

# A Study on Conflict Management Styles for Decision Making in Sri Lankan Construction Projects

P.L. Perera<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sri Lanka Technological Campus (SLTC), Sri Lanka  
# lakylaky87@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Traditional project managers believe that the conflicts among project stakeholders are a threat to project deliverables. This is because the traditional project managers believe that the conflicts may bring negative results for the project management success. Though the modern project managers believe that a sustainable decision-making process can assist to achieve the overall project success. In this study the data collected through a questionnaire survey. Final conclusion for the research objectives was achieved by analyzing the collected data from 68 respondents. This research was investigated based on different kinds of approaches and methods when dealing with conflicts with all the counter parts. Further, the research was focused on studying the project conflict management styles which assisted for better decision making for all major stakeholders of organization structure. Stakeholders of Sri Lankan construction projects mostly adopt active strategies to resolve the project conflicts. Further, the project conflict approach is problem solving but without bargain. Hence, most of the stakeholders actively participate to resolve the conflict while more are concerned about the fulfillment of the needs of counterpart. When considering the gender roles in adopting approaches, females have a tendency to adopt a slightly more positive approach than males. Additionally, males adopt the same conflict management approach for every management level; whereas conflict management approach used by females differ according to the counterpart managerial level.

**Keywords:** *Project Conflict, Conflict Management Approaches & Styles, Decision Making*

## Conflict & Conflict Management

In present, the organizations mostly depend on the project teams & their team performance. (DeChurch & Marks, 2001). Further, Boddy (2002, p.108) defined a project team as a temporary multiple organization which consists of two or more members whose having different backgrounds, knowledge levels, responsibilities & objectives. This may lead to possible conflicts due to the group members having different perspectives about tasks & their outputs. As Rahim (2001, p 18) defines the project conflict is a process that the opposing interests or beliefs between individuals or groups which develops through the existing relationships between individuals or groups actions by one or both sides discomforting of others' goals.

The traditional Project Manager considers that the conflicts are barriers when making decisions in organizations (March & Simon 1958). When it comes to modern project management, project managers believe that the project conflicts are one of the sources of information, that provides additional insight regarding how to achieve the best solution to satisfy the requirements of all the stakeholders (Singh & Vlatas,1991). Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy (2009) mentioned that conflicts have several positive effects & negative effects. Further, they explained that the project managers must reduce the negative effects of project conflicts such as reduction in productivity, polarization, decrease harmony & cooperation among organization members. On the other hand, he must enhance the positive effects such as enhanced understanding of others views &

feelings, improved decision making and stimulation of critical thinking.

Moreover, middle managers spent more than 25% of their time to resolve the conflicts in the organization (Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy, 2009). Hence, the time that spent by project managers must utilize effectively for better decision making in an organization. For that, the project manager must improve the understanding of how the conflicts have risen and what the method that assist to resolve the conflict in effective & efficient manner.

### Forms Of Conflicts

### Sources of Conflicts

According to Rahim (2001, p 21), there are 10 types of sources of conflicts as described below in Table -1

Table 1. Sources of Conflicts

Source of Conflicts	Description
Affective/ Relationship Conflict	Occurs when two or more parties are incompatible about their feelings and emotions about the issues when resolving them.
Cognitive Conflict/ Task Conflict	Occurs when two or more parties disagree on their task or content issues.
Conflict of Interest	Occurs when between two or more parties are inconsistency in their preferences for the allocation of a scarce resource.
Conflict of Values	Occurs when two or more parties having different values for certain issues.
Conflicts of Goals	Occurs when between two or more parties are inconsistency with the preferred outcomes or results.
Realistic vs Non-realistic Conflict	Realistic conflicts occurs when between two or more parties having incompatibilities in tasks, goals, values, interest. Non-realistic conflict occurs when party's need for releasing tension and expressing hostility, ignorance.

Institutionalized vs. Non-institutionalized Conflict	Institutionalized conflict occurs when involving with day to day activities; Noninstitutionalized conflicts occurs explicit situations.
Retributive Conflict	Situation where the party feels the need for a finish of the conflict to punish the counterpart.
Misattributed Conflict	Occurs when incorrect assignment of causes or wrongly attributed to the counterpart which has done by a third party.
Displaced Conflict	Occurs when the conflicting parties either explore their frustrations to external parties who are not involved in the conflict.

