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Conflicting Environment at Workplace: UiTM Sarawak's lecturers

Aiza Johari*, Affidah Morni,
Dayang Faridah Abang Bohari, Siti Huzaimah Sahari

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak, 93400, Malaysia

Abstract

This paper examines possible causes of conflicts that might arise when UiTM Sarawak's lecturers were dealing with their Course Coordinators at the workplace, their effects and conflict management styles. Adapted questionnaire was given to 76 randomly selected subjects. The findings indicated that many respondents did not face many problems in the six areas of conflicts. As professionalism was sustained, conflict was seen not to interfere with the work flow and the existing unity and harmony in the organisation. As for conflict resolution, a majority of the respondents preferred 'collaborative style' which gives emphasis on working together to resolve conflict.

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Keywords: Workplace; conflict; professionalism; management styles

1. Introduction

Today's employers experience both the benefits and challenges of an increasingly diverse workforce. This results in a variety of beliefs, opinions, values and attitudes, which will enrich the organization. However, it is these differences in beliefs, opinions, values and attitudes that will, at some point, inevitably lead to conflicts. As conveyed by Pace (1983: 59): "Conflict-free company has never existed and never will exist. Antagonisms, tensions, aggressions, stereotypes, negative attitudes and the frustrations of perceived conflicting needs will always be present wherever men are forced to live and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +60-138-183-080; fax: +60-82-677-300.
E-mail address: aiza@sarawak.uitm.edu.my.

work together". In fact, Raduan Che Rose et al. (2007) affirmed that conflict is a persistent aspect in both social circles and professional interaction. To add, Henry (2009) and Hotepo et al. (2010) described work-related conflict as an unpleasant fact in any organization as long as people compete for jobs, resources, power, recognition and security. McNamara (2006) suggested several of actions which may create conflicts of interest at work place such as poor communication, lack of coordination and organisation, mismatch of personalities, poor leadership skills and, lack of commitment and collaborations.

The effects of conflict can either be positive or negative, even disastrous, depending on how one tackles the conflict. On a positive note, conflict can help to raise and address problems, energizes work to be on the most appropriate issues and helps people to learn how to gain benefits from their differences. Cheney et. al (2004) addressed that even though many people associate conflict with an unpleasant and even harmful experience, some modern management scholars believe that conflict is good for organizations as it can bring necessary corporate change and development. This is true because conflicts sometimes encourage a self-review of one self and develop one's critical thinking for better performance. Hotepo (2010) also viewed conflict as positive when it encourages creativity, new looks at old conditions, the clarification of points of view and the development of human capabilities to handle interpersonal differences. On the contrary, if conflict is not properly managed, it hampers productivity, lowers morale, causes more and continued conflicts and causes inappropriate behaviours (McNamara, 2006). Similarly, Friedman et. al (2000) further asserted that conflict can be negative when the conflict levels affect the amount of stress felt by individual employees in which their previous research has shown that people with different dispositions tend to create different social environments for themselves.

Thus, appropriate methods to solve such conflict need to be addressed and utilized in order to rectify conflict and to produce a better and harmonious working environment. The ability to resolve conflicts successfully is probably one of the most important social skills and conflict resolution can be taught like any other skills. In Malaysian multicultural society, Awang-Rozaimie, Siti Huzaimah and Ali (2012) mentioned that multicultural awareness is also critical to eradicate intercultural conflict and establish harmonious interracial interaction and integration at the workplace. Nevertheless, to be realistic, there is not one single best style to handle conflicts as almost everyone has a predominant style. Synthesizing the research of Hall (1969), Blake and Mouton (1970) in De Vliert and Kabanoff (1990), and Kilmann and Thomas (1975), Pace (1983) generates five main styles of dealing with conflicts that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. These five generally accepted styles that can be applied to respond to and manage conflict in the work place are avoiding, accommodating, compromising, collaborating and dominating. Additionally, organizational participants must learn the five styles of handling conflict to deal with different conflict situations effectively.

