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**CONFLICT AVOIDANCE IN COOPERATIVE AND COMPETITIVE
RELATIONSHIPS: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY BETWEEN
CHINESE SUBORDINATES AND WESTERN SUPERIORS**

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MPHIL

LINGNAN UNIVERSITY

2007

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by

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ABSTRACT

Conflict Avoidance in Cooperative and Competitive Relationships: A Cross-Cultural Study between Chinese Subordinates and Western Superiors

by

PENG Chun Yan

Master of Philosophy

Many international companies have entered China because of its expanding opportunities. However, for expatriate managers to innovate and implement their strategic plans in order to exploit these opportunities, they must know and work with their Chinese subordinates. But conflict is inevitable within organizations, especially when people with different cultural backgrounds work together. Culture not only affects people's preferred ways of doing things but also influences their styles to deal with conflicts. Compared with Westerners, Chinese people have been found to employ indirect ways and prefer to avoid conflict. To facilitate effective communication, it is imperative for Western managers to understand why local subordinates might avoid conflicts and what strategies they will use.

This paper explores the dynamic structure of conflict avoidance between Western managers and Chinese employees; we want to understand the different strategies used to avoid conflict. Specifically, this study uses the theory of cooperation and competition to predict people's responses toward conflict avoidance. We hypothesize that conflict avoidance is not always negative but depends on the specific actions the protagonists adopt and their perceptions of the goal interdependence with each other (cooperative or competitive) greatly influence their tactics to avoid conflict. The study extends research on conflict avoidance to foreign invested companies in China and develops a typology of the dynamics of conflict avoidance.

Altogether 132 face-to-face interviews were carried out in Hong Kong and Beijing, China. Participants who work with Western managers were asked to describe an incident in which they avoided a conflict with their foreign superiors; it included the setting, what occurred, the reasons, and the consequences. Then they rated specific questions on 7-point Likert-type scale based on the recalled incidents. Employees whose bosses are local managers were also recruited as a control group. Structural equation modeling and other analyses will explore the proposed model and help to compare cultural differences in handling conflicts between the Western and Chinese managers. The paper draws implications for managing in foreign invested firms.

DECLARATION

I declare that this is an original work based primarily on my own research, and I warrant that all citations of previous research, published or unpublished, have been duly acknowledged.

(Ms. PENG Chun Yan)

Date

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL OF THESIS

Conflict Avoidance in Cooperative and Competitive Relationships:

A Cross-Cultural Study between Chinese Subordinates and Western Superiors

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter first briefly presents the objectives of the study. Then it provides background information for the study, leading to the hypotheses. Finally, it summarizes the study's contributions.

Objectives of this Study

This exploratory study aims to understand conflict avoidance between managers and employees. Specifically it has three goals:

First, it explores the dynamic structure of conflict avoidance; why employees avoid conflict, how they act, and the consequences;

Second, it uses the theory of cooperation and competition to predict people's strategies to avoid conflict;

Third, this study aims to understand the cross-cultural interaction by exploring Chinese employees' avoiding conflict with their Western managers.

Background

Secretary PK Boss

In the early April 2006, an email from EMC (the world's largest network information storage company with headquarters in the United States) Beijing headquarters had been madly read and discussed among all big foreign corporations in China. The news titled "Secretary PK Boss" shook up the Internet, in which EMC Greater China CEO had a major quarrel with his senior secretary over some

work-related trivia, causing the latter to leave the post. The story is briefly summarized below:

On the evening of April 7, EMC Greater China CEO Alex (I have used fictitious names in this example.) went back to the office to retrieve something. When arriving at the door, he realized that he did not have the office key. By that time, his personal secretary Zhang Li had left the office. Unable to reach her by phone, Alex felt very annoyed. Several hours later, Alex sent Zhang Li a harshly phrased "letter of condemnation", in which Alex blamed Zhang Li bitterly and impolitely. Zhang Li was extremely frustrated and felt inappropriately treated. Instead of tolerating, she refused his accusation and pointed out that it was his own business to leave the key in office. Moreover, Zhang Li co-sent this letter to all EMC employees in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Guangzhou. This email evoked the hot discussion among the white-collar workers at foreign corporations in China, copying and forwarding.

Though the ideas of my thesis were not due to this event, which occurred after I had developed the framework, it does underline the practical value of the thesis. This event reveals the sensitive topic of cultural barriers and power inequality in managing conflicts.

Chinese Values and Managing Conflict

"No matter where you are, don't ever think about arguing with the boss." An employee at Hewlett-Packard, China believed that all Chinese people who are joining foreign corporations must learn how to adapt to management styles in different cultures. Her thinking and belief reflect many Chinese people's attitudes toward conflicts with superiors, i.e., they should avoid conflict. The incident described above also reflects this

value shared by many Chinese employees; it is because of her unusual action to confront the CEO that the secretary shocked the public and evoked heated discussion.

Chinese culture is well known for emphasizing harmonious relationships. Chinese people are concerned more about what their own behaviors would bring about on others, and their self constructs are more dependent on others' evaluations compared with Westerners (Bond and Huang, 1986; Brew and Caims, 2004; Hofstede, 1991; Morris, et. al., 1998). As a consequence, they are highly sensitive to the possibility of losing social face in public; they avoid conflict so that they can protect other's social face and sustain the network harmony. Many studies have found that Chinese, as compared to Western people, prefer to avoid open discussion of their differences (Bond and Lee, 1981; Chiao, 1981; Herbig, 1997; Hofstede, 1980; Swierczek and Hirsch, 1994; Tang and Kirkbridge, 1986).

Besides the collectivist values, which are generally thought to induce Chinese people to try to avoid conflict, Chinese society is also often considered a traditional, hierarchical one where employees readily defer to their superiors (Triandis, 1990, 2000; William, Morris, and et.al., 1998). Chinese subordinates respect authority and believe that the rules of all the corporate games are written by the bosses. Rather than taking risk to argue with the boss, the employees prefer to hide their opposite opinions and avoid conflicts. Therefore, in the face of criticisms from the Greater China CEO in the incident above, a secretary is supposed to write a polite reply to explain the reason for what happened that day and agree on the requirements of the CEO, admitting fault and apologizing.

Diversity in Conflict Avoidance

Values are general guides and people develop their own ways to interpret and apply them. Although believed more sensitive to confronting others directly, Chinese people can express their opposing ideas and openly discuss their differences (Chen, Liu and Tjosvold, 2005; Tjosvold, Hui and Sun, 1999, 2004; Tjosvold and Wu, 2005). Even conflict avoidance itself is found to be much more complicated than assumed. Leung (1996, 1997) proposed that avoiding conflict has two distinct motives: disintegration avoidance and harmony enhancement. The former is instrumental in nature while the latter refers to the sincere desire to engage in behaviors that strengthen relationship.

With different motives, people developed a variety of strategies and actions to avoid conflict. In the study of Tjosvold and Sun (2002), two distinguished strategies were identified respectively as conforming and outflanking, where individuals might turn to the third party to get what they want. Friedman and his colleagues (2006) reported more detailed and diverse tactics during conflict avoidance, such as “do nothing right now but draw a lesson for future actions”, “support and cooperate”, “feel angry but do nothing”, and so on.

Conflict avoidance is thought to be less constructive than open-minded discussion in most situations. But in some situations avoiding might be an appropriate approach; it was found to be right response to trivial conflicts (Rahim, 1983), and can help solve the problems in some circumstances (Barsky and Wood, 2005). The reasoning that conflict avoidance is sometimes functional is also supported by its widespread use in China (Kirkbride, Tang, and Westwood, 1991).

Conflicts between Chinese Employee and Foreign Boss

With the increasing interest in China market, more foreign companies have

invested in China, especially in those important cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Due to its relatively higher pay and better opportunity for self-development, jobs in foreign companies attract many excellent Chinese workers. However, there is always cultural gap between East and West. For example, with their high distance cultural values, Chinese people accept their superior's unilateral decision making quickly while their Western bosses may complain about their lack of participation.

Research has documented the differences on managing conflict in the individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Westerners often use the direct confrontation and prefer the forcing conflict resolution (Holt and DeVore, 2005; Tinsley, 1998), while the Eastern people, such as Chinese, prefer indirect ways and avoid assertive methods (Leung, 1997; Spencer-Oatey, 1997). Compared with Westerners, Chinese people are more likely to withdraw and avoid conflict (Holt and DeVore, 2005; Ohbuchi, et al. 1999). However, conflict avoidance does not necessarily mean the same thing across culture. Contrary to Western theory, avoidance can reflect a sincere concern for others' feelings and needs in order to preserve the interpersonal relationship (Gabrielidis, et al. 1997).

If not recognized and well managed, these cultural differences in conflict management styles can make collaboration between Western employer and Chinese employee ineffective and frustrating (Hitt, Lee, and Yucel, 2002; Tjosvold, 1999). Thus it is imperative for the Western managers to understand their Chinese employees and their culture to manage their business effectively in China.

Hypotheses

Deutsch's (1949, 1973) theory of cooperation and competition was used in this

study to understand the diverse responses for the Chinese employees to avoid conflicts with their superiors. This theory proposes that how people consider their goal relationships with each other, cooperative or competitive, greatly affects their actions to avoid conflict, leading to different consequences. Specifically, we hypothesized that believing that they and their bosses have cooperative goals employees are more likely to consider the interests of their bosses and use considerate and positive tactics during conflict avoidance. In contrast, those who believe their goals are competitively related with their superiors' tend to think of their own benefits and use aggressive and ineffective tactics during conflict avoidance.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to our understanding of the multifaceted phenomenon of conflict avoidance, which has not been directly and adequately explored in previous studies and has been pervasively considered as simple giving in and obeying. Avoiding conflict has for long been thought to be one approach contrasted with confrontation, forcing, and compromising (Rahim, 1992, 2001; Roloff and Ifert, 2000). However, recent studies have indicated that conflict avoidance is more complex than what it is believed, with at least two opposite alternatives of passively following the other's opinions and actively turning to a third party (outflanking) (Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). This exploratory study contributes to previous research in this area by distinguishing more specific strategies that are commonly used by Chinese employees to avoid conflicts with their bosses.

Moreover, this study applies the theory of cooperation and competition to discover the dynamics of conflict avoidance. Limited studies have tried to examine the

theoretical perspective that could be referred to characterize people's avoiding behavior. This study is to demonstrate the important role of goal interdependence in people's avoiding behavior. Cooperative goals are hypothesized to contribute to the considerate and effective approaches to handle conflict, and then lead to constructive outcomes. In contrast, competitive goals are expected to lead to the destructive strategies to avoid conflict. These hypotheses, if supported, can indicate the conditions for constructive conflict avoidance.

Additionally, this study can also contribute to the literature on cross-cultural studies by directly examining the cross-cultural interactions between the Chinese employees and their Western managers. Not much research has explored the cultural influence on individual's behavior on the cross-cultural level rather than simply comparing different national cultures in the intra-cultural level (Smith and Bond, 1998; Triandis, 1990). The current study looks at the interaction of individuals from different cultures in dealing with conflict, which itself can serve as good setting to manifest the role of cultural norms on people's behavior (Smith, Dugan, and Trompenaars, 1996).

The findings will also have practical implications for Western managers to understand their Chinese subordinates. It can help expatriate managers develop effective communications with their local employees by understanding their cherished values and beliefs. A recent study found that adjusting one's style to the local culture was positively related to agreeableness and openness to new experiences (Huang, Chi, and Lawler, 2005). Therefore our study can support this conclusion by providing evidence that people with diverse cultural background are able to adapt to each other and create a mutually accepted interacting way which incorporate elements from their respective cultures (Rao and Hashimoto, 1996; Thomas and Ravlin, 1995).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first chapter introduced the study's purpose and background. This chapter reviews research studies on conflict and conflict avoidance. Definition and concept on conflict are discussed followed by a description of the theory of cooperation and competition, which serves as the theoretical framework in this study. Then the chapter examines conflict management between Chinese employee and foreign manager. Finally, it summarizes conclusions of the literature review and proposes the study's hypotheses.

Understanding Conflict

Conflict exists everywhere and everyday and is complicated with multi-levels in various fields. Conflict has different levels; it can happen within an individual or between members, among different firms, between two hostile areas, or more macroscopic, between two countries or unions. Conflict also has numerous contents; it can be some arguments on problem solution in workplace or at home, or the more enduring culture conflict and conflict between nature and the development of human society. Through our lifetime, we also encountered uncountable conflicts. We are living in a world filled with conflicts!