Source: Rahim (2001) pp 21-23

### A. Levels of Conflict Analysis

According to Rahim (2001, p 23), there are 4 levels of conflict analysis of conflicts as described below in Table -2.

Table 2. Levels of Conflict Analysis

Levels of Conflicts	Description
Intrapersonal Conflict	Occurs when one has to perform certain tasks and roles that do not align with the expertise, interests, goals, and values.
Interpersonal Conflict	Occurs between two or more parties of the same or different hierarchical levels.
Intragroup Conflict	Occurs among members of a group or between two or more subgroups within a group in connection with rational content.
Intergroup Conflict	Occurs when two or more units or groups within an organization.

Source: Rahim (2001) pp 23-24

### Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict

In this study, it is focused on how to resolve the interpersonal conflicts & styles of handling interpersonal project conflicts. According to Rahim (2001), there are 4 models of styles for conflict management which are introduced & adopted to resolve the issues throughout its evolution. Namely: model of two style, model of three style, model of four style, model of five style

According to Rahim (2001), in model of two style, there is only a competitive & cooperative style. Purely competitive conflicts are technically identified as zero-sum games because the outcomes are fully positive to one party & negative to the other party. Eventhough, comparatively, cooperative style is an effective conflict management style but two style method has ignored the productivity, performance & outcomes of the conflict management. Nonconfrontation (obliging), solution-orientation (integrating), and control (dominating) are the styles introduced in model of three style. According to Rahim (2001), in this model the main drawbacks were that they haven't a clear theoretical background & the studies were done through single factor analysis.

According to Rahim (2001), model of four style consists of following conflict management styles: yielding, problem solving, inaction, and contending. Though the researchers were able to prove the existence through empirical laboratory test data, they couldn't show the relationship between four styles, job performance & the productivity. Rahim & Bonoma (1979), introduced five style model that assists to resolve the interpersonal conflicts which consists of dual concern to both self & others satisfactions of the concern. It consists of five conflict management styles as follows: Collaboration, Accommodation, Competition, Avoidance, Compromise.

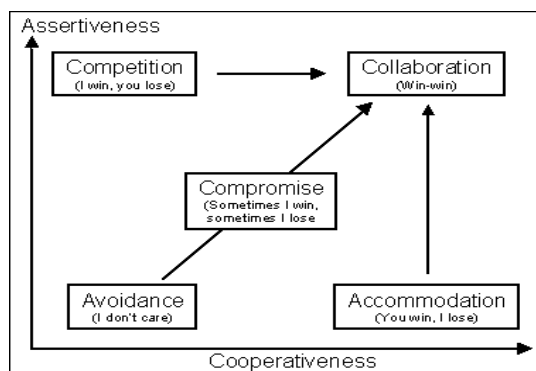


Figure1 - five style model of interpersonal conflict management

Source: Rahim, A., & Bonoma, T. V. (1979)

**Collaboration:** Prein (1976), has mentioned that confrontation and problem solving are the two main features of collaboration. Confrontation involves open communication which leads to reduce the misunderstanding, and assist in investigating the hidden reason behind the conflict. This is style is adopting solve the conflict with resolving the differences to reach mutual solution. (Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy, 2009)

**Accommodation:** According to Rahim (2001), it indicates low concern for self-requirements and high concern for others requirements. This style self- sacrifices highly to satisfy the concern of the other party.

**Competition:** According to Rahim (2001), a competitive person needs to win his objectives and, ignores the expectations of the other party. This style is applied by the people who have self-centered mindset.

**Avoidance:** According to Rahim (2001), this method applies when postponing the issue is better because time will heal or simplify the complexity of the conflict. This approach does not satisfy any of the parties.

**Compromise:** According to Rahim (2001), this conflict management style involves in give and-take policy for both parties & come up with a mutually acceptable decision seeking a quick, middle-ground position.

According to Desivilya et al. (2005), identified that the accommodation & avoidance styles are passive strategies; whereas, collaboration, competition & compromise are active strategies to resolve the conflicts. On the other hand, Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy (2009), categorized the collaboration, compromise & accommodation as co-operative strategies & other two styles as non-co-operative

strategies. Further, according to Somech et al. (2009), Desivilya et al. (2005), De Dreu et al. (2004), different kind of characteristics vary according to the conflict management style as per following table 3 (a) & 3 (b).