At times, while the lecturers of varied backgrounds and departments certainly can and do work together, it is to be expected that at some point, they will face conflict with their Course Coordinator or between the lecturers themselves. Knowing when to step in and work everything out before things escalate from a minor issue to a major problem can be the key to finding resolution. Therefore, this paper attempts to look at the possible causes of conflict that arose when the lecturers face their Course Coordinators, to identify the possible effects of such conflicts on the individuals and organization and to identify conflict management styles practised by the lecturers, specifically at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak Campus, in dealing with the conflicts at the workplace. The findings will help create better understanding and cooperation between the lecturers within the department including their Course Coordinators.

2. Research method

This research was conducted at UiTM Sarawak Samarahan Campus in which the participants of the research comprised 76 lecturers of different faculties and departments who were selected based on random sampling. A simple set of questionnaire survey, adapted from Pickering's How to Manage Conflict Questionnaire (2007) and Robert's Conflict Management Style Survey (2007) was used to collect data for this study. The lecturers provided their perceptions of their possible causes and effects of workplace conflicts and, their individual conflict management style. This study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature where the data was analysed for frequency counts using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20 while the qualitative method relates to the theories and reasons to explain the occurring findings after the frequency counts.

3. Results and findings

The findings are presented according to the flow of sections in the questionnaire: Lecturers' Demographic Data, Possible Causes of Conflicts at the Workplace, Possible Effects of Conflicts at the Workplace and Conflict Management Styles.

3.1. Demographic data: Age, gender, education level and length of tenure

By ethnic group, it is shown that the distribution of races among the lecturers was not equitably represented whereby 57% of the respondents were Malay, 18% were Chinese, 12% were Iban, and 7% were made of other races while Bidayuh made up the rest. In terms of age, the highest proportion of the lecturers (38%) are aged between 25-30 years old, followed by those aged between 31-35 years old (30%). 16% was represented by those who are between 36 and 40 and another 16% comprised those who are 41 and above. On the whole, the education level of the respondents was high. Majority of the lecturers (81%) held a Master's Degree. 16% of the respondents were Bachelor Degree holders and 3% of them have attained their doctorate. In relation to length of tenure, 58% of the lecturers have served for less than four years, 16% have worked for five to eight years and another 26% have been lecturing for nine years and above.

3.2. Causes of conflict

In order to identify the possible causes of conflict, this section is divided into 5 main sub-categories and tables: Communication, Coordination and Organisation, Personality, Leadership, and Commitment and Collaboration.

3.2.1. Communication

In relation to communication, a majority of the lecturers claimed that they communicated well with their Coordinators based on the responses to 'I am able to communicate well with my Course Coordinator' with 42.1% who agreed and 50% who strongly agreed and 'I am able to understand all the directives from my Course Coordinator clearly' with 51.3% opted to agree and 32.9% chose to strongly agreed. Only 3.9% chose to disagree with the statement. When the lecturers were asked to respond to this statement: 'I show my displeasure openly to my Course Coordinator when a task is not successfully accomplished', only 32.9% lecturers agreed.

Table 1. Communication

No	Statements:	S.D %	D %	U %	A %	S.A %
1	I am able to communicate well with my Course Coordinator	0.0%	3.9%	3.9%	42.1%	50.0%
2	I am able to understand all the directives from my Course Coordinator clearly	0.0%	3.9%	11.8%	51.3%	32.9%
3	Before assigning a task, my Course Coordinator explains his/her needs or tasks clearly to the lecturers	0.0%	5.3%	18.4%	57.9%	18.4%
4	I expect appraisals from Course Coordinator for a job well done	0.0%	6.6%	15.8%	53.9%	23.7%
5	I show my displeasure openly to my Course Coordinator when a task is not successfully accomplished	7.9%	14.5%	40.8%	32.9%	3.9%
6	I criticize my Course Coordinator privately	26.3%	21.1%	28.9%	22.4%	1.3%
7	My Course Coordinator criticizes the lecturers openly for a job badly done	21.1%	31.6%	26.3%	17.1%	3.9%

