

Conflict Management Skills: How to Increase the Bottom Dollar by Decreasing Construction Team Conflict

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Introduction

Development of solid conflict resolution skills is necessary in preparing to enter today's striving construction business. Rapid-paced globalization and technology advancements have become the common external environmental forces that drive the need for continuous change in construction organizational structure. Technology, job restructuring, coordination of global markets, and increased diversity of team member demographics are involved. The days of completing a project and moving to the next are gone. The structure is becoming more service oriented where team approaches and partnering agreements are being adapted to gain more repeat business. The successful organizations are hiring construction managers who possess a high level of emotional intelligence, who have strong conflict management skills, and who can develop team cooperation. Such skills are essential in an adversarial, confrontational business where conflict is an integral piece of any construction project. Conflict can emerge during any stage of the construction process and can take the form of functional or dysfunctional discontent. Functional conflict is constructive and results from challenges and creative discussions, but when the discussions lead to unresolved problems, stress and tension among team members can develop into dysfunctional conflict.

Developing construction teams based on conflict resolution styles would expedite the manner of resolving conflict, increase member's individual performance, and save time, money, and lives. The purpose of this paper is to present an alternative method of introducing students to the importance of managing conflict in construction projects and to setup an evaluation tool that can be used in the establishment of this type of pedagogy.

Key Words: Emotional Intelligence, Conflict Management Skills, Construction Team Conflict, Relationship Management Skills

Conflict Management Skills in Short Supply

Personal insults and comments that lack regard for others feelings are often described as dysfunctional and are disruptive to performance. "Indicators that conflict has become unproductive include: Conflict becomes personal; conflict increases with each meeting rather than decreases; communications become one way; parties become entrenched and will not accommodate alternative views; and the conflict becomes a major issue – incurs costs and delays activities. Ultimately, the completion of construction projects relies on cooperation between multidisciplinary teams and as disagreements are to be expected managers must attempt to develop appropriate mechanisms for dealing with conflict" (O'Neil as cited in Gorse, 2003, p. 174).

According to a recent international survey of 1,589 HR professionals, "Conflict management skills are in short supply in the construction industry, new research has found, with 19% of companies surveyed saying that managers of culturally diverse workforces, such as those typically found in 'heavy industries' such as construction and manufacturing, are not adept at dealing with conflict" (HRreview, 2012, para. 1).

Although the need for today's construction managers to continue to develop ways to identify conflict styles and to increase emotional intelligence and collaboration among team members is readily recognized, many still return to the tried and true method of doing business. In an introduction to emotional intelligence for the Alpha male dominated construction industry Darnell (2011) stated, "We all know who the 'old school' construction manager is. He's the one who kicks ass and takes names. He doesn't take crap from anybody, punishes subcontractors, and doesn't think twice about compromising safety if he thinks it will increase his profit and personal bonus" (p. 39). Darnell also pointed out that the face of the construction industry is changing and that the new construction manager needs not only highly technical skills "but it would benefit him to have a balance in his emotional makeup" (p. 39).

Darnell discussed the research that showed how emotional intelligence is imperative for effective performance and how increasing this skill set can eventually have a positive effect on the bottom line as diagramed in Table 1.

Table 1

Changing face of the construction industry

Old	New
Large labor pool	Competition for talent
Homogenous, male dominated labor pool	Multi-cultural labor pool with more females
Baby boomer workforce	Multi-generational workforce
Manage processes	Manage people
Low bid work	Negotiated work
Short, adversarial relationships	Long, satisfying relationships
Projects run from silos	Integrated project delivery systems
Lack of client focus	Focus on client and his needs
Communication lacking	Communication focus
Decrease overhead	Increase performance
Safety a nuisance	Focus on safety
Environmental ignorance	Environmental focus
High stress/burnout	Focus to reduce stress/burnout

Source. Darnell, 2011, p. 42

The Cost of Conflict in the Workplace

The need for more innovative leadership styles, integrating methods of identifying conflict resolution, is not a new concept. Bennett at the 2010 Liverpool Built Environment and Natural Environment conference presented the results of a pilot survey to test the hypothesis of the question—“Is the construction industry culturally ready to adopt more innovative leadership styles; and if so, would it perceive the leadership value of emotional intelligence (EI) as a tool for managing conflict?” (ppt. 6). The survey was distributed to professionals in the construction industry and used a 5-point Likert scale. Of the 56% response rate, 39 % were construction project managers. The findings were that the majority of respondents agreed that the construction industry needed to invest in training for conflict management and believed that conflict could be managed more successfully if participants understand how to deal with others and understand their own self-awareness (emotional intelligence concepts) as reported in Figure 1.

