Conflict Resolution Style and Experience in Management: Moderating the Effects of Gender

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is an integral part in the communication processes of virtually all organizations. This research can help people understand conflict resolution and improve communication. Researchers have found many variables with some correlation to preferred conflict resolution style. These variables include the context of the conflict, whether researchers study actual behavior or perceptions, and the effect of work roles. Research can yield different results if the focus is on initial or follow-up strategies. Some research suggests managers become more androgynous as they gain experience, which affects conflict resolution style. The present research addresses the effect of managerial experience on interpersonal conflict resolution styles in supervisor/peer dyads within organizations and looks at gender as a confounding variable. Previous research found that male managers prefer competitive styles and women managers prefer more communicative styles, but did not examine gender differences in styles for those beginning their careers. This study measures perceptions of differences in conflict styles between the genders for managers with limited experience.

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gender has been the focus in many aspects of communication. Scholars have disagreed about what differences exist and to what degree they exist between male and female managers concerning preferred conflict resolution style. Some scholars do not believe that gender significantly impacts communication strategies at all (Conrad, 1991; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993). Korabik et al (1993) found that women managers do not differ from male managers in preferred conflict resolution style, but they do differ from their nonmanagerial counterparts (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993). However, other researchers have found that gender does not have as much impact as other variables.

Researchers have found that multiple variables have some correlation to preferred conflict resolution style (strategy). One variable of great importance is the interaction of heterogeneous (opposite sex) and homogenous (same sex) dyads in supervisor/ subordinate conflicts (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Monroe, Di Salvo, Lewis, & Borzi, 1991; Berryman-Fink & Brunner, 1987). Monroe and associates (1991) studied the effects of gender on conflict resolution style of supervisors in relation to difficult subordinates. They found that supervisors perceived that the sex of the difficult subordinate and not the supervisor had the greatest effect on style. The data indicated that male subordinates used relational leverage (confrontation) more often with a female supervisor and female subordinates used avoidance more often with male supervisors. However, the researchers also noted that in same sex supervisor/

subordinate dyads, these differences dramatically lessened. Berryman-Fink & Brunner (1987) note that both male and female subordinates were more likely to pursue their interests in a conflict with a female supervisor and less likely to use a confrontation with a male supervisor. This research explains that managers of both genders do not possess innate conflict resolution styles but that the interaction with male or female subordinates affects the preferred style.

Another variable of importance is the context, which may call for different conflict styles regardless of a supervisor's gender. Korabik and associates note, "Because conflict management styles are likely to be situationally specific, additional research is needed to examine whether our results will generalize to a wider range of conflict situations" (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993, p.416). Fink and Brunner (1987) suggest that contextual factors in relation to personality traits and relationships should be studied. Other researchers note the need for additional research on conflict in different situations (Conrad, 1991; Monroe, Di Salvo, Lewis, & Borzi, 1991; La Mude & Torres, 2000; Berryman-Fink & Brunner, 1987).

Researchers have indicated female supervisors tend to use interpersonal, compromising, collaborative, accommodating, integrating, cooperative, avoiding, pro-social and communicative methods. In contrast, there is evidence male managers tend to use more aggressive, competitive, confronting, assertive, pro-task, and coercive strategies more often and faster then female managers (Gibbs & Lach(a), 1994; Gibbs & Lach (b), 1994; Lay, 1994; Sorenson & Hawkins, 1995; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Conrad, 1991; Monroe, Di Salvo, Lewis, & Borzi, 1991; Fink & Brunner, 1987).

The Berryman-Fink & Brunner studies (1987) looked at competing and compromising styles in supervisors of both genders. The study was based on self-reporting techniques and concluded that there was a small difference between the genders. Males thought that they competed in more conflicts then females and females thought that they compromised more often in conflicts then males. Similarly, the Sorenson and Hawkins study (1995) found that males were more competitive then females and females were more cooperative and communicative then males in conflict resolution style. Conrad (1991) notes that pro-social communication is often adapted more readily and more often by female supervisors as they possess more integrative, compromising, and low avoidance styles.

