development, and conflict benefit or causes.

4. The study of Thai organization conflict should extend from an individual level to a group or organization level: The analysis of Thai organization conflict research reveals that most conflict studies collect data from an individual level according to mechanical and psychological perspectives. The use of these two perspectives solely limits us to a narrow understanding in communication and conflict. To have a broader understanding, other perspectives are needed. For example, we may use a critical approach to study the influence of contextual variables such as an analysis of organization ideology which is pervasive in that organization. This ideology may determine the points to be discussed in each organization. This perspective will unveil the hidden power that determines which conflict issues to be discussed.

5. More types of organizations should be studied to compare and contrast the conflict in each type of organization: Previous Thai organization conflict studies were mostly conducted in governmental organizations especially educational and public health organizations. There are few studies in business and people organizations. Each type of organization has its own working nature and culture. As a result, there could be different variables influencing communication and conflict in terms of causes and conflict management styles. Hence, there should be more studies conducted with the latter type of organizations to extend the body of knowledge in Thai organization conflict.

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