S.D: Strongly disagree; D: Disagree; U: Undecided; A: Agree; S.A: Strongly agree

3.2.2. Coordination and organisation

In terms of coordination and organisation, it is interesting to note that few lecturers claimed that the Coordinators did not delegate the tasks equally and fairly among them. Though the percentages were low, this matter should be taken into consideration as unequal distribution of tasks may lead to feelings of dissatisfaction among the staff. On a more positive note, in response to the same statement ‘The workload is distributed equally among the lecturers in our department’, 46.1% lecturers agreed and 9.2% lecturers strongly agreed. To the statement ‘The workload is distributed fairly among the lecturers in our department’, 42.1% lecturers agreed and 10.5% lecturers strongly agreed. In comparison, most lecturers agreed that the Coordinators delegated work to them according to their capabilities where 55.3% of the lecturers agreed to this statement ‘My Course Coordinator assigns tasks to lecturers in the department according to their capabilities’ and 15.8% strongly agreed.

Table 2. Coordination and organisation

No	Statements:	S.D %	D %	U %	A %	S.A %
1	The workload is distributed fairly among the lecturers in our department	7.9%	17.1%	22.4%	42.1%	10.5%
2	The workload is distributed equally among the lecturers in our department	3.9%	19.7%	21.1%	46.1%	9.2%
3	My Course Coordinator assigns tasks without prior discussion	10.5%	28.9%	35.5%	21.1%	3.9%
4	My Course Coordinator assigns tasks to lecturers in the department according to their capabilities	0.0%	11.8%	17.1%	55.3%	15.8%
5	My Course Coordinator assigns tasks to lecturers whom he/she dislikes in the department to punish them.	38.2%	18.4%	27.6%	10.5%	5.3%

S.D: Strongly disagree; D: Disagree; U: Undecided; A: Agree; S.A: Strongly agree

As to the next statement, ‘My Course Coordinator assigns tasks to lecturers whom he/she dislikes in the department to punish them’, slightly more than half of the lecturers disagreed (18.4% disagreed and 38.2% strongly disagreed) while 27.6% were undecided and the rest claimed that the Coordinators assigned tasks to them as punishment. These data might show that unfair work delegation might be one of the factors on why workplace conflicts occur if this issue persists.

3.2.3. Personality

This section recounts the lecturers’ personalities and how these may influence the relationship with their Course Coordinators. Most of the subjects disagreed with the statement, ‘I have mismatch personalities with my Course Coordinator’ with 34.2% opting for strongly disagreed and 27.6% opting to disagree. This again further gives evidence that most lecturers and their Coordinators did not often face clashes of personalities, hence they were able to collaborate and cooperate under one organisation, and avoid workplace conflict.

On whether the lecturers were firm, 38.2% decided to agree and 21.1% chose to strongly agree with the statement. 39.5% of the lecturers disagreed and 19.7% strongly disagreed that they were pushy and only 13.2% agreed with the statement. 40.8% agreed that they were perfectionist compared to only 19.7% who disagreed. Majority of the lecturers claimed that they were obliging whereby 52.6% of them agreed and 13.2% strongly agreed with the statement. On whether they were scared of their Coordinator, 36.8% strongly disagreed, 32.9% disagreed and only 10.5% agreed. This shows positive insight as the lecturers were not afraid of their Coordinators, thus able to reduce conflict at workplace.

Table 3. Personality

No	Statements:	S.D %	D %	U %	A %	S.A %
1	I have mismatch personalities with my Course Coordinator	34.2%	27.6%	21.1%	14.5%	2.6%
2	I have different interests and views from my Course Coordinator when discussing an assigned task	14.5%	38.2%	22.4%	23.7%	1.3%
3	I am a firm person	0.0%	13.2%	27.6%	38.2%	21.1%
4	I am a pushy person	19.7%	39.5%	22.4%	13.2%	5.3%
5	I am a perfectionist	10.5%	19.7%	23.7%	40.8%	5.3%
6	I am an obliging person	1.3%	10.5%	22.4%	52.6%	13.2%
7	I am scared of my Course Coordinator	36.8%	32.9%	17.1%	10.5%	2.6%
8	I respect my Course Coordinator	0%	0%	4.3%	43.5%	52.2%