Conrad's findings were disputed by Duane (1989) who found that female supervisors were less likely to avoid conflict situations and tended to be more competitive while male supervisors were more likely to accommodate subordinate's requests then female supervisors. However, this study was based on a small sample (70 union/ management officials), which had more males (63) then females (7). In addition, the study does not take into consideration other confounding variables such as managerial experience and different contexts.

Conrad (1991) divided the conflict process into five steps rather then focusing on the conflict as a whole. He found no difference in the initial strategies taken by supervisors. The difference was in follow- up strategies. Females used more communicative strategies such as requesting, persuasion, and threat aversion before relying on coercive strategies. In fact, males were four times more likely to follow up with coercive strategies then females. Sorenson and Hawkins (1995) noted that in the Todd-Mancillas and Rossi study (1985) male managers preferred power and authority and females used communication before resorting to using power (coercion). The Todd-Mancillas and Rossi study (1985) points out female supervisors tend to use coercion less than male supervisors and often after other resolution styles do not yield desired results. However, the research indicates female supervisors will ultimate-

ly use coercion if necessary. Lamude and Torres (2000) studied subordinate tolerance for dis-agreement. The researchers reported that subordinates see coercive-based techniques as negative. On the other hand, rewarding, referent and expert-based techniques were seen as positive by subordinates. However, these researchers admit that their sample was non-random which may have affected the results.

Another important variable is the subordinate and supervisor's perceptions of conflict style as either male-like or female-like. Some researchers believe perceptions of supervisor behavior are more important than actual behavior exhibited by the supervisors and base their studies on perceptions (Jurma & Powell, 1994; Monroe, Di Salvo, Lewis, & Borzi, 1991; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993). Korabik and associates (1993) noted the phenomenon of gender- role congruence. Gender role congruence states that both genders have a set of cul-tural rules and norms that must be adhered to. Specifically, it is appropriate that women use an obliging style and men a dominating style. These researchers ascertained the effectiveness of conflict resolution styles for managers of both genders through analyzing both supervisor and subordinate perceptions. The results were that both female and male managers were eval-uated as less effective if they used the style that clashed with cultural expectations. Korabik et al (1993) note that subordinates' perceptions do not reflect reality. In addition, the uncon-scious application of gender stereotypes blocks their ability to evaluate in an unbiased way. This may also account for conflicting findings as some studies measure perceptions, which tend to yield differences, whereas other studies try to ascertain actual behavior, which often yields no differences in styles.

Jurma and Powell (1994) take a different stance; their study concludes that subordinates were more satisfied with managers who possessed both male-like and female-like character-istics. The androgynous manager was perceived as most effective and managers who were more female-like were perceived as more effective then male-like managers.

Other researchers discuss whether preferred communication style differs according to work role (Lay, 1994). Researchers suggest work role and not gender role impacts the com-munication styles managers of either gender exhibit (Mulac, Seibold, & Farris; Gibbs & Lach, 1994; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993). Lay (1994) notes the phenomenon of "profes-sional non-women" and "non professional women" who assume male-like traits or traditional female traits. She notes the duality of successful professional women. These women are under a microscope for any success they might have and for the existence of feminine traits. Leadership traits, which are needed for job success, are seen as something women do not have and should not want to have. Lay states, "a strong woman is unfeminine and a feminine woman cannot be strong" (Lay, 1994, p.12).

Many researchers note that androgynous supervisors who take on both male and female like characteristics are perceived more positively by subordinates (Lay, 1994; Jurma & Powell, 1994). This is because the androgynous manager's tactics in resolving conflicts tend to mold to the situation at hand, yielding the best outcome. Korabik and associates give two explanations, selection and socialization, for women's androgynous behavior, "First, women managers are a highly selected group who do not conform to the typical female stereotype. Because management has long been a male-dominated activity, the schema of the ideal man-ager is grounded in masculine attributes…Second, women managers may also undergo a socialization process whereby they become more like men the longer they are in the profes-sion" (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993, p 416).

In fact, many researchers believe gender may have even less effect on conflict resolution as managers gain experience (Sorenson & Hawkins, 1995; Gibbs & Lach, 1994; Korabik, Baril & Watson, 1993). Korabik and associates (1993) only noted gender differences for those without managerial experience in the five conflict resolution styles included, which were integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising. Differences for those without experience were higher for women in the integrating, obliging, and compromising categories.