Defining Conflict as Competitive Interests

The definition of conflict varies as the phenomenon itself. Despite its long-time as a research topic, a clear and generally accepted definition of conflict is still lacking (Wall and Callister, 1995). Most often conflict is identified as disagreement, negative emotion

and interference. For example, Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim (1994) argued that conflict had become too broadly defined but they want to use it to mean a “perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.” Lewicki, Saunders, and Minton (1997) suggested a similar definition as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals.” More recently, Barki and Hartwick (2004) elaborated upon these efforts by defining conflict as “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals.”

However, conflict is not always destructive with competitive and incompatible goals. Conflicts happen when group members share the common goals and interests but disagree on the concrete approaches to achieve their goals. For example, colleagues might argue for the best solution for a work problem, but all of them want to get it resolved as everyone is expected to benefit from accomplishment of this common task. Their goals and interests are positively related. As a result, colleagues discuss their differences and work together for better solution. Studies have already empirically documented the value of conflict for understanding the problem, generating new ideas, making decisions, leading to significant organizational changes, and other critical aspects of organizational and social life (Amason, 1996; Anderson, 1983; George, 1974; Gruenfeld, 1995; Peterson and Nemeth, 1996; Tetlock, Armor and Peterson, 1994). Constructive controversy, the open-minded discussion on different opinions for mutual benefit, was found to be an effective approach to solve conflicts in organizations (Tjosvold, 1995; Tjosvold and Wang, 1998; Chen and Tjosvold, 2002; Johnson, Johnson and Tjosvold, 2006). Therefore, the conventional perception of conflict as a kind of

competition is inaccurate by ignoring the situation in which people consider conflict as a common problem but hold different views to solve it.

Defining conflict as caused by opposing interests due to scarcity of resources and goal divergence very much frustrates our understanding and managing of conflict (Mack and Snyder, 1957; Pondy, 1967; Schmidt and Kochan, 1972). It confounds competition with conflict. This kind of definition reinforces the way that people consider conflict as a win-lose game, in which one achieves at the expenses of others. Unfortunately, this negative conception of conflict does affect people's approaches toward conflict management, leading to more suspicion, avoidance and competition, and destructive solutions.

Defining Conflict as Incompatible Activities

To address the problems above, conflict can be defined as occurring when individuals perceive incompatibilities in interests, goals or behaviors (Deutsch, 1973; Tjosvold, 1997). In this study we refer to the definition suggested by Alper, Tjosvold and Law (2000), where conflict was identified as "incompatible activities, where one person is interfering, obstructing, or in other ways making the behavior of another less effective". Their study also supports this definition by showing that conflicts can either be perceived as a mutual problem to contend or a win-lose game among group members, and that when cooperatively handled, conflicts can contribute to conflict efficacy, the confidence in their capability to resolve a conflict, and team performance in organizations.

Inspired by the positive potentials of conflicts, researchers put further effort on exploring the conditions in which conflicts are constructive. One stream is to categorize

conflicts into task and relationship ones, and generally relate the task conflict with positive outcomes while relationship conflict with negative results. Task conflict refers to “disagreements about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions”, while the relationship conflict is defined as “interpersonal incompatibilities which typically include tension, animosity, and annoyance” (Jehn, 1995). Task conflict is thought to be more related to the cognitive aspect, while relationship conflict involves the affective aspect of negative feelings (Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin, 1999). The problem for this distinction is that actually either in a task or relationship conflict, both human being’s cognition and affection are involved, making this definition of less practical application. Moreover, meta-analysis failed to find consistent effects of task and relationship conflict on team outcomes (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003).

To summarize, conflict is unavoidable when people are working together. Fortunately, it is not necessarily competitive and destructive; when well managed it can contribute to various organizational issues. We need further understanding the situations in which conflict is positive. The shortcomings of sorting conflict into task and relationship ones may indicate that it is not conflict itself but the way people perceive and approach conflict that largely determines the outcomes. The following part is to introduce cooperation and competition theory that helps us understand the situations when conflict can be positive.

Goal Interdependence Theory

Through centuries, social psychologists have tried to explain and understand conflicts from different theoretical perspectives. Three intellectual giants, Darwin, Marx, and Freud developed their theories on conflict from the perspectives of biological evolution, social movement and psychosexual development respectively. Their work greatly influenced the early social psychologists' thinking and theories on conflict. However, they all assumed conflict to be definitely competitive, incompatible in the interests of different parties. The process is a painful struggle to determine which party is to win and dominate; the loser is to be subordinated or even eliminated. This assumption has been popularly accepted in our society and greatly influenced the public's thinking on conflict, which was later demonstrated not the only truth. In late 1940s, Deutsch developed the theory of cooperation and competition which then changed our systematic understanding of conflict and its resolution.

Introduction of Goal Interdependence Theory

Deutsch (1949, 1973) argued that how people believe their goals are related is an important variable affecting the dynamics of their interactions, and then the interactions influence the results. Three alternatives of people's interpreting their goal interdependence are classified as cooperation, competition and independence.

In cooperation, goals are perceived to be positively related; members share the common interests and goals. They recognize that the achievement of the others will also help themselves to move toward their goals. With this belief, group members are willing to support each other, expect the success of others, and pool the efforts to accomplish the

common task for mutual benefits.

In competition, goals are believed to be negatively related. One's success precludes the success of others or at least makes it less likely for others to achieve their goals. In this win-lose game, people consider their goals as incompatible and try to outperform and defeat each other in order to win.

In independence, goals are believed to be unrelated. People conclude that whether they can succeed or not depends on their own efforts. As the goal attainments of others have no impact on their achievement, people pursue their goals individually.

The Role of Goal Interdependence in Managing Conflict

Based on the goal interdependence theory, Deutsch argued that people have at least two alternative approaches to conflicts; they can either develop cooperative conflict or competitive one. How protagonists approach conflict, cooperatively or competitively, affects the dynamics and outcomes. In a competitive conflict, interests and goals are considered largely incompatible; members believe others' success obstructs their own goal achievement. As a result, disputers treat this conflict as a war, where members are suspicious of each other, try to outperform and beat each other, and obtain their own benefits at the expense of others. In contrast, the protagonists can also consider their goals as mainly compatible and cooperative; they can pursue their interests while other members move toward success. Members are confident that others will reciprocate and work for mutual beneficial solutions. They listen to others' different ideas to understand the problem, and integrate the useful aspects of each other's opinions for the best solution. People interact and communicate effectively in a cooperative conflict, leading to constructive results.

Considerable research has supported the role of goal interdependence in conflict resolution and its prediction of people's responses toward conflicts. Studies found that cooperative goals led to an open-minded discussion of the incompatible activities whereas competitive goals resulted in close-minded interaction (Chen, and Tjosvold, 2002; Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, and Skon, 1981; Poon, Pike and Tjosvold, 2001; Snell, Tjosvold and Su, 2006; Tjosvold 1998; Tjosvold, Hui, and Law, 2001). Competitive protagonists have been found to avoid conflict frequently because they suspected open discussion would escalate and not help them win at the other's expense (Tjosvold, 1998). In an experiment in South China, the students who were exposed to the cooperative scene, compared with those who were induced with competitive goals, understood the opposing views and developed a cooperative relationship (Tjosvold, Sun and Wan, 2005).

Benefits and Costs of Cooperative Conflict

Cooperative conflict theory is elegant and powerful. It not only addresses the positive aspects of conflict, which have not been recognized enough, but also exposes us with the constructive approach to deal with conflict. It contributes to our understanding conflict as a matter to be appropriately handled rather than an absolute disaster itself. When successfully solved, it can help the individuals or organizations develop their thinking, knowledge, self-esteem and the ability to face changes and uncertainties. As detailed in Johnson and Johnson's meta-analysis study (1989), these ideas have given rise to a large number of research studies indicating that a cooperative process, compared to competitive one, leads to more productivity, favorable interpersonal relations, and constructive conflict resolution. Conflict is often the medium through

which innovative ideas are created and human society advances (Pruitt and Syna, 1989).

However, cooperative conflict, characterized by open discussion for mutual benefits, is not always desirable. When the interests are highly competitive and it is impossible for the involved parties to work with each other in the future, cooperative conflict approach may have little practical use (Johnson, Tjosvold and Leung, 2006). Sometimes conflicts are too trivial to deal with, and sometimes the atmosphere is too hostile that an immediate, constructive direct discussion is not likely. Moreover, successful cooperative conflict requires careful considering the different situations. For example, direct challenging the other's weaknesses is more acceptable in Western societies, but less effective for conflict resolution in Asian countries where people are sensitive to other's face (Cocroft and Ting-Toomey, 1994; Redding and Ng, 1982; Ting-Toomey 1988; Tjosvold, 1983).

To conclude, Deutsch's theory of cooperation and competition contributes greatly to our understanding and managing conflicts. It indicates that protagonists' perceptions of their goal relationships in conflict influence their attitudes and actions toward conflict resolution, which in turn determines the outcomes. Cooperative conflict, compared with competitive one, generates more constructive outcomes. However, other alternatives, like conflict avoidance the next section argues, might be constructive in specific situations.

Conflict Avoidance in East Asia

Conflict avoidance is the attempt to smooth over conflicts and to minimize the discussion of them (Chen, Liu and Tjosvold, 2005). It is the behavior of refusing the overt recognition and open engagement in any active actions toward solving the conflict (Ohbuchi and Takahashi, 1994). When encountering a conflict or sensing a potential conflict, individuals avoid openly discussing and directly debating with the other; instead, they simply agree with the other to prevent the surface of the conflict or choose indirect and non-confrontational ways to deal with it.

Conflict Avoidance in Collectivistic Cultures

It has long been concluded that culture, characterized by certain norms and beliefs shared by a social group (Deutsch, 1973), could influence individuals' preferred approaches toward conflicts (Hofstede, 1980; Cocroft and Ting-Toomey, 1994; Smith, Wang and Leung, 1997; Triandis, 1990). Compared with in Western countries, conflict avoiding is much more common in East Asia (Bond and Huang, 1986; Ohbuchi and Takahashi, 1994; Smith and Dugan, 1998; Triandis, 1990). In a study between American and Japanese students, it was found that the Japanese students used an avoiding strategy 48% of the time whereas American students used this strategy 22% of the time (Ohbuchi and Takahashi, 1994). Morris et al. (1998) also concluded that Chinese are more likely to avoid conflict whereas Americans are more likely to use a competitive or dominating strategy.

It is believed that people in East Asia are generally collectivistic and value harmonious personal relationships with others (Hofstede, 1980; Bond, 1989) and they

prefer avoiding direct debate and confrontation in order to protect other's face and maintain harmonious relationships (Triandis, 1990; Leung, 1997, 1996). Chinese people, as collectivists, are thought to avoid aggressive ways of working with others in order to strengthen their interpersonal relationships and make sure the other's face unchallenged. The strong emphasis on harmonious relationships in the collectivist Chinese culture thus leads to conflict avoidance (Boisot and Child, 1996; Chan, 1963; Triandis, 1990; Tung, 1991).

Value of Conflict Avoidance

Though conflict avoidance is relatively less constructive compared with the cooperative approach where conflict is openly discussed and directly dealt with, the rejection of conflict avoidance and nearly complete endorsement of confrontation may be premature. Rahim (1986) speculated that conflict avoidance was an appropriate response to trivial conflicts or when a cooling-off period was needed before a complex problem could be effectively dealt with. Compared with Western managers, Chinese managers endorse and rely upon conflict avoidance, partly supporting the reasoning that conflict avoidance is at least sometimes functional (Kirkbride, Tang, and Westwood, 1991). A recent study on the patterns of conflict avoidance among university students, professors, administrators and staff also demonstrated the positive role of avoidance in some circumstances (Barsky and Wood, 2005). Andrews and Tjosvold (1983) did experiments among student teachers and their sponsor teachers, implying avoidance could contribute to relationship effectiveness when conflict intense was high. Avoiding conflict, like other strategies, can be constructive in some conditions.

Diverse Motives and Strategies in Conflict Avoidance

Researchers have found that conflict avoidance does not mean the same thing across culture. Contrary to the Western theory that conflict avoidance is a lack of concern and responsibility to solve the problem, avoiding can reflect a sincere concern on what his/her behavior would bring about on the others in the Asian culture (Gabrielidis, et al. 1997). Leung (1996, 1997) proposed that avoiding conflict has two distinct motives: disintegration avoidance and harmony enhancement. The former is instrumental in nature while the latter refers to the sincere desire to engage in behaviors that strengthen relationship. One avoids conflict either because he believes open discussion or debate with the other will just harm his own benefits or because he assumes the direct way will harm the other and damage their relationship.