S.D: Strongly disagree; D: Disagree; U: Undecided; A: Agree; S.A: Strongly agree

3.2.4. Leadership

Under the aspect of leadership, 37% lecturers strongly disagreed and disagreed while 30.3% were undecided in view of the Coordinators’ inconsistencies in making decision. Additionally, more than half of the lecturers strongly disagreed and disagreed that their Coordinators were indecisive leaders. Likewise, 69.7% of the lecturers strongly agreed and agreed that they respected their Course Coordinators as leaders, in which is found to be beneficial. In an organisation, gaining respect from your subordinates is vital to ensure that they are able to work together with you to lead, hence able to avoid conflicting issues. On a more encouraging note, most of the lecturers admitted that: ‘When there is failure, my

Course Coordinator will share the responsibility with the lecturers in the department' and 'My Course Coordinator applies corrective actions when dealing with failures'. These positive leadership attributes reflected by the Coordinators seem to be acknowledged by the lecturers where many of the lecturers claimed that their Coordinators were not indecisive leaders (51.3%) and not autocratic leaders (51.3%) while more than half of the lecturers admitted that their Coordinators practiced democracy. Nonetheless, when responding to this statement: 'My Course Coordinator is easily influenced by others', more lecturers seemed to agree and strongly agree compared to those who strongly disagreed and disagreed (40.7% over 31.5%). This leads to the belief that many lecturers perceived their Coordinators to be easily swayed by others and not firm. Thus, to be a leader, one needs to be firm in his or her decision so that others might not query any decision made.

Table 4. Leadership

No	Statements:	S.D %	D %	U %	A %	S.A %
1	My Course Coordinator is inconsistent when making decisions	19.7%	26.3%	30.3%	18.4%	5.3%
2	As a leader, my Course Coordinator is not afraid of failure	2.6%	9.2%	40.8%	40.8%	6.6%
3	My Course Coordinator promotes a feeling of confidence and pride among the lecturers in the department	3.9%	11.8%	21.1%	55.3%	7.9%
4	My Course Coordinator promotes a feeling of fear among the lecturers in the department	34.2%	25.0%	30.3%	9.2%	1.3%
5	When there is failure, my Course Coordinator will share the responsibility with the lecturers in the department	2.6%	6.6%	28.9%	57.9%	3.9%
6	Where there is failure, I am solely accountable	9.2%	14.5%	36.8%	38.2%	1.3%
7	My Course Coordinator gives me the opportunity to explain the reasons for a failure	3.9%	5.3%	21.1%	59.2%	10.5%
8	My Course Coordinator applies corrective actions when dealing with failures	1.3%	6.6%	19.7%	61.8%	10.5%
9	My Course Coordinator is sensitive to the needs and welfare of the lecturers	3.9%	3.9%	23.7%	52.6%	15.8%
10	I respect my Course Coordinator as a leader	6.6%	11.8%	11.8%	36.8%	32.9%
11	My Course Coordinator is an indecisive leader	14.5%	36.8%	28.9%	17.1%	2.6%
12	My Course Coordinator is an autocratic leader	15.8%	35.5%	25.0%	17.1%	6.6%
13	My Course Coordinator is a democratic leader	2.6%	11.8%	19.7%	56.6%	9.2%
14	My Course Coordinator is a 'laissez faire' person (give freedom; no state of control)	10.5%	23.7%	25.0%	36.8%	3.9%
15	My Course Coordinator is not a transparent leader	14.5%	35.5%	22.4%	23.7%	3.9%
16	My Course Coordinator is easily influenced by others	11.8%	19.7%	27.6%	28.9%	11.8%
17	I feel safe and secure under the leadership of my Course Coordinator	6.6%	2.6%	19.7%	53.9%	17.1%