*Table 3 (a): Comparison for Conflicts Managements Approaches*

Conflict Management Style	Communication, Knowledge Sharing	Performance & Creativity	Relationship
Collaboration	More	More	Yes
Accommodation	Less	Less	Yes
Competition	No	Yes	No
Avoidance	No	No	No
Compromise	Moderate	Moderate	Yes

*Table 3 (b) : Comparison for Conflicts Managements Approaches*

Conflict Management Style	Culture consider the issue as	Performance, Creativity
Collaboration	Threat	Negative, Unrelated
Accommodation	Common Issue	Positive, Unrelated
Competition	Common Issue	Positive, Positive
Avoidance	Common Issue	Positive, Positive
Compromise	Threat	Negative, Negative

### Approaches of Interpersonal Conflict Management

#### Problem Solving & Bargaining Dimensions in Conflict Management:

According to Psenicka & Rahim, (1989), stated that the following two equations can be used to evaluate the problem solving & bargain project conflict approach of each person in a conflict situation.

**Problem Solving = Collaboration - Avoidance**

**Bargain Ability = Competition- Accommodation**

By applying Problem Solving Equation, the respondent's willingness to resolve the conflict with others can be identified. On the other hand, bargain ability represents the amount of influence that each respondent makes to resolve the problem in favour of his view.

#### Activeness & Agreeableness in Conflict Management:

According to Chanin & Schmeer (1984), the following equations can be applied to identify the activeness & agreeableness of each respondent to the conflict management with their counter parts.

**Activeness = (Competition + Collaboration - Accommodation - Avoidance)**

**Agreeableness = (Collaboration + Accommodation - Competition - Avoidance)**

Activeness evaluates implantation of active strategies against passive strategies. Further, agreeableness depicts the amount of concern of fulfilling the others requirements against the fulfillment of self requirements.

#### Statement of Research Purpose

The main purpose of this research is to identify the most popular & suitable conflict management style for the Sri Lankan construction industry. Moreover, from the results of the study, another purpose that can be identified is that the most appropriate conflict management approach for interpersonal conflicts in the construction industry. The aim of the research is to study appropriate conflict management approach to better decision making in Sri Lankan construction projects.

Following set of objectives are established to achieve the final aim of the study:

to identify the forms of project conflicts & approaches of project conflicts.

to evaluate the project conflict approaches for better decision making.

to evaluate the different between project conflict management according to the gender of the manger.

When this research was progressed, following limitations were encountered; This study was:

focused on interpersonal conflict management within the construction project teams in Sri Lanka.

carried out to find approaches to resolve the conflicts before it becomes dysfunctional.

focused on project teams where work is done face to face; not for virtual teams.

not considered about conflicts of multicultural project teams.

#### Research Methodology

The adopted methodology for this study adheres to research philosophy in the ‘research onion’ (Saunders et.al., 2012). The adopted research philosophy was post positivism because all questionnaire data was collected based on recent experiences of the respondents regarding their conflict management approach. Study was done through abduction approach as follows: Hypothesis, Research Design, Empirical, and Data Collection & Analysis. The required data was collected through literature surveyors of past researchers & questionnaire surveyor among the diversified, well experienced professionals related from construction industry. Hence adopted methodology choice for the research is simple quantitative method.

The interpersonal group conflict management styles in Sri Lankan Construction industry were ascertained through 28 item Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI-II) (Rahim1983a, 1983b). All the statements were adjusted according to the project intergroup counterparts (peer, subordinate,

supervisor). Further, the five-point scale was changed to three-point scales (such as always, sometimes & never) to understand the responses easily & to have more responses for the study.

The study was conducted among 100 different types & levels of project stakeholders in Sri Lanka. The participants were selected through stratified random sampling method. The questionnaires were created by using Google Forms & posted through internet as it is the most cost effective, time saving mass media. The survey hyperlink sent via emails & other social medias such as WhatsApp, Messenger etc. The data was collected through the recent past experience of the respondents; hence time horizon of the study is cross –sectional. The respond rate is 68% from professionals who are having diversified experience & views regarding project conflict management. (See Table 4 & 5)

*Table 4. Professions of the Responses*

Profession	No. Responses
Project Manager	03
Architect	05
Engineer	12
Quantity Surveyor	33
Contractor	05
Academia	07
Financial Officers	03
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>

*Table 5. Middle Management Experience of the Responses*

Middle Management Experience	No. Responses
0- 5 years	50
5 - 10 years	12
10-15 years	02
15-20 years	04
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>



Then, data was analyzed by using statistical methods such as Mean Rating, Standard Deviation & Co-relationship of project conflict approach for each counterpart. Table 6, 7, 8 provide the summary of the Mean Rating, Standard Deviation & Co-relationship of this study.