Avoiding is much more complicated than the common perception of passive complying and withdrawal from the resolution; people develop and adopt a variety of strategies in different situations (Bond and Huang, 1986; Friedman et. al., 2006; Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). Bond and Huang (1986) reported several strategies other than open debate when Chinese people were in conflict, such as indirect language, middlemen, face-saving plots, a long-range view, flexibility, and so on. More recently, Tjosvold and Sun (2002) pointed out that there were different motives and strategies in conflict avoidance, ranging from passive strategies to highly proactive ones that often involved working through third parties. Avoiding a direct discussion does not mean that protagonists simply withdraw and accommodate (Leung et al, 2002; Roloff and Ifert, 2000).

This study proposes that conflict avoidance is a complex behavior with different

motivations and actions, leading to diverse outcomes. It identifies four different strategies for the protagonists to avoid conflicts; they are named conforming (agree and comply with the other's decision to end the conflict), waiting (wait for a better opportunity to discuss the conflict), outflanking (work through the third party to resolve the conflict) and aggression (take passive but subtle actions against the other). Conforming and outflanking have already been identified as distinct strategies to avoid conflict. This study proposed that people might not take immediate actions during conflict but wait for a better opportunity. Waiting is assumed to be similar to "a cooling period", which has been thought to be effective to avoid intense conflict (Rahim, 1992, 2001). Moreover, research on face negotiation behavior indicated that people might take subtle aggressive actions against the other during conflict (Oetzel, et. al., 2000), which was labeled passive aggression. This study assumes these four strategies are distinct from each other and often used to avoid conflict in China.

We hypothesize that waiting and outflanking contribute to task accomplishment and strengthen the relationship whereas aggression and conforming are negatively related to problem solving and relationship. Specifically, our first four hypotheses are developed as:

H1: To the extent that people use the strategy of waiting to avoid conflict, they accomplish the task and strengthen their relationship.

H2: To the extent that people use the strategy of outflanking to avoid conflict, they accomplish the task and strengthen their relationship.

H3: To the extent that people use the strategy of conforming to avoid conflict, they cannot accomplish the task and undermine their relationship.

H4: To the extent that people use the strategy of aggression to avoid

conflict, they cannot accomplish the task and undermine their relationship.

To conclude, conflict avoidance is much more common in the East than in the West. It conveys the information that the differences should not be discussed openly and directly. However, it does not inevitably mean a simple agreement or accommodation; it is a multifaceted construct with opposite motives, leading to diverse responses. Like other conflict management styles, conflict avoiding can be appropriate in some situations, depending on what specific tactics the protagonists use. Outflanking and waiting are assumed to result in positive outcomes whereas conforming and aggression cause negative consequences.

Conflicts between Local Employees and Expatriate Managers in China

With the increasing importance of China market in the world economy, many international companies rush to China to explore more opportunities. However it is not easy for expatriate managers to get everything neatly done in a foreign country (Hitt, Lee and Yucel, 2002; Tjosvold, 1999; Tse, Francis and Walls, 1994; Tung, 1991). Due to cultural clashes and different norms, conflicts arise from time to time. For example, highly respecting the authorities, Chinese people accept their superior's unilateral decision making and quickly dismiss their Western partners' complaints about the lack of participation (Tjosvold, 1999).

Cultural Differences and Adjustment in Managing Conflict in Workplace

Researchers have concentrated on documenting cultural differences between Western and Chinese managers dealing with conflicts. Chinese managers prefer indirect ways and use more persuasive methods to solve conflicts with their subordinates

whereas Western managers prefer more direct and forcing styles to solve conflicts (Ding, 1997; Kirkbride, et al., 1991; Holt and DeVore, 2005; Tse, et. al., 1994). It is presumed that Chinese managers are concerned about personal relationships (*guanxi*) with their subordinates and avoid direct confronting their people to save other's face in conflict. Western superiors like to solve conflicts using their own experiences and training; they are more self-judged and pay less attention to the face of their subordinates (Smith and Bond, 1998). Expatriate managers often ignore their Chinese subordinates' need for saving the social face and can easily feel stymied and lose confidence in working well with the "sensitive" Chinese subordinates (Tjosvold, 1999). These cultural differences in conflict management styles make collaboration between Westerners and Chinese very taxing and demoralizing.

However, people with different cultures can continuously adjust their own behavior styles through their interaction (Rao and Hashimoto, 1996; Thomas and Ravlin, 1995; Tjosvold and Wong, 2004). For example, Japanese managers in Canada used more assertiveness to influence their Canadian subordinates than what they would do with the Japanese subordinates (Rao and Hashimoto, 1996). General cultural interaction adjustment, adjusting one's style to the local culture, was found to be positively related to the agreeableness and openness to new experiences (Huang, Chi, and Lawler, 2005). It is imperative for Western managers to know the Chinese values which help to understand their Chinese subordinates' avoiding behaviors in handling conflicts; what factors drive them to avoid the open discussion and what specific tactics they would take during the avoidance. Due to the inequality in authority and power, subordinates, other than superiors, are more likely to avoid assertive ways to handle conflicts (Brew and Cairns, 2004; Friedman et al. 2006). Studies are needed to explore conflict avoidance

from the perspectives of the employees in order to provide insights for managers, especially expatriate ones.

Subordinates' Avoiding Conflict with Superiors in Chinese Society

As commonly believed, protagonists with higher power are more likely to use strategies like forcing and confronting to deal with conflicts whereas those with lower power are to follow the others to avoid conflicts (Drory and Ritov, 1997; Bacharach and Lawer, 1981; Greenhalgh, 1987). Subordinates usually avoid conflict with their superiors who have more power and higher status. This perceived power difference is larger in Eastern countries such as China than in Western countries, that is, there is a higher tendency for the Chinese people to accept the uneven distribution of power and status and to obey the social hierarchy (Hofstede, 1980). The values to obey the social hierarchy and to respect people of higher status make Chinese employees more sensitive to managers' face and image and reluctant to oppose their decisions. Chinese people's intention to avoid conflicts becomes stronger when the other side is of higher status and authority (Ding, 1995; Friedman, et. al., 2006). Simply put, employees in China perceive a higher power distance between them and their superiors than employees in Western countries do, leading to their preference of indirect strategies to avoid confronting the superiors when there is a disagreement.

A few previous studies have tried to identify the situations in which people avoid conflicts. For example, it was found that people tended avoid conflicts with in-group members, that is, people avoid conflicts more often with those in closer relationship (Derlega, Cukur, Kuang, and Forsyth, 2002; Pearson and Stephan 1998). Other studies also supported this rationale by finding less avoidance between strangers than between

friends in China (Leung, 1988; Oetzel, et al, 2000). People with more relational intimacy are likely to avoid conflict, since they believe it can help avoid hurting others' feelings and preserve relational harmony (Oetzel, et al., 2000). However, other studies also indicated that even in China members could discuss their differences open-mindedly when they have already developed good relationships (Chen, Tjosvold, Huang, and Xu, 2007; Tjosvold, Morishima, and Belsheim, 1999; Tjosvold and Sun, 2001). Disputers with strong high quality relationship can trust each other, be more open-minded to the other's different opinions, and integrate their efforts for mutually beneficial solutions. This Chinese flexibility is consistent with our hypothesis—conflict avoidance is a multifaceted construct with diverse motives and actions.

Goal Interdependence and Conflict Avoidance

Cooperation and competition theory has been successfully adopted to study people's behaviors toward conflicts; however it has been seldom applied to understand people's avoiding conflict. It is believed that cooperative goals lead to open-minded discussion whereas competitive goals lead to narrow-minded interaction and avoidance in conflict (Tjosvold and Morishima, 1999; Tjosvold and Sun, 2001). However, people with cooperative goals might also avoid conflicts due to their concern with harmonious relationships. This is especially true in the collectivistic cultures, like China. As discussed before, conflict avoidance is actually complicated with diverse motives and behaviors, leading to different outcomes. Similar to the rationale on conflict, avoidance does not necessarily cause negative outcomes; it is how people avoid conflicts and what specific tactics they use that largely determine the results.

Though tolerating or accommodating a conflict at a minor cost is probably more

beneficial for the employees than running the risk of pursuing the conflict and disrupting the relationship (Putnam, and Wilson, 1982), employees still can be expected to take different strategies (Leung, 1997; Roloff and Ifert, 2000; Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). Based on the theory of goal interdependence, whether disputers conclude their goals are mainly cooperative or competitive affects their motives and responses to avoid conflict. Cooperative goals lead to the sincere desire for harmony enhancement and problem solving, whereas competitive goals result in instrumental avoidance. With harmony enhancement consideration, employees wait for appropriate opportunity to discuss with the supervisor and use indirect non-confrontational ways to solve the problem to preserve their superiors' authority. In instrumental avoidance, employees are mainly concerned about their own benefits. Though they pretend to agree in public, they might complain and gossip behind.

This study argues that employees' perceptions of their goal relationships with their managers affect their actions in conflict avoidance. It assumes that cooperative goals lead to more constructive approaches of waiting (wait for a better opportunity to discuss the conflict) and outflanking (work through the third party to resolve the conflict); while competitive goals lead to conforming (agree and comply with the other's decision to end the conflict) and aggression (take passive but subtle actions against the other). The last four hypotheses were developed as:

H5: To the extent that subordinates perceive cooperative goal interdependence, they use waiting to avoid conflicts with their superiors.

H6: To the extent that subordinates perceive cooperative goal interdependence, they use outflanking to avoid conflicts with their superiors.

H7: To the extent that subordinates perceive competitive goal

interdependence, they use conforming to avoid conflicts with their superiors.

H8: To the extent that subordinates perceive competitive goal interdependence, they use aggression to avoid conflicts with their superiors.

Rather than using the three types of goals (i.e., cooperative, competitive and independent goals) as identified in the social interdependence theory, this study tested the relationships between avoiding strategies and cooperative and competitive goals. Excluding the independent goals simplifies the tested model. Many previous studies on goal interdependence have also just focused on cooperative and competitive goals.

This study explores the interaction between Chinese employees and Western managers, and compares it with that between Chinese employees and local managers. Given the higher level of respect for authority in Chinese culture, hierarchical control in Chinese organizations was much stronger than in American organizations (Huang, Leonard, and Chen, 1997). As argued by Friedman, et al. (2006), Chinese people were expected to be more adaptive to the Western context than Americans to the Chinese context. It is easier for Chinese employees to learn to be more direct than the Western managers to adjust to be more indirect. If this is true, conflict avoidance occurs more often between Chinese employees with local employers than those with Western supervisors.

Summary

Conflict exists everywhere in our world and is popularly considered and defined as a win-lose, competitive activity, where the involved members' interests are thought incompatible. However, this concept is neither accurate nor comprehensive because it

ignores situation when people share common goals but have conflicts as they disagree on how to achieve the goals. This study adopts the definition of conflict as “incompatible activities, where one person is interfering, obstructing, or in other ways making the behavior of another less effective” (Alper, Tjosvold and Wong, 2000).

Studies already demonstrated the usefulness of conflict in brainstorming, effective decision making, innovation and other organizational issues (Alper, Tjosvold and Law, 1998; Chan, Lok and Xun, 2005; Cheu, Liu and Tjosvold, 2005; Chen and Tjosvold, 2002). Conflict is not always destructive; it is how people consider and approach conflict that largely determines the outcomes. Goal interdependence theory is therefore suitable to understand people’s conflict behaviors; people’s perceptions of their goal relationships influence their interactions with each other in conflict, and lead to different outcomes (Deutsch, 1973). Based on this theory, at least two alternative approaches, cooperative and competitive conflicts, can be identified. In a cooperative conflict, people construe their goals as largely compatible; one’s goal achievement helps others also achieve their goals. They open-mindedly discuss different ideas and integrate them for best solution. In a competitive conflict, members believe their goals are largely incompatible; one’s success makes others less likely to succeed. Consequently, people treat this conflict as a war, in which they try to earn their own benefits at the expense of others.

Though developed in the West, cooperation and competition theory is also applicable to the Eastern countries, such as China. Cooperative conflict has been found to be relative more constructive than competitive one. However, cooperative conflict sometimes is costly and inappropriate. There are other alternatives to deal with conflicts. A common approach to conflict in China is avoiding; people minimize open discussion

of their differences, especially when protagonists are of unequal power, like subordinate and superior. Few studies have specifically explored the phenomenon of conflict avoidance. Research on the dynamics of employees' avoiding conflict with their superiors is needed to help understand why employees avoid conflicts and what specific tactics they use.