There are mixed results concerning which variables have the most impact on conflict resolution styles. Lamude and Torres (2000) state "researchers have attempted to discover personal characteristics of supervisors uniquely important in the exercise of influence in supervisor-subordinate relationships…Such knowledge would be useful in understanding what conditions supervisors' selection of techniques in modifying or changing their subordinates' behavior" (p.1050).

Sorenson and Hawkins (1995) study is based on perceptions, which is important because it affects dyad interaction. In addition, the study was based on a conflict situation between supervisors and their peers. This is remarkably different from previous studies, which focus on supervisor/subordinate relationships and attempts to study dyad interactions within a different context. They conclude these gender specific behaviors are less prevalent as managers gain experience (Sorenson & Hawkins, 1995). The Sorenson and Hawkins study included managers from varying degrees of experience (1-26 years).

In the Communication field, the relation between conflict resolution style and managerial experience moderated by gender is an area of interest. This paper suggests a research problem on this topic. The following hypotheses are posed for this study:

> **Hypothesis 1:** "A gender difference will exist in conflict resolution style within the group of subjects such that female managers with 1-10 years experience will exhibit more communicative behavior then male managers."

> **Hypothesis 2:** "A gender difference will exist in conflict resolution style within the group of subjects such that male manages with 1-10 years of experience will exhibit more competitive behavior then female managers."

Research has not previously looked at the relationship between groups of managers who have less experience in their chosen field. In fact, most research has only looked at superior/subordinate relationships. This study will follow-up previous research and conclude whether managerial experience has more effect on conflict resolution style then gender for those beginning their careers.

METHOD

Conflict resolution style preference is explained in the Sorenson & Hawkin's (1995) study through the Todd-Mancillas and Rossi (1985) study. The Todd-Mancillas and Rossi (1985) study contends that female managers are initially likely to use ***communication strategies*** to resolve disputes with their subordinates. In addition, male managers are likely to emphasize power and authority as their initial course of action in order to resolve conflicts with their subordinates. Female managers are likely to use power in conflict situations only if using the initial ***communication*** strategy failed.

The present study will address preferred conflict resolution style among management peers. Therefore *conflict resolution style preference* is conceptualized as "female managers who are initially likely to use **communication strategies** to resolve disputes with their peers. Male managers who are likely to emphasize power and authority as their initial course of action in order to resolve conflicts with their peers. Female managers who are likely to use power in conflict situations only if using the initial **communication** strategy failed".

Sorenson and Hawkins (1995) have operationalized five different areas of *conflict resolution style preference* through the ROCII instrument which include: integrating (high concern for self and high concern for others), **dominating** (high concern for self and low concern for others), **obliging** (low concern for self and high concern for others), **avoiding** (low concern for self and low concern for others), and **compromising** (intermediate levels of concern for both self and others).

Strategies with high concern for others and low or high concern for self such as integrating and obliging are communicative. Strategies with low concern for others and high concern for self such as dominating are competitive. Avoiding has low concern for self and others and is the most ineffective conflict strategy. Compromising has moderate levels of both concern for self and others. The compromising strategy is neutral and does not indicate communicative or competitive behavior. This study will use these categories and focus on initial strategies employed.

Conflict will be operationalized as a dispute between two management peers described in a case study. *Management peers* is operationalized as two people who have 1-10 years of management experience, are at the same approximate level in the organizational hierarchy (can be peers across departments), and have been in their current jobs for 5 or less years.

The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCII) (Rahim, 1983) will be used to measure preferred conflict style. The ROCII has been deemed accurate and has been a popular survey instrument to measure conflict style preference (Sorenson & Hawkins, 1995; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Conrad, 1991). Conrad notes that "The ROCII was developed and tested with a supervisory sample…and has a form specifically designed for supervisors" (Conrad, 1991, p. 138). This instrument measures style preferences for 5 conflict resolution approaches previously discussed. The ROCII contains 35 items, which subjects respond to on a 5-point Likert scale. Scores for each of the subscales are determined by averaging the 7 of the 35 total items, which address each conflict dimension. A high score represents a greater preference for the strategy indicated.