Table 6. Mean Rating Conflict Management for Counterpart

Conflict Management Style	Mean Ratings of Respondents				Over-all %
	Peers	Supervisors	Subordinates	Over-all	
Collaboration	0.65	0.70	0.65	0.67	25.88%
Accommodate	0.50	0.56	0.51	0.52	20.21%
Competition	0.35	0.34	0.46	0.38	14.78%
Avoidance	0.44	0.50	0.47	0.47	18.25%
Compromise	0.53	0.55	0.53	0.54	20.88%

Table 7. Standard Deviation Conflict Management for Counterpart

Conflict Management Style	Standard Deviation of Respondents		
	Peers	Supervisors	Subordinates
Collaboration	0.65	0.70	0.65
Accommodate	0.50	0.56	0.51
Competition	0.35	0.34	0.46
Avoidance	0.44	0.50	0.47
Compromise	0.53	0.55	0.53

Table 8. Co-Efficiency of Conflict Management Style & Counterparts

Conflict Management Style	Standard Deviation of Respondents		
	Peers	Supervisors	Subordinates
Collaboration	0.9459	0.9777	0.9230
Accommodate	0.4132	0.4105	0.3538
Competition	-0.0476	-0.1857	0.0503

Avoidance	0.3916	0.4499	0.4378
Compromise	0.5659	0.4493	0.4726

Additionally, Table 9 summarizes the analysed data represent the conflict management role of the respondents for its counterparts. Moreover, the analyzed data sample assists to identify the most adopted project conflict management style & its deviation for each counterpart.

Table 9. Role of Respondent with the Counterpart for Interpersonal Conflicts

Role of Conflict Management	Role of Respondent with Counterpart for Interpersonal Conflicts					
	Peers		Supervisors		Subordinates	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Collaborator	39	57.35%	45	66.18%	36	52.94%
Accommodator	6	8.82%	10	14.71%	5	7.35%
Competitor	7	10.29%	1	1.47%	6	8.82%
Avoider	5	7.35%	4	5.88%	8	11.76%
Compromiser	11	16.18%	8	11.76%	3	4.38%
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Additionally, this study evaluates the prevailing approaches of conflict management in Sri Lankan construction industry. Table 10 & 11 shows the conflict management approach according to problem solving & bargaining approaches, Activeness & Agreeableness approaches, respectively.

Table 10. Problem Solving & Bargaining in Conflict Management Approach with the Counterpart for Interpersonal Conflicts

Types Conflict Management Approach	Conflict Management Approach with Counterpart for Interpersonal Conflicts			
	Peers	Supervisors	Subordinates	Rank
Problem Solving & Bargain	30.88%	17.65%	32.35%	2

Non-Problem Solving & Bargaining	7.35%	4.41%	7.35%	4
Problem Solving & Non-Bargaining	54.41%	69.12%	47.06%	1
Non-Problem Solving & Non-Bargaining	7.35%	8.82%	13.24%	3
<b>Problem Solving</b>	<b>85.29%</b>	<b>86.76%</b>	<b>79.41%</b>	
<b>Bargain</b>	<b>38.24%</b>	<b>22.06%</b>	<b>39.71%</b>	

Table 11. Activeness & Agreeableness in Conflict Management Approach with the Counterpart for Interpersonal Conflicts

Types Conflict Management Approach	Conflict Management Approach with Counterpart for Interpersonal Conflicts			
	Peers	Super-visors	Subord-inates	Rank
Activeness & Agreeableness	57.35%	48.53%	50.00%	1
Non activeness & Agreeableness	25.00%	36.76%	25.00%	2
Activeness & Non agreeableness	16.18%	8.82%	17.65%	3
Non activeness & Non agreeableness	1.47%	5.88%	7.35%	4
<b>Activeness</b>	<b>73.53%</b>	<b>57.35%</b>	<b>67.65%</b>	
<b>Agreeableness</b>	<b>82.35%</b>	<b>85.29%</b>	<b>75.00%</b>	

Finally, this study examines the conflict management style according to the gender. (See Annexure -I)

### Results & Discussions

In the Table 4, the respondents were categorized into seven professional categories & the majority represents the quantity surveying & less contribution from the finance sector. Further, the majority of the respondents are direct stakeholders of the construction industry, which assist to provide insightful views regarding the current conflict management approach in Sri Lankan construction industry. As per the Table 5, when considering the middle management exposure of the sample, more than 70% have less than 5 years' experience. One can consider it as a negative effect on the results. Though, on the other hand, it is a benefit to identify how the young blood of the construction

industry copes up with conflicts & it depicts innovative approaches of project conflict management for upcoming years for the country.