Though normally less constructive than cooperative conflict characterized by open discussion, conflict avoidance is appropriate in some situations (Barsky and Wood, 2005; Rahim, 1983). Its popularity in China also partially suggests its effectiveness. Studies have shown that conflict avoiding is much more complicated than the common belief of simple avoidance and withdrawal; people can be pro-active rather than passively compliant (Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). Research further found that people might have opposite motives in conflict avoidance, leading to diverse tactics and responses (Leung, 1997, 1996). Inspired by the previous studies, four typical avoiding strategies are proposed in this study; they are conforming, waiting, outflanking, and aggression.

The theory of cooperation and competition, which has been documented effective to describe people's behaviors (cooperatively or competitively) toward conflicts, may be useful to predict people's responses in avoiding conflict. Specifically, we hypothesize that cooperative goals lead to more constructive approaches of outflanking and waiting whereas competitive goals lead to conforming and aggression.

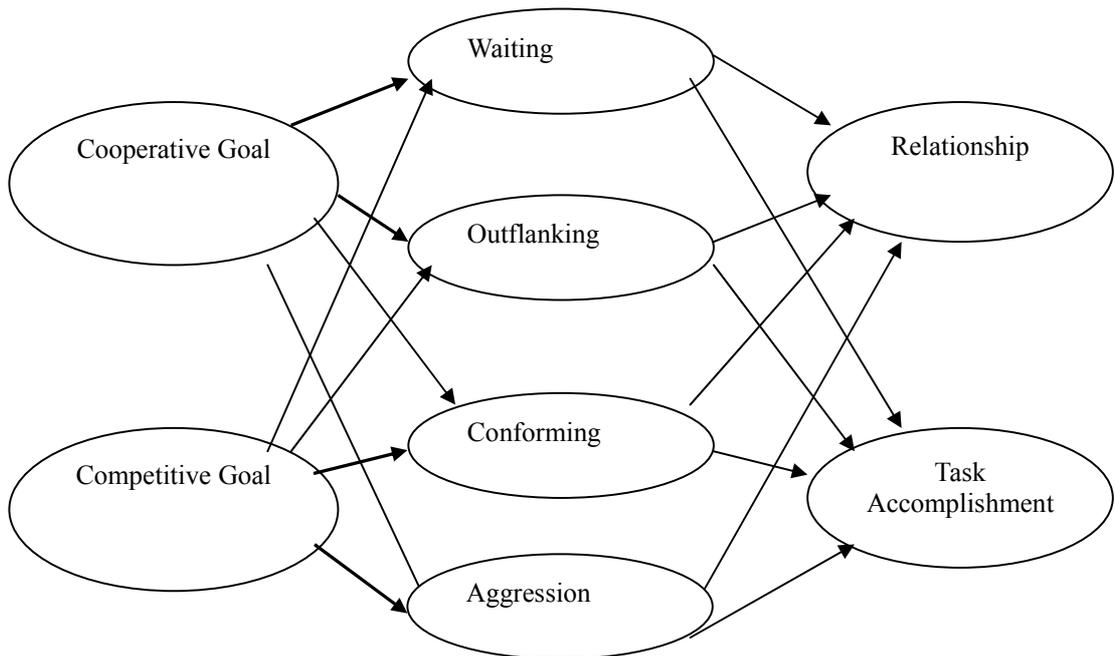
CHAPTER III

THE HYPOTHESES

Chapter II reviewed the previous studies on conflict and conflict avoidance. This chapter summarizes all the hypotheses that have been developed based on the literature review. It presents the hypothesized model followed by the explanation on each path (i.e., the eight separated hypotheses developed in this study).

Hypothesized Model

Figure 1 Hypothesized Structural Model in this Study



As shown in the figure above, the basic model to be tested is that goal interdependence affects avoiding strategies, and the strategies then lead to different

outcomes. In this model, cooperative and competitive goals are identified as antecedents to affect the outcomes of relationship and task accomplishment through the mediation of four different avoiding strategies. Eight specific hypotheses are listed below:

H1: To the extent that people use the strategy of waiting to avoid conflict, they accomplish the task and strengthen their relationship.

H2: To the extent that people use the strategy of outflanking to avoid conflict, they accomplish the task and strengthen their relationship.

H3: To the extent that people use the strategy of conforming to avoid conflict, they cannot accomplish the task and undermine their relationship.

H4: To the extent that people use the strategy of aggression to avoid conflict, they cannot accomplish the task and undermine their relationship.

H5: To the extent that subordinates perceive cooperative goal interdependence, they use waiting to avoid conflicts with their superiors.

H6: To the extent that subordinates perceive cooperative goal interdependence, they use outflanking to avoid conflicts with their superiors.

H7: To the extent that subordinates perceive competitive goal interdependence, they use conforming to avoid conflicts with their superiors.

H8: To the extent that subordinates perceive competitive goal interdependence, they use aggression to avoid conflicts with their superiors.

Variables of the Model

This study proposes that employees' perceptions of their goal relationships with their managers affect their actions toward conflict avoidance, and then the specific actions determine the outcomes. There are eight variables in the hypothesized model

with two antecedent variables, four mediators and two outcomes. All the variables are measured in 7 point Likert-type scales.

This section defines each variable in the model (Figure 1):

Cooperative goals are measured by the extent the interviewees conceive their goals with others' as consistent and positively related, etc.

Competitive goals are measured by the extent the interviewees construe their goals with others' as incompatible and negatively related, etc.

Waiting: Employees reserve talking about the conflict immediately but choose to wait for a better opportunity to discuss the conflict with their managers.

Outflanking: Instead of direct arguing with the boss, employees work through a third party, either an individual or an association, to get the conflict solved.

Conforming: Employees follow their managers' decisions to avoid potential conflict, even when they actually do not like or agree on the superiors' ideas.

Aggression: Employees do not express directly their differences and complaints about the superiors' decisions, but take subtle and passive actions against the boss, such as avoiding seeing the boss.

Relationship is measured by the effect of the interaction between the subordinate and his/her superior on their relationship afterwards.

Task accomplishment is measured by the efficiency for the participants to solve the problem and accomplish the task due to their interaction.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter III summarized the hypotheses in this study and briefly described the tested model. This chapter examines the research methodology for testing these hypotheses. It introduces the sampling, interview schedule, and the data analyses respectively.

Participants

One hundred and thirty-two Chinese employees who worked for either local or Western managers in Beijing and Hong Kong were recruited in our interview study. The Western managers were those who came from the Western countries and at that time working in Beijing or Hong Kong. Western countries are normally considered as those places having an individualistic national culture, such as most northern and western regions in Europe and North America (Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1995). A total of 61 interviewees in our study were working for Westerners, in which 28 (45.9%) were Americans, 13 (21.3%) were British, 9 (14.8%) Australians, and the other 11 (18.0%) were from Germany, France, Canada, Sweden, etc.

Seventy interviews were done in Beijing and sixty-two in Hong Kong. Among the 70 participants from Beijing, 31 worked for the foreign superiors, the remaining 39 were working for local managers. Among the 62 interviewees in Hong Kong, 30 worked for foreigners and the other 32 worked for local employers. Regarding gender, males accounted for 65.2% (86) and female 34% (46). Regarding the highest educational qualifications obtained, 18.9% (25) had high school degrees, 15.2% (20) had college

degrees, 43.2% (57) had university degrees and 22.7% (30) had graduate degrees. Regarding to the age, 13.6% (18) were below 25, 31.1% (41) between 25 and 30, 27.3% (36) were at their thirties, 20.5% (27) at forties, and the rest 7.6% (10) were at the age of fifties or above. As for occupation, 5.3% (7) worked for governments, 32.6% (43) worked in private local firms, 9.8% (13) for state-owned companies, 41.7% (55) for foreign invested companies, 3.8% (5) for joint venture, and the remaining 6.8% (9) worked in social institutes and other organizations.

More detailed descriptions for the interviewees in each of the four different groups (Beijing/Hong Kong * Local/Western) are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristic for the Interviewees

Group Category	Gender		Age		Education		Position		Work Year	
	1=male	2=female	1= below 25	2=25-30	1=high school or below	2=college	1=employee	2=professional	1=less than 1 year	2=1-3 years
Beijing * Local Superior (39)			3= 30-40	4=40-50	3=university	4= graduate school	3=manager		3= 3-5 years	4= 5-10 years
			5=above 50						5= over 10 years	
	1:	22	1: 7	2: 15	1: 3	2: 8	1: 17	2: 8	1: 6	2: 13
	2:	17	3: 12	4: 3	3: 23	4: 5	3: 14		3: 7	4: 5
			5: 2						5: 8	
Hong Kong * Local Superior (32)	1:	20	1: 4	2: 8	1: 14	2: 5	1: 15	2: 1	1: 4	2: 7
	2:	12	3: 3	4: 12	3: 6	4: 7	3: 16		3: 5	4: 3
			5: 5						5: 13	
Beijing * Western Superior (31)	1:	22	1: 6	2: 13	1: 0	2: 5	1: 15	2: 7	1: 10	2: 13
	2:	9	3: 12	4: 0	3: 12	4: 4	3: 9		3: 3	4: 5
			5: 0						5: 0	
Hong Kong * Western Superior (30)	1:	22	1: 1	2: 5	1: 8	2: 2	1: 17	2: 8	1: 5	2: 7
	2:	8	3: 9	4: 12	3: 16	4: 4	3: 14		3: 3	4: 4
			5: 3						5: 11	

As an M. Phil. thesis, I believed it would be valuable for me to conduct all the interviews. The challenging, tough job was divided into three phases. First I did the pre-test in Hong Kong in May 2006, to make sure the questions designed in the interview are understandable and practical. Eleven of my friends who worked in Hong Kong participated in the pre-test. After obtaining their suggestions and refining the questionnaire, I went to Beijing to collect data in the summer of 2006. It took two months to carry out the interviews. The 70 interviewees were recruited through my personal network, such as with the help of my former university classmates, my relatives' colleagues and other friends who worked and lived in Beijing. The last phase was interviewing employees who worked in Hong Kong. This process lasted from September 2006 until March 2007. Most of the interviewees were recruited through the help of my former classmates in an EMBA course, who accepted my interviews and introduced me to their friends and colleagues.

Interview Schedule

Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to develop the interview structure, in which interviewees were first asked to describe a story in which they avoided a conflict with their superiors. After that they were asked to rate specific questions based on the recalled incidents on 7-point Likert-type scales. Measures included goal interdependence, conflict avoiding and two outcomes of relationship and task accomplishment. Open questions would be introduced through the interviews to clarify the subjects' true meaning if necessary.

As the interview schedule was originally written in English, three bi-lingual researchers translated it into Chinese. To ensure the conceptual consistency, the

questionnaire was back-translated into English to check for possible deviation (Brislin, 1970). Interviewees were assured that their responses would be kept totally confidential.

Critical Incident Technique

The critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) was used to develop the interview structure. CIT has been considered as a particularly useful method when studying complex interpersonal phenomenon (Walker and Truly, 1992). This method is thought to help moderate errors when persons are asked to summarize across many incidents as required by most surveys (Schwartz, 1999).

Interviewees were informed that the objective of the study was to investigate how employees in China avoided conflicts with their superiors. Participants were asked to describe a recent incident when they were avoiding conflicts with their superiors, including the settings, what occurred, the reason and the consequences. They were told that the conflict mentioned can be related to their work or not and the results of this event can be either constructive or destructive. Interviewees were reminded to describe a story on avoiding conflict, where he/she tried to avoid open-minded discussing and direct arguing different opinions. The interviewee might delay the discussion or just give up his/her own positions to end the conflict. Each interviewee reported one incident for a total of 132 cases.

After describing the incident in detail, interviewees rated on specific scales. All scales were based on the recalled incident and used 7-point Likert-type scale (from 1=little to 7=A great deal). The scales were listed below and all items in the measurement can be found in Appendix I.

Goal Interdependence

Based on Deutsch's (1949, 1973) cooperation and competition theory, two items taken from Alper, Tjosvold and Law (1998) indicated how the interviewee construed the relationship between his/her goals and those of the superior during the incident. The item, "How much would your reaching your objectives help the other person reach his or her objectives", measured the extent to which interviewees assumed a cooperative relationship between their own goals and those of others, i.e., cooperative goals. The item, "How much would your accomplishing your objectives interfere with his or her objectives" measured competitive goals. Cooperative and competitive goal interdependence were each measured with one item. Participants are often more reluctant to answer similar questions in an interview than in a survey. As long as they understand the question well, one item should provide a valid measure.