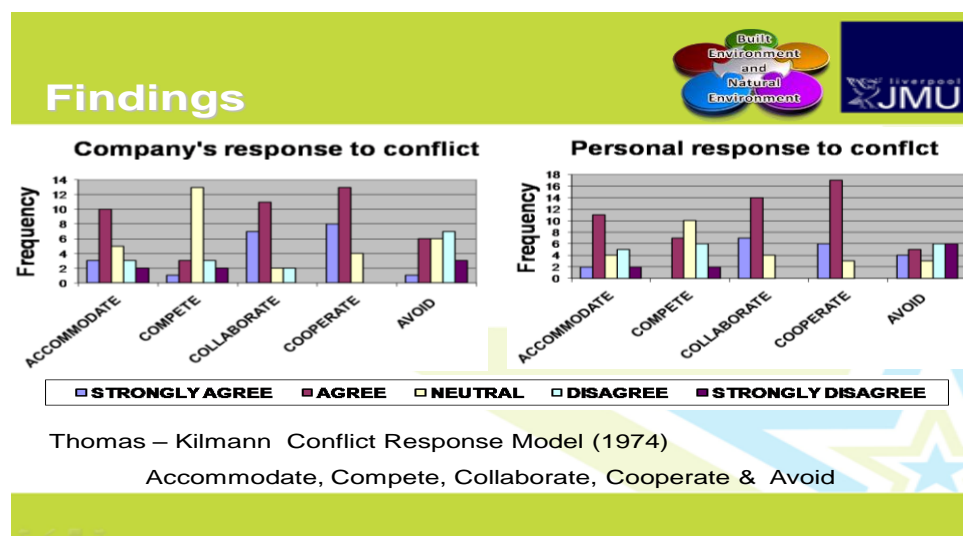


Figure 1: Bennett’s (2010) survey results (ppt. 9).

The cost of conflict in the workplace is well documented and ranges from low morale, reduced productivity and missed deadlines to increased stress and reduced collaboration. So why haven't more companies adopted this improved way of hiring and managing construction teams? The answer may be that most companies do not see the possible *return on investment* for the cost and effort. But now there is a way to efficiently reduce conflict, increase team members' emotional intelligence, and increase team productivity.

A recent study was conducted to determine how team personality composition and task conflict interact with performance (Baker, 2013). According to Bradley, Klotz, Postlethwaite, and Brown (as cited in Baker, 2013), "Our results indicate that team level averages of both openness to experience and emotional stability function as moderators of the relationship between task conflict and team performance. Specifically, task conflict had a positive impact on performance in teams with high levels of openness or emotional stability; in contrast, task conflict had a negative impact on performance in teams with low levels of openness or emotional stability. Thus, when task conflict emerges, teams composed of members who are open-minded or emotionally stable are best able to leverage conflict to improve performance" (para. 4).

Following up to my previous research, I believe the opportunity for positive impact on return-on-investment (ROI) is created by the effects on ROI that unchecked negative team conflict can have. Having the ability to place individuals on teams with similar conflict resolution styles could reduce team conflicts that result in poor performance. In addition, the ability to select team leaders with a high degree of emotional intelligence can enhance team performance. A recent study by Baker (2013) of 60 military officers determined that predicting an individual's preferred conflict resolution style from one's emotional intelligence (EI) level is possible or vice versa." (para. 5)

Overview of the Study

Decreasing Team Conflict and Increasing Emotional Intelligence

The purpose of Baker's (2013) research was to determine whether a strong enough relationship exists to be able to either predict emotional intelligence scores from the conflict resolution scores or predict levels of conflict resolution from composite EI scores among United States National Guard (USNG) leaders. The request to participate in the study was sent to 237 USNG officers in the Midwest. Of the USNG officers contacted, 113 were either deployed or unavailable. Of the 124 officers available to participate, 60 officers participated for a response rate of 53%.