Table 6, clearly shows that more than 25% of the sample are willing to resolve the conflicts in a collaborative style, which is the most popular style of all the counterparts. Another highlighted fact is that the accommodation & compromise are almost equally utilized when resolving the conflicts with all the counterpart groups, which is more than 20% from overall. Further, negative conflict management styles are least popular category. Moreover, in the Table 7, summary of the standard deviation of the sample proves that the view regarding the conflict management style is similar in most of categories except the competition conflict management style.

Results of the coefficient - co relationship of conflict management style & counter parts (Table 8) shows that the data sample is highly coefficient with collaborative conflict management style when making decisions. On the other hand, there is a negative or minimum coefficient in competition conflict management in all three categories. Accommodation & Compromising are second & third most coefficient conflict management style in Sri Lankan construction industry.

Table 9 results clearly show that the majority of the respondents are willing to work as collaborators when resolving the issues in all three counter parts. It is mostly utilized in the conflicts with their supervisors. The compromiser role is the second popular style when, there is conflict with a peer or subordinate. Further, the majority of the respondents accommodate their supervisors' view than compromising. It shows that the Sri Lankan construction industry stakeholders adhere to the authority & power that

incorporated to managerial level of traditional organization management.

The results of Table - 10, 11 prove that the majority of (54%,69%,47%) current Sri Lankan construction industry try to resolve the conflict using problem solving approach but without bargaining. Further, the most popular conflict management approach is activeness & agreeability with all three counterparts (57%, 49%,50%). Further, close to 80% of sample is willing to adopt the problem-solving approach across all three categories (85%,87%, 79%) & more than 57% of the sample likes to resolve the problem by using active strategies across all counterparts (73%,57%,68%). Though the Sri Lankan construction stakeholders adopt the problem-solving approach they are less bargaining. Another highlighted point is high percentage of agreeableness in all the categories, which depicts that when resolving the conflicts, the parties are more concerned about the method of fulfilling the needs of their count parts.

The annexure - I represents that, the respondents are almost equally distributed between the two genders. This is a proper platform to explain how the conflicts are managed according to the gender. Most of the time the conflict management style is similar for both genders except in few styles. Females are more concerned about collaborating with their peers than males & on the other hand, males tend to collaborate with their supervisors more, than females. Males accommodate more for their peers & avoid more for their subordinates than females. Females tend to utilize compromising with their counterparts than males.

## Conclusions

This study shows that 67% of the stakeholders apply active strategies to resolve the conflicts. Further, among these strategies, the most popular strategy is the collaboration style in

Sri Lankan construction conflict management. Another concluding factor that can be derived from this study is that the majority of the stakeholders accommodate their supervisors' view when there is a conflict between them. This is mainly due to the power & authority that gained by the higher level management in traditional organization management.

This study identified that, most of the current construction industry stakeholders adopt problem solving approach without bargain. This depicts that the most of conflicts are resolved by problem solving method. Parallely, the amount of influence that each individual makes to resolve the problem in favor of his view is less. This results to find the most apt solution for the conflict. Further, when resolving the problem, they involve in high activeness & more concern about their counterparts needs.

Conflict management style which is used by both genders is similar, but females adopt positive approach a little higher percentage than males. Additionally, males are not concerned about the level of their counter parts when adopting their approach; whereas, females tend to change their approach for their counterpart according to the managerial level of the counterpart.

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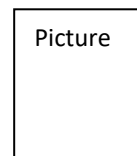
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### Author Biography



Mr. P. L. Perera is working as a Lecturer Probationary in Sri Lanka Technological Campus. He has obtained B. Sc. in Quantity Surveying & M. Sc. in Project Management. The author's research interest areas are: Construction Project Management, Sustainable Construction, Tendering & Procurement in construction industry.