Conflict Avoiding

A scale for drawing a typology of people's conflict avoiding behaviors was developed from previous studies (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, and Takai, 2000; Rahim, 1983; Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). Seventeen items were designed to describe the diverse individual actions in avoiding conflicts, such as conforming, turning to a third party, complaining, discussing privately and so on. Sample items are "I followed my supervisor's decision although I did not agree with it", "I spoke to another person who would then influence my supervisor to change his idea", "I said bad things about my supervisor behind his/her back" and alike.

It assumes that there are four factors (strategies) underline the diverse responses,

named waiting (wait for a better opportunity to discuss the conflict), outflanking (work through the third party to resolve the conflict), conforming (agree and comply with the other's decision to end the conflict), and aggression (take passive but subtle actions against the other). Exploratory factor analysis then would be applied to extract these factors.

Relationship

A four-item scale was developed to measure the extent that the interviewee improved his/her relationship with the superior after the interaction. It has a Cronbach alpha reliability of .95. A sample item is "To what extent did this interaction strengthen your relationship with the other person".

Task Accomplishment

This scale is to measure the extent that their interaction with others helped solve the current problem effectively and efficiently. This 3-item scale has a Cronbach alpha reliability of .92. A sample item is "how efficiently did you and your supervisor accomplish the task because of this interaction".

Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were adopted in this study. For the quantitative data based on the respondents' ratings on the scales, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was first applied to extract several underlying factors to categorize the diverse responses during conflict avoidance. Correlation analysis was used to have initial test of the relationships among the variables, i.e., how the goal interdependence

related with different types of avoiding, and how different avoiding strategies related to the outcomes. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was adopted to further understand the causal relationships among goal interdependence, conflict avoidance, and the outcome variables. For the qualitative data from the participants' narrative accounts on those critical incidents, we categorized and summarized them to understand what conditions led to conflict avoidance in workplace. Specific case studies were introduced for better understanding the specific avoiding strategies.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

To simplify participants' various responses toward avoiding, we conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to extract the common factors underline the diverse behaviors. The extraction method used here is Principle Component Analysis and the rotation method is Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Three rounds of EFA were conducted before obtaining the final result.

The original 17 items were included in the first-round EFA analysis, and five factors were extracted at the first round. The result is shown in Table 2.1. Factor loadings lower than .35 were masked in the table.

Table 2.1 First-round EFA for Different Avoiding Responses

Item No.	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Act14	.870				
Act17	.747				
Act3	.696				
Act15	.631				
Act11	.611				
Act13	.522		.466		
Act8		.848			
Act7		.785			
Act1		.764			
Act9		.757			
Act6			.816		
Act5			.719		
Act10			.621		-.373
Act12				.881	
Act16				.826	
Act2				.581	
Act4					.828

Note:

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

As there was actually only one item with a loading above 0.4 on the fifth factor, we therefore reduced the number of factors into four, and ran the EFA again using the same methods mentioned above. As shown in Table 2.2, quite a clear loading pattern emerged on four factors.

Table 2.2 Second-round EFA for Different Avoiding Responses

Item No.	Components			
	1	2	3	4
Act14	.819			
Act3	.770			
Act15	.663			
Act17	.593			.358
Act4	.562		-.374	
Act13	.555		.437	
Act8		.800		
Act7		.791		
Act1		.781		
Act9		.742		
Act10			.768	
Act5			.698	
Act6			.579	
Act11	.442		.531	
Act12				.872
Act16				.839
Act2				.584

Note:

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Since two items (Act 13 and Act 11) had cross loadings higher than .40, they were deleted, and we ran the factor analysis once more. Table 2.3 showed the result, where four distinguished factors were found underlying the diverse avoiding behaviors.

Table 2.3 Third-round EFA for Different Avoiding Responses

Items in the Scale	Four Factors			
	outflanking	conforming	waiting	aggression
Act14 through an outside party	.830			
Act3 speak to another influential person	.783			
Act15 turn to my supervisor's boss	.683			
Act17 turned to our friend	.630			
Act4 indirectly identify boss's drawbacks	.541			
Act8 agree with my supervisor		.810		
Act7 give up opposing position		.793		
Act1 follow supervisor's decision		.778		
Act9 accept all his words		.761		
Act12 waited until two persons			.882	
Act16 wait for a better opportunity			.832	
Act2 privately deal with problems			.587	
Act10 make my supervisor feel guilty				.772
Act5 try not to see my supervisor				.709
Act6 I left the scene				.661

Note:

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Complete description of each item is presented in Appendix I

The results were consistent with our hypotheses. Based on the previous studies, we labeled these four factors as outflanking (work through the third party to resolve the conflict), conforming (agree and comply with the other's decision to end the conflict), waiting (wait for a better opportunity to discuss the conflict), and aggression (take passive but subtle actions against the other). Consequently, the scale of avoiding was

divided into four sub-scales with Cronbach alpha reliabilities of .77 (5 items), .82 (4 items), .70 (3 items), and .70 (3 items) respectively. Though not high, the reliabilities were acceptable.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to validate that the four strategies are distinct variables. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

	d.f.	Model χ^2	$\Delta\chi^2$	NNFI	CFI	RMSEA
Baseline 4-factor Model (M0)	84	133.00		.90	.92	.07
Combined outflanking and aggression (M1)	87	221.61	88.61	.81	.84	.11
Combined conforming and aggression (M2)	87	222.01	89.01	.81	.84	.11
Combined waiting and outflanking (M3)	87	214.361	81.361	.80	.84	.11
2-factor Model (M4)	89	304.66	171.66	.71	.76	.13
One factor solution (M5)	90	555.68	422.68	.49	.56	.20

Note:

4-factor Model (M0) includes outflanking, conforming, waiting and aggression.

The 3-factor Models are developed based on the correlations among the four strategies

In 2-factor Model (M4), conforming and aggression are combined into one factor, and waiting and outflanking are combined into the other factor.

N of cases =132

Results of the confirmatory factor analysis (Table 3) indicated a good fit between our proposed 4-factor measurement model (Model M0) and the data, with a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and a Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) of .92 and .90, respectively. The 4-factor measurement model was then compared to three different 3-factor models, a 2-factor model, and the one-factor solution model. In order to make these comparisons, each of the 3-factor models (M1, M2, and M3) was formed by merging two of the four factors into one aggregate factor, and the 2-factor model (M4) was formed by merging each two factors into one aggregate factor. These four alternative models were developed based on the correlations among the four variables to test the conceptual distinctiveness of the four measures. Finally, all the models were compared to the one-factor solution model (M5).

As shown in Table 3, the model chi-squares of five alternative models were significantly greater than that of the proposed 4-factor model (M0) and the fit index scores of the alternative models were also lower. Therefore, we conclude that there are four distinct measures of avoiding strategies and these four variables are used in later analyses.

Hypotheses Testing

Multivariate statistics were conducted to see whether the avoiding pattern for the subordinates working for local managers would be different from those who worked for the Western managers. Another factor included in the multivariate statistics was the locating city (i.e., Hong Kong or Beijing). Correlational analysis was then performed for initial hypothesis testing. Structural equation modelling was used through the LISREL

8.70 to examine the underlying causal relationships among goal interdependence (i.e., cooperative or competitive goals), different avoiding strategies (i.e., outflanking, conforming, waiting, and aggression), and outcomes (i.e., relationship and task accomplishment). In the model, goal relationships were specified as exogenous variables that predicted the outcomes by the mediation of different avoiding strategies (see in Figure 1).

A nested model test commonly adopted in causal model analysis was used to compare the hypothesized model (fully mediated model) with two other alternatives, the non-mediated model and the partially mediated model. In the non-mediated model, goal relationships impact outcomes directly, without causal relationships between avoiding behavior and the outcomes. The partially mediated model implies that goal relationships influence conflict avoidance and outcomes, and conflict avoidance also has effect on the outcome variables.

Summary

One hundred and thirty-two Chinese employees who worked for either local or western managers were interviewed in Beijing and Hong Kong from May 2006 to March 2007. Interviewees were first asked to describe in detail an incident when they avoided conflict with their superiors, and then rated specific questions on 7-point Likert-type scale based on the recalled incidents. Scales included goal interdependence, conflict avoiding behavior and two outcomes of relationship and task accomplishment.

Qualitative and quantitative analyses were combined to understand subordinates' conflict avoiding better. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) explored four strategies under the diverse avoiding responses, which were titled as outflanking, conforming, waiting

and aggression. CFA results validated the distinctiveness of the four avoiding strategies. Correlational analysis initially tested the relationships among all variables in the hypothesized model. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was then adopted to explore the causal relationships among goal interdependence, conflict avoiding strategies, and the outcomes. The critical incidents were categorized and summarized to understand the conditions that led to conflict avoiding in workplace. Specific cases were introduced to fully understand the four avoiding strategies.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

The previous chapter described the methods to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data obtained. This chapter examines the empirical results of the data analyses. Specifically, it discusses the multivariate statistic results, correlational findings, structural equation modeling results, and presents the cases.

Local vs. Western Superior: Multivariate Statistics

Multivariate statistics was used to test the differences of the avoiding strategies between employees who worked for local employers and those working for Western managers, either in Hong Kong or in Beijing. The effects of two situational factors of the superior's national culture and the interviewees' working city were examined to see whether cultural background significantly affected subordinates' using different avoiding strategies (i.e., conforming, outflanking, waiting and aggression). The results (Table 4) indicated that there were insignificant main effects of these two culture-related factors on employees' avoiding strategies. Only the interaction effect of the two factors on the outflanking strategy was significant.

Given a strong hierarchical control in Chinese organizations (Huang, Leonard, and Chen, 1997) and the relative ease for Chinese to learn to be more direct (Friedman, et. al., 2006), we may assume Chinese employees with Western superiors avoid conflict less than those with local supervisors. Differences in their avoiding patterns (i.e., preferred strategies) might be expected due to the national and regional cultures. However, the results above did not find significant differences in the subordinates'

conflict avoiding strategies caused by the two cultural factors. One possible reason is that the influence of culture on people's behaviors may not be direct and expatriate managers are able to adapt to the local culture (Rao and Hashimoto, 1996).

Table 4 Effects of National and Regional Cultures on Avoiding Strategy

Culture	Avoiding Strategy	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Nation	Outflanking	1	.808	.442	.508
	Conforming	1	.535	.229	.633
	Waiting	1	4.879	1.957	.164
	Aggression	1	4.011	2.040	.156
City	Outflanking	1	1.615	.883	.349
	Conforming	1	4.971	2.126	.147
	Waiting	1	.749	.301	.585
	Aggression	1	2.677	1.361	.245
Nation * City	Outflanking	1	11.215	6.133	.015
	Conforming	1	.039	.017	.898
	Waiting	1	6.220	2.495	.117
	Aggression	1	4.770	2.426	.122

Strategies and Outcomes: Correlational Findings

The correlations (see Table 5) lent initial support to our first two hypotheses (H1 and H2) that waiting and outflanking lead to constructive outcomes. Specifically, waiting was significantly positively related with relationship and task accomplishment ($r = .45, p < .01$; $r = .44, p < .01$); outflanking was also significantly positively related with relationship and task accomplishment ($r = .28, p < .01$; $r = .32, p < .01$). Though not significant, the correlations between the other two avoiding styles, conforming and aggression, and the outcomes were all negative (Table 3), partially supporting our next two hypotheses (H3 and H4) that conforming and aggression lead to destructive outcomes.

For the last four hypotheses that cooperative goals lead to waiting (H5) and outflanking (H6) while competitive goals lead to conforming (H7) and aggression (H8), the correlational results did not lend much support since most of the correlations were not statistically significant. Only the correlation between cooperative goals and waiting was found significantly positive ($r = .20, p < .05$). The implications of these findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

Table 5 Correlations among Variables

	Mean	Std. D.	Coop	Comp	Outfl	Conf	Wait	Aggr	Rela	Prod
Coop	4.79	1.89	1							
Comp	3.18	1.95	-.42**	1						
Outflank	3.05	1.37	.12	-.07	(.77)					
Conform	3.90	1.53	-.08	.06	.05	(.82)				
Wait	4.17	1.59	.20*	-.03	.31**	.09	(.70)			
Aggress	2.47	1.42	.01	.06	.36**	.34**	.16	(.70)		
Relation	3.99	1.65	.23**	-.02	.28**	-.15	.45**	-.06	(.95)	
Product	4.57	1.54	.37**	-.11	.32**	-.07	.44**	-.09	.65**	(.92)

Note:

N=132

Values in bracket are reliability (coefficient alpha) estimates.