Subjects completed the ROCII in reference to strategies they would use during conflicts with their supervisory peers based on an adaptation to the case study described by Sorenson and Hawkins (1995) involving organizational conflict. Subjects consisted of 74 first-to-mid-level male and female managers from numerous business organizations, which represented a wide range of public and private organizations. Subjects are currently managers or have been managers in the past. Respondents have 1-10 years of management experience and have been in their current jobs for 5 years or less. Respondents completed questionnaires distributed to them by a member of that organization. The data was collected in the fall semester of 2001. All instruments used in this study have received reliability and validity tests as they have been used in other similar studies.

RESULTS

The first hypothesis predicted a gender difference would exist in conflict resolution style within the group of subjects such that female managers with 1-10 years experience will exhibit more communicative behavior then male managers. The second hypothesis predicted a gender difference would exist in conflict resolution style within the group of subjects such that male managers with 1-10 years experience will exhibit more competitive behavior then female managers.

Results were analyzed from a total of 74 surveys consisting of 29 males and 45 females. Results of a one-tailed t-test did not reveal significant differences between females and males for four strategies including: integrating ($F(1,72)=.09$, $p=.77$), obliging ($F(1,72)=.05$, $p=.82$), dominating ($F(1,72)=.10$, $p=.32$), and avoiding ($F(1,72)=.92$, $p=.34$). The data did reveal significant differences between females and males for compromising ($F(1,72)=8.11$, $p=.006$).

Results indicated males scored slightly higher in obliging (M=3.32, SD=.45) and dominating (M=3.06, SD=.72) than females. Females scored slightly lower in obliging (M=3.29, SD=. 53) and dominating (M=2.88, SD=. 72) than males. Results indicated females scored slightly higher in avoiding (M=2.98, SD= .64) and integrating (M= 4.32, SD=. 41) than males. Males scored slightly lower in avoiding (M=2.83, SD=. 63) and integrating (M=4.29, SD= .35) than females. See Table 1 below. Significant results indicated females scored higher in compromising (M=4.01, SD=. 46) than males (M=3.64, SD=. 67).

Table 1

Sex	Obliging (Male scores higher)	Dominating (Male scores higher)	Avoiding (Female scores higher)	Integrating (Female scores higher)	Compromising (Female scores significantly higher)
Male	M=3.32 SD=.45	M=3.06 SD=.72	M=2.83 SD=.63	M=4.29 SD=.35	M=4.01 SD=.46
Female	M=3.29 SD=.53	M=2.88 SD=.72	M=2.98 SD=. 64	M=4.32 SD=.41	M=3.64 SD=.67

DISCUSSION

Conflict resolution has been analyzed from many perspectives with varying results. Researchers have found multiple variables with some correlation to preferred conflict resolution style. Some variables include the context of the conflict (Conrad, 1991; Monroe, Di Salvo, Lewis, & Borzi, 1991; La Mude & Torres, 2000; Fink & Brunner, 1987) and different combinations of dyad interactions (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Monroe, Di Salvo, Lewis, & Borzi, 1991; Fink & Brunner, 1987). Results can also differ if researchers study actual behavior or perceptions (Jurma & Powell, 1994; Monroe, Di Slavo, Lewis, & Borzi, 1991; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993). The effect of work roles may also have an impact on preferred strategies (Lay, 1994; Mulac, Seibold, & Farris; Gibbs & Lach, 1994; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993).

Research can yield different results if the focus is on initial or follow-up conflict style strategies (Conrad, 1991). Some research suggests managers become more androgynous as they gain experience (Lay, 1994; Jurma & Powell, 1994), which affects conflict resolution style. Many researchers believe gender may have less effect on conflict resolution as man-

agers gain experience (Sorenson & Hawkins, 1995; Gibbs & Lach, 1994; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993). The present research addressed the effect of managerial experience on interpersonal conflict resolution styles between supervisor/ peer dyads within organizations and looked at gender as a confounding variable.