S.D: Strongly disagree; D: Disagree; U: Undecided; A: Agree; S.A: Strongly agree

3.2.5. Commitment and collaboration

In view of commitment and collaboration, 75% of the lecturers agreed and strongly agreed that: 'My Course Coordinator is committed in carrying out his/her duties'. Additionally, 68.4% of the lecturers also

opted for strong disagreement and disagreement over this statement: ‘I do not collaborate well with my Course Coordinator’. Subsequently, more than half of the lecturers agreed and strongly agreed that they accepted the job assigned by their Coordinators because they wanted to, probably due to the negotiation of tasks done by the Coordinators before they actually assigned any task. This is seen as encouraging as 68.4% of the lecturers agreed and strongly agreed that their Coordinators and they worked together as a team (Statement 8). It is also evident as 44.8% of the lecturers strongly disagreed and disagreed that they were working for the Coordinators personally. In fact, 68.5% of the lecturers admitted that their Coordinators used words like ‘us’, ‘we’ and ‘our’ when communicating with them. To conclude, the results illustrate that the Coordinators and lecturers were aware that team work is essential to create a healthy working environment, thus hinder workplace conflict.

Table 5. Commitment and collaboration

No	Statements:	S.D %	D %	U %	A %	S.A %
1	My Course Coordinator is committed in carrying out his/her duties	5.3%	14.5%	5.3%	50.0%	25.0%
2	I am not a team player	38.2%	31.6%	7.9%	18.4%	3.9%
3	I give full commitment in accomplishing a task when I am given one	6.6%	9.2%	1.3%	36.8%	46.1%
4	I do not collaborate well with my Course Coordinator	36.8%	31.6%	13.2%	17.1%	1.3%
5	I accept a job assigned to me because I want to	0.0%	11.8%	30.3%	39.5%	18.4%
6	My Course Coordinator expects me to accept any given task regardless of how busy I am	5.3%	15.8%	27.6%	46.1%	5.3%
7	My Course Coordinator insists that I comply strictly to the deadline in completing tasks	1.3%	21.1%	25.0%	43.4%	9.2%
8	I regard my Course Coordinator and myself as a team working for the good of the organization	3.9%	7.9%	19.7%	39.5%	28.9%
9	My Course Coordinator regards me as working for him/her personally	14.5%	30.3%	25.0%	22.4%	7.9%
10	My Course Coordinator uses word like 'us', 'we', 'our' when communicating with the lecturers	6.6%	6.6%	18.4%	46.1%	22.4%

S.D: Strongly disagree; D: Disagree; U: Undecided; A: Agree; S.A: Strongly agree

3.3. Possible effects of conflicts

This section deals with the possible impacts of conflicts at the workplace between the lecturers and their Course Coordinators. The first statement ‘I become hostile towards my Course Coordinators’ when there is a conflict in Table 6 shows 27.6% lecturers opted for strongly disagree and 32.9% for disagree. These imply that many lecturers were able to act professionally to their Coordinator during conflicts as they did not show much hostility. Additionally, more than half of the respondents agreed and 23.7% strongly agreed that they still respected their Coordinators’ decisions during conflicts and hence, considered as positive. Likewise, the findings also reveal more optimistic outcome where half of the lecturers claimed that the arising workplace conflict would not hamper their relationship with their Coordinators.

The result further indicates the findings for the statement ‘It demotivates me personally’ when there is a conflict. From the analysis, 32.9% agreed while 7.9% strongly agreed that conflict demotivated them personally. Notably, some lecturers did not feel personally demotivated when facing conflict (15.8% for strongly disagree and 21.1% for disagree). Subsequently, more than half of the lecturers reflected that

they would carry out their assigned duties accordingly despite the existing conflict (work commitment and dedication will be maintained). In view to the statement ‘There are difficulties in achieving the goals of the organisation when there is a conflict’ more than half of the lecturers opted for agree and strongly agree to this statement which further shows that to a certain degree, conflict at the workplace may pose difficulties in achieving the organisation’s goals successfully, hence may negatively affect the organisation as a whole.

For the statement ‘There will be a miscommunication between both parties when there is a conflict’, 43.4% of the lecturers agreed and 5.3% strongly agreed to this statement, hence implying that the lecturers did face problems communicating with each other when a conflict arose between them. Conflict may provoke resentment towards superiors; hence the working atmosphere will suffer (Evans, 1992). In addition, it may break down communication and obstructs problem solving. However, the result for this statement: ‘Harmony and unity will still exist between them and the lecturers’ when there is a conflict between them, revealed that 59.2% lecturers showed strong agreement and agreement. Consequently, this is considered as encouraging because in spite of conflict, the respondents can still maintain harmony and unity among them thus, group cohesion and identity will not be affected.