**p<.01; *p<.05.

Strategies and Outcomes: Structural Equation Findings

Structural equation modeling was used to test the causal relationships among goal interdependence, avoiding strategies and outcomes. Two alternative models, the partially mediated and the non-mediated models, were compared with the fully mediated model (i.e., the hypothesized model). Table 6 shows the fit indices for the three competing models. The partially mediated models provided better fit to data than the non-mediated model, χ^2 difference (8) = 63.12, $p < .01$, indicating the omission of parameters for the mediating effects of different avoiding styles on outcomes significantly deteriorated the model fit to the data. However, the inclusion of the parameters for the direct effect from exogenous variables to outcomes did not improve the model fit significantly, with the

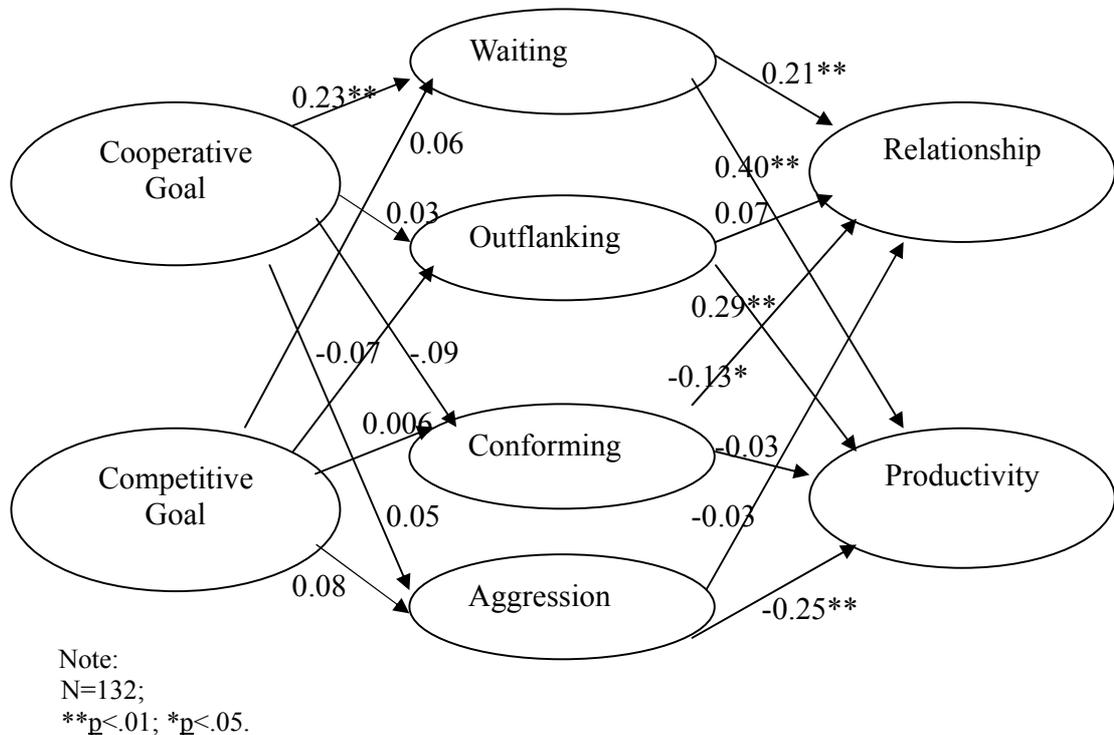
NNFI, CFI and the CFI nearly remaining the same. The Chi-square was improved a little bit, χ^2 difference (4) = 19.07, $p < .05$, which was marginally significant (the critical value for significant χ^2 difference is 3.84). The partially mediated model did not much outperform the fully mediated model in data fit. Thus, the fully mediated model was accepted because it is parsimonious while the partially mediated model was less meaningful. Another reason for preferring to the fully mediated model is based on our theory. Goal interdependence affects people's interactions and then their interactions lead to different consequences.

Table 6 Results of the Nested Model Analyses

	Chi-square	df	$\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df$	NNFI	CFI	RMSEA
1. partially mediated	393.93	226		.92	.93	.075
2. non-mediated	457.05	234	7.89	.90	.92	.085
3. fully mediated	413.00	230	4.87	.92	.93	.078

The fit statistics also supported the utility of the hypothesized model (see Table 6). With a χ^2 of 413.00 (d.f.= 230), a non-normed fit index (NNFI) of .92 and comparative fit index (CFI) of .99, the model was by convention considered a good fit with the data.

Figure 2 Path Estimates for the Hypothesized Structural Model



Path coefficients of the accepted model explored the findings more specifically (Figure 2). Cooperative goals contributed to waiting ($\beta=.23$, $p < .01$). However, contrary to the hypothesis, cooperative goals did not significantly affect the outflanking ($\beta=.03$, ns). Also competitive goals were not significantly related to conforming and aggression ($\beta=.006$, ns; $\beta=.08$, ns). However, waiting significantly led to improved relationship and better task accomplishment ($\beta=.21$, $p < .01$; $\beta=.40$, $p < .01$); and outflanking contributed to task accomplishment ($\beta=.29$, $p < .01$). Conforming led to damaged relationships ($\beta=-.13$, $p < .05$), and aggression negatively influenced task accomplishment ($\beta=-.25$, $p < .01$).

Generally, findings on path coefficients were consistent with the correlational findings and provided reasonably good support for the study's hypotheses. The next section will discuss four specific cases in which participants chose different strategy to handle the conflict as they avoided.

Illustrative Cases

This section first presents four cases representing the four avoiding strategies; they are outflanking, waiting, conforming and aggression.

Actually, we found these four styles were not fully separated; they were indeed often used in combination (Van de Vliert, Euwema, and Huisman, 1995). For example, aggressive tactics are often used while people are following their supervisors' decisions without real agreement in mind. Also participants might turn to a third party to solve the conflict when they are seeking for a better opportunity for discussion. The cases presented here illustrate the four styles of people's avoiding behaviour and suggest how the perceived goal interdependence affects the interviewees' avoiding strategies, and then how these strategies lead to different outcomes.

Conforming

A middle manager in a large energy company in Beijing told a story in which he avoided conflict with his immediate supervisor. Weeks before the interview, the manager was responsible for composing a report for the State Bureau of Quality Supervision. When the report was first given to his superior for comments and proof, he was required to put in some issues on their recent projects, especially some problems and disadvantages they found in this industry. The manager believed that it would

generate negative effects on their own company as well as other institutes related to this industry. However, his supervisor insisted on reflecting these problems in order to let the Bureau be aware of the superiority of their company and what they had done to address these questions. Considering the authority of his superior as well as conflicts between his direct boss and other senior managers, he did not argue any more and followed his superior's opinions. He emphasized that his boss concerned about his own interest even at the expense of their company's benefits. Consequently, exactly as what the manager predicted, this report caught serious attention from the Bureau, who took an action soon after the submission of the report. The work load of the energy company has greatly increased to further keep its reliability and customer responsibility. Particularly, this report also made the business in related areas more difficult due to some new rules and regulars addressed by the government.

Outflanking

A male financial advisor in an insurance company talked about an incident in which he worked through his boss's friend to help his colleague get back her deserved bonus. This happened several weeks ago when a co-worker in his company disclosed a conflict between her and their supervisor, the center director. She thus suffered a discount of bonus due to that conflict. With sympathy for the colleague's unfair treatment, the advisor decided to help her to get back her deserved bonus. To gather more information about this conflict and to avoid a direct confrontation with the director, the advisor pretended carelessly to mention this conflict in an occasion when he was having a drink with his manager. Then perceiving the sensitiveness of this topic to his director, he decided to turn to another center director to solve the problem. Instead of

directly discussing the problem with his own superior, the advisor presented the situation to another director and implied that his superior might suffer a decrease in his authority and trust if the problem was not appropriately solved, and the spirit of other employees would be affected. As the advisor expected, the other director talked this problem with his superior, who finally recognized the potential risks and was persuaded to make up for it. Two weeks later, his colleague, was delighted to tell the advisor that she got her bonus back.

Waiting

An editor who worked for a psychology magazine in Beijing negotiated with the chief editor on the selection of a manuscript a month before the interview. The procedure for the selecting the manuscripts in her magazine is like this, individual editors select and submit several manuscripts to the chief editor, who then makes the final decision on whether these selected manuscripts will be published in their magazine. It is usual that the chief editor often rejects preferred articles and the editors follow the chief editor's decision. But the editor was so fond of this article that she insisted on publishing it in their magazine though it was rejected by the chief editor who thought the story was somewhat fictitious. Recognizing the autocratic management style of her superior, she decided to wait for a better chance to discuss this article. Meanwhile, she was trying to obtain support from her co-workers and gather more information from the perspectives of their readers. One week later, when they were holding a party for celebrating the good sales record of their magazine, the editor mentioned this article again to her superior in an informal manner. With agreement from other colleagues and some evidence from the readers, the editor successfully persuaded the chief editor to take this article, which

turned out to be favored by the readers. The editor thus became more confident in her insight as well as capability of handling similar conflicts with her superior.

Aggression

A female vice director in a financial service firm in Hong Kong described an occasion when she found difficulties to work with her new superior. Two months before our interview, she was assigned to a new department with the supervision of her current manager. Though they had known each other for long, it was the first time for them to work together as subordinate and superior, resulting in many conflicts on how to accomplish the tasks. Several weeks later, she was required to hand in her superior a financial plan, though she had no experience in how to do it. The task seemed even more impossible as no information or materials were provided for her to write such a plan. She felt extremely frustrated when her boss never gave her any opportunity to discuss with him as he was easily irritated by her inexperience. Angry but helpless with the belief that the superior was only seeking chances to criticize her, the interviewee gave up working on the plan and prepared to be blamed or even punished by her boss. She pretended to forget the plan and avoided talking with her boss in case he would mention the plan. She also said that she would not begin to work on this plan until an exact deadline was set by her boss. After this event, she characterized her boss as critical, petty and hard to get along with, and complained about him to her co-workers and friends.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

This chapter provides an overview of the study's results and then discusses important findings. Specifically, the discussion considers issues on the different avoiding strategies, the relationship between goal interdependence and avoiding behavior, and the influence of cultural norms on conflict resolution. Then it describes the limitations and practical implications.

Summary of the Results

This study identified four types of conflict avoiding, labeled as waiting, outflanking, conforming, and aggression. Multivariate statistics did not find significant differences in subordinates' avoiding strategies due to the national culture of their superiors (local or Western managers) or their workplace (Hong Kong or Beijing).

The correlations largely supported the hypotheses by indicating that waiting and outflanking were both significantly positively correlated with constructive outcomes. Structural equation modeling was further used to test the relationships among goal interdependences, avoiding styles and the outcomes. With acceptable model indices, the hypothesized model was conventionally considered as good fit with the data.

The path coefficients of the accepted model concurred with the correlational results. Cooperative goals significantly contributed to waiting, which then resulted in improved relationship and effective task accomplishment. Outflanking led to task accomplishment but had insignificant effect on relationship. On the other side, aggression had significant negative influence on task accomplishment. Surprisingly,

conforming damaged rather than maintained good personal relationships between the protagonists.

Strategies to Avoid Conflict

Seventeen items to describe Chinese subordinates' responses and tactics to avoid conflict were collected from the established measurements or qualitative descriptions in previous studies (Friedman, et. al., 2006; Oetzel, et. al., 2000; Rahim, 1983; Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). Four factors were extracted in the exploratory factor analyses (EFA); they were labeled as conforming, outflanking, waiting, and aggression. The following section discusses these four strategies in details.

Conforming

Conforming is the most familiar format to avoid conflict and often thought as the only strategy in conflict avoidance. Employees, with less power, are inclined to follow their superiors' decisions by giving up their different positions. They agree with their supervisors and accept their plans to end or prevent the conflict. For example, a civil officer described a conflict when he was required to sacrifice his holiday for a coming event. He dared not argue with his supervisor though he was very reluctant to perform the duty.

Previous studies have concluded that employees tend to use accommodating to avoid conflict (Putnam, and Wilson, 1982). This is particularly true in China, where the acceptance of social hierarchy leads to deference to authorities (Hofstede, 1980). A recent study found that Chinese people were more sensitive to hierarchy so that they avoided conflict more often when the other party was of higher status (Friedman, Chi

and Liu, 2006). This study provides further evidence that Chinese employees often avoid arguments and obey their superiors' decisions even when they do not agree and accept internally.