Research Methods

Participants in the study completed two assessment instruments. The MSCEIT instrument assessed the participant's level of EI and the Thomas Kilmann instrument (TKI) assessed the participant's preference for each of the five modes or styles of conflict management. An analysis was conducted using the scores of each instrument to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between the parameters measured by each instrument. The following variables were measured by how participants selected certain questions on the MSCEIT.

- **Perceiving emotions** refers to the ability to correctly identify how people are feeling.
- **Using emotions to facilitate thought** refers to the ability to create emotions and to integrate your feelings into the way you think.
- **Understanding emotions** refers to the ability to understand the causes of emotions.
- **Managing emotions** refers to the ability to create effective strategies that use your emotions to help one achieve a goal, rather than having emotions negatively affect you.

"A total score, derived from these variables, measured the overall emotional intelligence level. The scores were interpreted on a normal curve with an average score of 100 and a standard deviation of 15." (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002, p. 18) The upper score ranged from 100-109 for a high average, 110-119 for competent, 120-129 for strength, and 130+ for significant strength.

The TKI was developed to help individuals understand their conflict resolution style, which is broken down to five categories. The following variables were measured by participants' answers to certain questions on the TKI. The

scale for each variable ranged from a 0 (for very low) to 12 (for very high use). A higher score indicated a greater preference for use of the conflict-handling style. The variables were as follows:

- **Collaborating.** Both assertive and cooperative, the opposite of avoiding. Working with the other person to find a solution.
- **Accommodating.** Unassertive and cooperative, the opposite of competing. Satisfying the needs of the other person.
- **Compromising.** Intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness, the middle ground between competing and accommodating.
- **Avoiding.** Unassertive and uncooperative, not pursuing your own or the other person's concerns.
- **Competing.** Assertive and uncooperative, a power oriented style. Pursuing your own needs at other's expense.

Analysis

For each null hypothesis, the MSCEIT composite score and one of the TKI (collaborating, accommodating, compromising, avoiding, and competing) level scores was tested using linear regression. The overall MSCEIT score was examined against the individual TKI scores using this prediction model, $T1 = A + M$ (T1 was the dependent variable and M was the independent variable.). This method allowed the assessment of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The purpose of linear regression was to explain the amount of variance in a dependent variable accounted for by the independent variable.

First, through the use of linear regression, the model indicated *accommodating* total score did serve as a significant predictor for MSCEIT total score for USNG officers with $t(1, 58) = 2.528, p < .05$. *Accommodating* total score had an unstandardized partial regression coefficient of 3.696, which means MSCEIT total score were predicted to change 3.696 with a one unit increase in *accommodating* total score. The standardized partial regression coefficients (β weight of .315) allowed the measurement of impact that *accommodating* total score had on MSCEIT total score in standardized units through the use of *z*-scores. Second, the linear regression revealed that *compromising* total score served as a predictor for MSCEIT total score for USNG officers. This was determined through the use of an ANOVA that examined the significance of r^2 within the model. It determined that the *compromising* section score of the TKI could be used to predict MSCEIT total score for USNG officers. The ANOVA was significant, $F(1, 58) = 4.761, p < .05$, thus showing a linear relationship between the *compromising* section score of the TKI and MSCEIT total score.

Results

The results indicated that *accommodating* total scores and *compromising* total scores do serve as a significant predictor for MSCEIT scores. The findings suggested that an officer who scored in the upper 25% of the *accommodating* section or lower 25% of the *compromising* section of the TKI would have a mean score for the MSCEIT score of 93.04. These results indicated that it may be possible to use an individual's score from one of the two instruments to predict the participant's score on the opposing instrument.