The results do not support the first hypothesis. Females do not use the integrating and obliging strategy more often than males when confronted with the same conflict scenario. Therefore, the female managers did not use a communicative conflict resolution style more often than male managers. The results do not support the second hypothesis. Males did not use the dominating strategy more often than females when confronted with the same conflict scenario. The dominating strategy indicates a competitive conflict resolution style. Therefore, the male managers did not use competitive conflict resolution style more often than female managers.

This pattern is not completely consistent with the Sorenson and Hawkins (1995) study, which this research is based on. Sorenson and Hawkins (1995) found a significant difference between males (M=19.67, SD=4.14) and females (M=18.79, SD=3.32) in obliging. The data demonstrated that males show higher scores in obliging than females. The present study demonstrates that females show higher scores in compromising than males with no significant difference between males and females in obliging. Sorenson and Hawkins also found males and females used the same conflict resolution strategies including integrating, compromising, dominating, avoiding, and obliging concerning the same type of conflict. The researchers also contend that managers of both sexes used these strategies in that order.

The present study found that females used the conflict strategies in this order: integrating, compromising, obliging, avoiding, and then dominating. The present study found that males used the conflict strategies in this order: integrating, compromising, obliging, dominating, and avoiding. If the strategies are ranked, males and females prefer 3 of the same conflict strategies (integrating, compromising, and obliging) in that order.

This study and the Sorenson and Hawkin's (1995) study found more similarities between preferred conflict strategies for managers of both sexes when dealing with the same conflict situation. However, the current study reveals that males prefer the dominating strategy before utilizing the avoiding strategy. Similarly, females prefer the avoiding strategy before utilizing the dominating strategy.

Sorenson and Hawkin's (1995) study recommended further research on differing years of managerial experience. The researchers contended that the amount of managerial experience might influence preferences for certain conflict strategies (Sorenson & Hawkins, 1995). The current study consisted of managers with 1-10 years of experience and the Sorenson and Hawkin's study of managers with 1-26 years of experience.

Overall, the current study indicates that the amount of management experience does not affect preferred conflict resolution style of either sex. The research on conflict resolution style based on amount of managerial experience is conflicting. In addition, much of the research on preferred conflict resolution styles point out that both male and female managers do not possess innate conflict styles. Rather, the preferred conflict resolution style is mediated by many additional variables including amount of managerial experience. The true origin of preferred conflict resolution style would not be fully understood until every major confounding variable is researched and accounted for.

This study revealed only one significant difference for females who scored higher in the compromising strategy. The compromising strategy was defined as having intermediate levels

of concern for self and others. Therefore, the compromising strategy is not entirely communicative or authoritarian. The compromising strategy is not the most effective conflict resolution style strategy. The integrating strategy (high concern for self and others) is the most desirable strategy because the conflict outcome has the ability to satisfy both parties.

This research may indicate that female managers with less managerial experience do not use the whole range of conflict resolution style strategies. In their inexperience, female managers may rely on strategies that make them feel more comfortable. As the female managers gain experience, they may begin to utilize other strategies that work better in the situation. It appears that inexperienced female managers utilize the compromising strategy more often than male managers do and this appears to be gender-linked. However, further studies on managers with 1-5 years of experience or management trainees could solidify the results of the current study. Qualitative research would also be useful in the form of interviews, diaries, and focus groups in conjunction with role-plays for future studies.

LIMITATIONS

One of the major limitations for this study is the small sample size of 74, which may hinder generalizability. Female subjects (45) were slightly over-represented within the small sample as compared to male subjects (29). Another limitation is that a convenience sample was used. The absence of randomization for control could affect the data. In addition, the ROCII attempts to measure subjects' perceptions of their own behavior. The results could be biased or somewhat inaccurate. However, the design of the ROCII has been proven for reliability and validity.

Survey instruments and case studies must be used to study supervisory conflict resolution styles because observational research would be unethical. Role-plays have been used in the past in place of case studies in conjunction with the ROCII. However, there are monetary concerns for the researcher and time concerns for subjects. Further qualitative research would be useful in the form of interviews, diaries, or perhaps focus groups in conjunction with role-plays for future studies.

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