Subordinates' complete following their supervisor was found to harm effective decision-making (Barney, 1991; Lawler, 1999; Pun, et al., 2001). Members' capability and willingness to participate in organizational decision making are now increasingly recognized as a company's important competitive advantage in a rapidly changing environment (Pun, et al., 2001).

More surprisingly, this study found conforming undermines relationships rather than maintains them. This result challenges the conventional theorizing that Chinese avoid conflicts to protect their relationships (Bond and Lee, 1981; Huang, 1987, 2000). Rather than maintain the relationships, conforming might intensify the psychological stress due to unresolved issues and pent-up feelings, leading to complaints and low quality relationships. A communication study indicated that people's intention to disagree was stronger when they avoided conflicts at the beginning (Bonito and Sanders, 2002). Employees might feel even more frustrated and unsatisfied when avoiding expressing their different ideas. The negative effect of conforming on relationship indicates that an interactive open discussion on conflict is critical and helpful for building good relationships between protagonists (Tjosvold, Hui and Sun, 2000).

Outflanking

Consistent with the study conducted by Tjosvold and Sun (2002), this study also identified the strategy of outflanking. Rather than simply follow the superiors' decisions, employees who avoid conflicts can be pro-active through a powerful third party to solve

the problem (Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). For example, the subordinate can turn to his colleague or the labor union to get the deserved benefits while avoiding directly confronting his superior.

Previous studies have identified various of indirect strategies for the Chinese to deal with conflict, such as indirect language, middlemen, face-saving plots, a long-range view, flexibility, and so on (Bond and Huang, 1986). This study also found that employees often used indirect ways in conflict, like talking with another friend, indirectly pointing out the defects in their supervisors' viewpoints and so on. This indirect strategy was identified as outflanking, a pro-active approach toward conflict to get ideas and plans accomplished (Tjosvold and Sun, 2002).

Outflanking was found useful for problem solving. But contrary to our hypotheses, the path coefficient from outflanking to relationship was insignificant. Thus outflanking can help get things done, but might not build mutual relationships. This suggests that similar to conflict avoidance generally, outflanking is also a coin of two sides with at least two different underlying motives: self-interest concern and mutual relationship concern (Leung, 1996; 1997). When employees are only concerned with their own benefits, they try to obtain their own ends while ignoring the interests and needs of their superiors, leading to low quality relationships. Previous studies have pointed out that outflanking is frequently used in Asian countries to solve conflict as it helps avoid direct confrontation with the other party, especially when the other is of higher authority (Kozan and Ergin, 1999; Tinsley and Brett, 2001). This study implies that outflanking can be productive when appropriately used, but can harm mutual relationships when inappropriately managed. Who you turn to should be thought over before action. For example, turning to your superior's boss is often not an effective way

since your immediate supervisor will consider this as a very serious confrontation and embarrassment, leading to mistrust and ineffective relationship.

Waiting

Waiting is a strategy that protagonists choose not to take any immediate actions toward the conflict but to wait for a better opportunity to discuss it with the other. As in Case 3 presented in Chapter IV, the editor did not immediately argue with her superior, but chose to gather more evidence and support from other colleagues before finding a better occasion to discuss the conflict. In this study, three items were highly allocated in this strategy; they are “waiting until when there are only two persons”, “waiting for a better opportunity to discuss the conflict”, and “privately preparing for the next discussion”.

No previous research has emphasized waiting as a strategy to avoid conflict, though “a cooling period” has long been believed effective to deal with conflicts when the two parties are in intense emotion (Rahim, 1992, 2001). This study empirically supports the argument that people sometimes need time to calm down and consider the issues more carefully in controversies. Rather than harshly confront the other party’s positions, which might escalate the conflict, it is wise to take time to explore more perspectives and find a suitable way to solve the problem.

The strategy of waiting was found to contribute to both effective task accomplishment and strengthened mutual relationships. This result suggests that employees using the strategy of waiting are trying to accomplish their own goals while minimizing the cost for the others. They typically pay attention to the others’ needs and want to maintain an effective relationship. It implies that thinking over to understand the

other's positions fully, trying to collect more supporting information, and selecting an appropriate occasion are effective approaches to communicate differences and solve the conflict.

Aggression

The fourth strategy identified in this study is aggression. Frequently, people who avoid conflicts act negatively through subtle and not so subtle ways. For example, they might avoid meeting each other or leave the scene during the conflicts, or adopt other wispy tactics to make the other feel guilty. Some studies named this kind of behavior as passive aggression, in which the expression of the aggression is not pro-active and subtle (Murphy, 2005). Ting-Toomey, Oetzel and Yee-Jung (2001) labeled the strategy of using passive aggressive, indirect responses to threaten the image of another person as "neglect".

Studies have pointed out that people adopt a variety of behaviors to negotiate face (the claimed sense of positive image in social interaction) during conflicts, ranging from politeness to aggression (Oetzel, et. al., 2000; Ting-Toomey, 1988). This study thus provides evidences that protagonists often behave aggressively but not overtly in conflict. This kind of passive aggression occurs more frequently when people are avoiding overt discussion of the conflict.

Not surprising, aggression does not promote relationship or task accomplishment. Employees who take aggressive tactics to express their disagreement and hidden anger might at last not get much achieved other than reinforcing their angry. Findings suggest that to solve the conflict successfully, protagonists should learn to control negative emotions and avoid aggressive ways to express them.

Relationships among Different Strategies

Although four strategies are identified, protagonists do not necessarily use only a single strategy to avoid conflict. The four types of avoidance are inter-related. For example, conforming is often accompanied with aggression, while outflanking is positively related to waiting. Conflict avoidance should be considered as a configuration of different strategies; it should be understood as a complex pattern of different behaviors rather than a single pure behavior. The results are consistent with previous studies which found human being's conflict behavior was a mix pattern conglomerated with different conflict management styles (Munduate, Ganaza, Periro and Euwema, 1999; Van de Vliert, Euwema, and Huismans, 1995).

It is how people act in conflict avoidance that determines the outcomes. In this study, the strategy of waiting contributed to both effective task accomplishment and improved relationship, whereas outflanking helped solve the problem but perhaps at the expense of relationship. Conforming led to undermined relationships while aggression hampered task accomplishment. The negative effect of conforming on relationships indicates an interactive approach to discuss the conflict and its solution is helpful for building relationships between protagonists (Tjosvold, Hui and Sun, 2000).

The following section discusses conditions that can make people choose the more constructive approaches (like waiting) toward conflict avoidance, and what conditions make people turn to destructive tactics (like aggression). It relates these different responses to the theory of cooperation and competition.

Goal Interdependence and Avoiding Strategies

The structural equation modeling results found that cooperative goals led to participants' using the strategy of waiting. Employees who perceived cooperative goal interdependence with their bosses postponed immediate dealing with the conflicts and seek for a better opportunity to discuss with their superiors.

Cooperative Goal and Waiting

The result that cooperative goals make employees more likely to wait for a better chance to solve the conflict suggests that when construing their goals as cooperatively related the protagonists intend to look into the other's viewpoint, think from the other's perspective, consider the other's feelings, and try to work together to get the best solution. Expecting that both sides can benefit from the effective conflict solution, the subordinates are more problem-solving oriented while at the same time minimizing the possible cost on relationships with their superiors. This finding is consistent with a recent study in which positive goal interdependence was found to induce protagonists to have high task conflict while low person conflict (Janssen, De Vliert, and Veenstra, 1999).

Compared with the other three strategies, waiting is relatively safe, polite, and effective to solve the conflict. However, what we should recognize is that people are actually pro-active rather than doing nothing during their waiting for a better opportunity. When encountering a conflict with the supervisor, employee might want more time to re-think and compare her/his viewpoint with the manager's as he/she believes "my boss might be right as he is more experienced" (A novice in a civil service institute in Hong

Kong suggested this dynamic in the interview), or to gather more materials to support his/her own standpoint so that he/she can “convince the superior without ineffective arguing” (A middle manager in a law firm in Hong Kong said in the interview). In some cases, the participants are waiting for a chance to have a private talk with their bosses as they do not want to embarrass their superiors in public.

Goal Interdependence and Outflanking

Our results cannot document the causal effect from cooperative goals to outflanking as proposed in the fifth hypothesis. Results that both outflanking and waiting contribute to task accomplishment indicate the common characteristic of problem-solving orientation in these two strategies, where participants try to find a way to solve their problems. However, they are different regarding to the debater’s willingness and actions to discuss the conflict directly with the other side. People using outflanking avoid direct talking while those who choose the strategy of waiting do want and seek to talk with the other person on another occasion.

The above differences therefore help to understand the results that cooperative goals are significantly related to waiting but not to outflanking. As participants believe their goals are cooperatively related, they wait for a better chance to talk with their bosses about the conflicts in the expectation of a mutually beneficial solution. Rather than turning to a third party as in outflanking, they prefer direct communication with their supervisors at later occasion. It can be speculated that people with cooperative goals are more confident that they can work well with the other on the conflict, leading to their intention to find a more suitable chance to discuss with the other person. In contrast, people who use outflanking might see their goals with the others’ as

incompatible and doubt that they themselves can successfully solve the conflict, leading to their avoidance of direct discussion.

To conclude, few studies have developed a theoretical perspective that describes and predicts avoiding behavior. Based on the theory of cooperation and competition (Deutsch, 1949, 1973), we assumed that employees' perception on how their goals and those of their employers are related will lead to their different avoiding behaviors and strategies, which in turn determines the outcomes. In this study we found that when employees construed a positive goal relationship with their superior, they are more likely to use the strategy of waiting to solve the conflict, leading constructive outcomes of improved relationship and effective task accomplishment. Compared with waiting, outflanking might be a strategy with opposing motives, leading to either more considerate behavior or more aggressive (less considerate) approach. Though effective in accomplishing their own goals, outflanking might harm relationships. Most of the paths from the goal interdependence to the specific avoiding strategies in the tested model were not significant, indicating that goal interdependence theory does not well predict the specific avoiding behaviors. Findings between goal interdependence and the social psychological interaction like constructive controversy (Chen and Tjosvold, 2002; Tjosvold, 1995; Tjosvold and Wong, 1998; Snell, Tjosvold, and Su, 2006) have been quite consistent and strong. It may be that goal interdependence is more predictive of social psychological interaction rather than the specific behaviors, which are actually generated by different motives. The specific strategy like outflanking can be applied either cooperatively or competitively depending on the way the protagonist considers his own benefits are related with that of the other. In contrast, constructive controversy is kind of more stable psychologically interaction rather than concrete behaviors. People

can have different ways to open-mindedly discuss their differences, but generally share the common goals and want to integrate all effort for mutually beneficial solution. Behavior varies in different situations while psychological interaction is more stable and consistent.

Inter-Cultural Adjustment in Managing Conflict

Expatriate Manger's Cultural Adapting in China

In this study, the multivariate statistics did not find much difference in avoiding strategies between those who worked for foreigners and those who worked for local managers. Also the sub-cultural factor of region, in Hong Kong or in Beijing, did not have significant influence on the participants' using different strategies to avoid conflict with their superiors. These results might imply that the influence of culture on people's avoiding behavior is not direct and absolute, and that expatriate managers in China can adapt to the local cultures through interacting with their Chinese subordinates. This study thus lent evidence to previous findings that people with diverse cultural background are able to adapt to each other and create their own ways of interacting which incorporate elements from their respective cultures (Rao and Hashimoto, 1996; Thomas and Ravlin, 1995; Tjosvold and Wong, 2004).

From the participants' description of their stories, this study also found that the expatriate managers who are perceived as more considerate are more likely to be successful and respected by their Chinese subordinates. Western superiors are often presumed to use the assertive and direct ways to resolve the conflicts with their subordinates, paying less attention to the face of their subordinates (Ding, 1997; Holt

and DeVore, 2005; Kirkbride, et al., 1991; Tse, et. al., 1994). This forcing style might make Chinese workers feel embarrassed and ignored, leading to ineffective collaboration (Tjosvold, 1999). Therefore, it is imperative for expatriate managers to adjust their behavior styles to the local cultures for more effective interaction (Leung, Lu and Liang, 2002; Smith, 1998). General cultural interaction adjustment, i.e. adjusting one's style to the local culture was found to be positively related to the agreeableness (Huang, Chi, and Lawler, 2005). This study supported the previous conclusion that inter-cultural adjustment is necessary for productive collaboration between members from different cultures (Smith, 1998).