For the statement ‘Conflict produces an unhealthy working environment’ 39% lecturers chose to agree and strongly agree. This suggests that many lecturers believed that the working environment will no longer be a conducive working environment when a conflict arises because conflict will arouse negative feelings like stress, distress, tension, anger and anxiety. As a result, many affected individuals will react in anger and this may influence the productivity of an organization as these negative attributes could actually delay the progress of any work and task. Looking at the brighter side, 48.7% lecturers agreed and 10.8% strongly agreed that the tasks will still be accomplished successfully even though there is a conflict. To note, it can be implied that many of the lecturers had no problem in completing their tasks successfully despite the existing conflict.

Table 6. Possible effects of conflicts at workplace

No	Statements:	S.D %	D %	U %	A %	S.A %
1	I become hostile towards my Course Coordinator during conflict	27.6%	32.9%	21.1%	14.5%	3.9%
2	I still respect my Course Coordinator’s decisions during conflict	5.3%	6.6%	13.2%	51.3%	23.7%
3	My relationship with my Course Coordinator will not be affected during conflict	3.9%	10.5%	18.4%	52.6%	14.5%
4	Conflict demotivates me personally.	15.8%	21.1%	22.4%	32.9%	7.9%
5	The lecturers will not lose their commitment and dedication to the assigned duties during conflict	2.6%	15.8%	27.6%	42.1%	11.8%
6	There are difficulties in achieving the goals of the organization when there is a conflict	6.6%	21.1%	15.8%	48.7%	7.9%
7	There will be a miscommunication between the Course Coordinator and the lecturers during conflict	9.2%	18.4%	23.7%	43.4%	5.3%
8	Harmony and unity will still exist between the Course Coordinator and the lecturers during conflict.	2.6%	17.1%	21.1%	51.3%	7.9%
9	Conflict produces an unhealthy working environment	11.8%	13.2%	19.7%	44.7%	10.5%
10	The tasks will still be accomplished successfully	3.9%	17.1%	19.7%	48.7%	10.5%

S.D: Strongly disagree; D: Disagree; U: Undecided; A: Agree; S.A: Strongly agree

3.4. Conflict resolution



Fig. 1. Conflict management styles

The collaborative management style seems to be the most preferred management style practised by many of the lecturers (37%). Collaboration is the most useful tactic, particularly with extreme conflicts. It is practical as it focuses on working together to arrive at one possible and acceptable solution, where both sides will have ownership and commitment to the solution. They will feel 'involved' in solving the conflict, thus leading to a better and harmonious working environment. The next preferred management style is the compromising type of management style (25%). This is a much more useful tactic as the lecturers do not have to give in to the arising conflicts, but to work and sort out a solution that compromises between the two sides of arguments or conflicts. Furthermore, they probably choose this style in order to avoid further confrontation and conflict with each other. This can lead to a positive outcome as it involves the strategy of choice. Nonetheless, this can lead to a downfall as it might leave both sides feeling unhappy and unsatisfied.

4. Conclusion

Generally, the survey illustrates that many of the lecturers did not face a large amount of workplace conflicts as suggested in this survey. They acquired effective communication skills, practised sufficient levels of coordination and organization, did not have major issues in terms of personality mismatch, had Coordinators who possessed positive leadership attributes and the lecturers were also able to commit to their work and organization despite possible conflicting issues. As for the effects, many of the lecturers were able to retain their professionalism, even when they faced conflicts at their workplace. It seems that the work flow and the organisation, as well as the relationship and communication between the lecturers. Similarly, the harmony and unity within the organization were retained at all times. Besides, they preferred one type of management style, which is collaborating. This concurs with the theory of Pace (1983) which states that most individuals possess one conflict management style only. When any individual is alert of any possible symptoms or signs of conflict and try to resolve them immediately by

adapting to the various conflict management styles, it would result in a healthy working environment, productive work progress and a successful organization as a whole.

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