Table 2

Unstandardized and standardized partial regression coefficients for accommodating

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Accommodating	3.696	1.462	.315	2.528	.014

Gilbert's (1978) behavioral engineering model distinguished between the environment and a person's repertory of behavior or what they contribute to the performance equation. The categories of the individual level are comprised of what an individual contributes to the job, such as motives, capacity, knowledge, and skills. The ability to predict one's preferred conflict resolution style may affect changes on an individual performance and provide an opportunity to leverage a cost-effective performance improvement instrument at the individual level that effectively

increases ROI. Within the category of motives is the statement, “employees are recruited and selected to match the realities of the work situation.”

Construction management professionals can now offer an alternative that focuses the efforts of all to achieve the desired corporation goals. Administering the cost effective TKI takes about 15 minutes. An individual’s preferred conflict resolution style is identified, which can then be used in the selection of team members. In addition, the TKI score allows for the prediction of the EI score for key team leadership training and placement. The TKI scores create the opportunity to recruit a likely candidate for organization teams based on one’s scores. This increases the team’s emotional intelligence, conflict handling abilities, ROI, and retention, while reducing organizational cost.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Having a tool to assist today’s construction corporations is imperative for the continued success. The ability to reduce team conflict and increase the team leader’s emotional intelligence based on a simple instrument will provide a positive impact by enhancing corporate leadership and cooperation. Institutions are charged with the responsibility of developing tomorrow’s industry leaders efficiently and effectively. Now there is a cost effective, unobtrusive way to enhance student performance. If students are to learn to lead, their conflict management and emotional intelligence skills must be developed. Based on the results of this study, two applications are suggested.

Firstly, to start the change in the industry culture, introduce the importance of relationships to construction management students as early as possible. Textbooks and instructions are full of references to the *triple threat*—time, cost, and scope. Very little is said about how these tasks are held together and managed by establishing critical relationships. In short, the technically educated people in the construction colleges receive very little training in people skills, meaning very little time and content is devoted to important interpersonal skills, communication, or teamwork. According to Darnell (2011), who investigated the curricula of several colleges, “several schools are aware of this deficit and are taking decisive action. They understand that although they are providing an excellent technical education to their students, they are not properly preparing them for the real world, where relationships are a vital key to their success.” (p. 27)

Baker (2013) familiarizes construction learners and instructors with the Quadruple Threat. The Quadruple Threat introduces the learners to the importance of conflict and relationship management skills. These relationship skills focus on the highly concentrated technical skills of planning, directing, and budgeting. Relationship management is the glue that binds it all together and can be the decisive factor in whether the project is crises managed or successful as reflected in Figure 2.

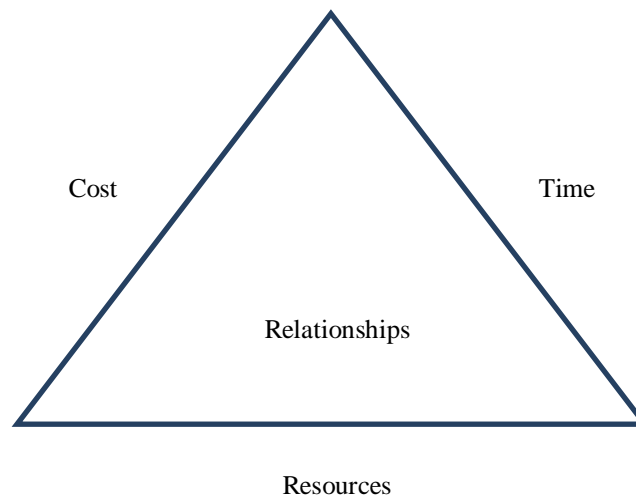


Figure 2: Quadruple threat.

Secondly, individuals will complete the TKI which takes about 15 minutes. The discussion begins with each student or instructor discovering one’s individual conflict resolution style and EI level.

Lastly, engage individuals in problem-based learning activities where they can develop skills that can be applied to real life situations. Individuals will learn to identify and manage conflict based on team members' conflict resolution styles. Create examples of how to work with all types ranging from the old fashioned foreman's competitive style to the new project manager's cooperative relationship style.

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