Open Minded Discussion to Solve Conflict in China

Contrary to traditional theorizing, this study found that following the superior's decision did not help to maintain a good relationship; subordinates' conforming damaged the relationships with their superiors. This finding indicates that open discussion is valuable for building sincere quality relationships in China as well as in the Western countries. Recent experiments with Chinese participants also support this reasoning by showing that direct disagreement, compared to smoothing over the opposing views, strengthened relationships (Tjosvold and Sun, 2003). Individuals who expressed their disagreement directly and openly were characterized as strong and competent while those who showed avoiding behaviors in conflict were considered as weak and ineffectual (Tjosvold and Sun, 2000). Open discussion is a mutually beneficial interaction developed from and contributing to cooperative relationships, and this kind of discussion in turn promotes integrative problem solving.

Though conflict avoidance can be useful in some situations, especially when

people are using certain strategies such as waiting for a better opportunity, this study also implies the relative productivity of open-minded discussion. Through openness, protagonists make their ideas public, challenge the weaknesses in each other's arguments, and lay the groundwork to incorporate the best of each other's position to create integrative solutions (Pruitt and Syna, 1989). Though Chinese people are expected to avoid conflict to protect the other's social face and maintain harmonious relationships, open-minded discussion is critical to solve conflicts in China. The participants' different intentions in respect of direct discussion with the other and thus the different outcomes in outflanking and waiting also lend support to the benefits of open discussion. As there are different strategies to avoid conflict, there are also different ways to discuss conflict openly. Interactive problem-solving with considering the needs of each other contributes to effective open discussion by reducing protagonists' intense negative feelings (Kelman, 1999).

To conclude, cultural difference should be recognized but should never be stereotyped (Leung, Lu and Liang 2003). Though more likely to avoid conflicts to save the social face for the other party, especially when the other is of higher authority, Chinese are able to use open-minded discussion effectively to solve the conflict for mutual benefits. Moreover, people with diverse cultural backgrounds are able to adjust their behavior styles to each other and create a way by integrating elements of each other's cultures. This kind of inter-cultural adjustment is nevertheless critical for effective cross-cultural interactions and teamwork.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the relatively small sample of 132

subjects limits the validation and generation of the findings. Though interview is appropriate to explore an unknown problem, its operation hampers collecting data of wide sampling. A survey could complement the interview study in documenting findings. The data are self-reported and might not be accurate and objective due to biases like social desirability. Additionally, these data are also correlational, which are not able to provide direct evidence of causal links between goal interdependence, avoiding behaviors, and outcomes. Spector and Brannick (1995) have argued that the most effective way to overcome recall and other methodological weaknesses is to test ideas with different methods. Developing experimental verification of the role of goal interdependence on the dynamics of conflict avoidance in East Asia would very much strengthen this study's findings. Moreover, most of the correlations between goal interdependence and the four strategies are not found to be significant, which indicates the moderating effects of other variables (e.g. existing relationship) on the link between goal interdependence and avoiding strategies.

Practical Implications

Results, if future research supports them, have potentially important practical implications. This section discusses practical implications for managers, employees and organizations.

Implications for Managers

The interviews did reveal that subordinates often avoid conflict with their superiors by following the superiors' decisions even when they disagree. Managers should be sensitive to the employees' feelings and thinking to create an atmosphere that

can encourage the employees' expressing their disagreement. Managers should welcome different ideas to make better decisions and build up high quality relationships with the subordinates. For expatriate managers, adjusting their management styles to the local culture contributes to effective leadership. Western managers who are concerned about their Chinese subordinates' face need during the interaction can work more effectively with them.

Implications for Employees

Many employees are afraid of having conflict with their bosses. To avoid risking losing their jobs by disagreeing with their managers, they prefer to conform. However, as shown by this study, passive conforming can harm their relationships with the managers. Employees should express different opinions but in an appropriate ways. Among the four avoiding strategies, waiting and outflanking are relatively helpful for solving the problems. But outflanking is not always desirable depending on the choice of the third party; employee should be careful when turning to the boss's superior as it might affront the direct boss. Employees should control the passive emotions while encountering conflict; focusing on problem solving helps reduce the intensity of negative emotions. Appendix II has practical tips derived from the interviews.

Implications for Organizations

The interviews suggested that the structure and policy of the organization influence how conflict is managed between the superior and subordinate. Besides the leadership style and personality of the manager, the organizational culture and policy affect the employees' intention to avoid conflict. For example, in a private firm where

everything is totally determined by the employer's personal likes, employees hesitate to disagree and avoid conflicts. Employees feel more confident and safe to express their different opinions in organizations where formal overt systems and policies are established to guarantee the labor's rights and benefits. Organizations can set up certain channels to facilitate the staff's expressing different viewpoints.

Conclusions

This study supports previous conclusion that inter-cultural adjustment is an effective way for members with different backgrounds to solve their conflicts. No significant differences were found on the Chinese employees' avoiding strategies with local or Western managers either in Hong Kong or Beijing. It suggests that people with diverse culture background are able to adapt to each other and create mutually acceptable norms by incorporating elements from their respective cultures through interaction.

Employees frequently avoid conflicts with their superiors in China and avoiding can be appropriate partially depending on what specific tactics protagonists take. This study contributes to our understanding of conflict avoidance as a multifaceted phenomenon by finding a range of behaviors to avoid conflict. It identifies four specific avoiding strategies, which helps explore the conditions when avoiding can be helpful. Compared with other strategies, waiting is relatively more constructive by contributing to both task accomplishment and mutual relationship. Outflanking is a way to accomplish one's own goals but might undermine the mutual relationship, indicating participants might use this strategy instrumentally or operate inappropriately. Conforming, which is deemed as respecting authority in hope of maintaining good relationship, undermines relationships. Four avoiding strategies are often used together; conflict avoidance is a mix behavior pattern with different strategies rather than a single pure style.

This study also explores the theoretical perspective on conflict avoidance; goal interdependence theory is used to understand the dynamics of subordinates' avoiding

conflict with their superiors. It proposes that cooperative goals lead to constructive strategies that reflect the sincere desire for harmony enhancement and problem solving, whereas competitive goals result in instrumental and destructive avoiding strategies. It is found that cooperative goals lead to employees' waiting for a better opportunity, which then contributes to both strengthened relationship and effective task accomplishment. The insignificant effects of goals on other strategies suggest that goal interdependence is more predictive of relative consistent social psychological interaction rather than the specific behaviors, which are generated by different motives and varies in different situations.

Findings overall suggest that an open-minded discussion is critical both for building the genuine relationship and solving the conflict, even in the collectivistic China. When people concluded their goals as cooperatively related with each other, they discuss conflict openly and constructively. Like the diverse strategies during conflict avoidance, people also have different ways to openly discuss their differences. Waiting for a better opportunity helps protagonists discuss their conflicts effectively by showing their concern on the other's face need.

APPENDIX I

Questionnaire



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Conflict Avoidance between Chinese Subordinate and Foreign Superior

Interviewee: _____
Position: _____
Organization: _____
Years worked in Organization: _____
Gender _____ Age _____ Education _____
Contact No.: _____ Email: _____

Nationality of your superior: Chinese American British
Germany French Others _____

A. We are studying how people in China deal with conflict by avoiding direct discussion with their boss. We want you to discuss a concrete example when you had a disagreement, negotiations or other conflict with your supervisor when you avoided discussing the conflict directly with your supervisor. We define conflict as whenever people's actions are interfering or frustrating each other. It may be for a short-period of time and may be useful or destructive. It does not have to mean a "war against each other." The example can be one where you tried to avoid the conflict because you felt it was best for the other person or you thought that discussing the conflict would be harmful to you. The situation may have been generally successful or unsuccessful.

(Rephrase if necessary)

Describe what led to the situation, with whom you were working, what happened, and how both of you reacted.

[Scales]

Goal Interdependence

What were your objectives in this interaction?
(Record Verbatim)

What were the other person's objectives in this interaction?
(Record Verbatim)

(1) How much would your reaching your objectives help the other person reach his objectives?

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(2) How much would your accomplishing your objectives interfere with his objectives?

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

Conflict Avoidance

What actions did you use to avoid discussing the conflict. (Record:)

(1) I followed my supervisor's decision although I did not agree with it.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(2) I was prepared to deal with the problems that my supervisor's decision might bring about without letting him know about it.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(3) I spoke to another person who would then influence my supervisor to change his idea.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(4) I identified the drawbacks in my supervisor's ideas in an indirect way.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(5) I tried not to see my supervisor.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(6) I left the scene.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(7) I gave up my opposing position to solve the problem.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(8) I agreed with my supervisor to end the conflict

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(9) I accepted whatever my supervisor said.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(10) I tried to make my supervisor feel guilty

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(11) I said bad things about my supervisor behind his/her back

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

(12) I waited until we were by ourselves to talk about the problem.

Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

- (13) I complained about the conflict to other colleagues.
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal
- (14) I talked with my supervisor through an outside party.
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal
- (15) I took our problems to my supervisor's boss since I believed he can solve it.
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal
- (16) I waited patiently for a better opportunity to discuss the problem with my superior.
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal
- (17) I turned to the friend who was trusted by both of us to solve the conflict.
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A Great Deal

Outcomes

These questions ask you about the incident after you have had a chance to evaluate it.

- (1) Specify the effects of this interaction on you:
- (2) Specify the effects of this interaction on the organization:

Strengthen Relationship

- (3) To what extent did this interaction strengthen your relationship with your supervisor?
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A great deal
- (4) To what extent did this interaction make you more trusting of your supervisor?
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A great deal
- (5) To what extent did this interaction enhance your respect for your supervisor?
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A great deal
- (6) To what extent did this help you believe that your supervisor is competent?
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A great deal

Productivity

- (7) How much did you and your supervisor make progress on the task because of this interaction?
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A great deal
- (8) How efficiently did you and your supervisor accomplish the task?
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A great deal
- (9) How effectively did you and your supervisor work on the task?
 Little 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A great deal

APPENDIX II

Practical Tips for Managing Conflicts with Your Superior

The examples developed from the interviews suggest practical tips and skills for the employees to manage conflicts cooperatively and skillfully with their superiors. They also help to reduce the possibilities of escalating competitive conflict

1. Learn about your manager. As discussed in the interviews, conflict often occurs when employees get new managers who demand that things be done differently. New managers often criticize their employees as is to their habit. Thus, instead of waiting for criticism, employees can take a proactive approach and be absolutely clear from the beginning on how the new boss wants things to be done to reduce misunderstandings later. There are many ways of completing a task and having a discussion about them at the very beginning will allow you to see things from the perspective of your boss as well as sharing your own with them. Get to know your boss's likes and dislikes so that you can avoid future criticisms.

2. Discuss rather than confront. When your boss criticizes you, don't react out of emotion and become confrontational with the boss because it may well escalate the conflict. Instead, use their criticism as a topic for discussion on interests, goals, and problem-solving and ask them for their advice. If they criticize your work, then that means that they have their own ideas on how that work should be done; ask them for their advice on how your work can be improved.

3. Maintain professional performance. Know the difference between not liking your boss and not being professional. You do not have to make your boss your friend or even like your boss as a person, but you should get the job done and carry out their instructions dutifully as a subordinate.

4. Never react to verbal abuse or harsh criticism in kind. This can get you into more trouble as the conflict might become a war. When facing a personal attack from the boss, it is wise not to react, but to acknowledge their power. For example, you might say "You're right, I'm sorry." By saying this, you reduce chances of escalating the conflict.

5. Evaluate your opinions. Before you confront your boss, examine your positions and ask yourself if your evidence is sufficient and your reasoning logical. Ask your colleagues to criticize your viewpoints to determine how much your supervisor's criticisms are warranted.

6. Gather additional support. When you have documented the utility of your own ideas and decide to discuss them with your boss, whom you believe may not be very open, gather support from other co-workers. If they share your concerns, then you might have additional persuasion power with your boss. A supervisor might easily ignore one employee's opinion, but when most of his employees share this opinion, bosses are more likely to re-examine issues more carefully.

7. Be careful about going up the chain of command. Talking to your boss's boss is often ineffective in managing conflict in the workplace. Your immediate supervisor may well consider this a very serious confrontation and embarrassment and seek

retribution in the future against you and your career. People in your workplace might consider you arrogant and inconsiderate. Discuss issues with your supervisor first; go up the chain of command as a last resort.

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