

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between conflict management styles on the one hand and national culture, foreign language competence, and leadership style on the other. Based on Hofstede's (1980) theory of work-related values as well as Rahim and Bonoma's (1979) conflict management model, this study attempted to investigate how national culture, foreign language competence, and leadership style influence conflict management styles adopted by employees in FIEs in mainland China.

Six hypotheses were proposed and tested for the investigation. The independent variable of national culture was operationalized as consisting of four dimensions, namely, power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance, while the dependent variables of conflict management were operationalized as consisting of five distinct styles, namely, avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating, and obliging. In addition, foreign language competence and leadership style were also defined as independent variables.

The data was collected from a probability sample of 150 Americans, 73 French, and 150 Chinese from state-owned enterprises, and 150 Chinese from Sino-American and Sino-French enterprises through face-to-face interviews in Guangdong Province, China, from December 1998 to April 1999. To supplement the survey findings, qualitative data was collected through direct observations of Sino-American, Sino-French, and state-owned enterprises, and in-depth interviews with both expatriates and Chinese.

This study identified two value patterns, the pattern of cultural values and the pattern of work-related values. One important finding of this study is that Chinese employees working in FIEs and state-owned enterprises hold the same cultural

values, although their work-related values are different. It is their cultural values that determine their conflict management styles.

The tendency of convergence of cultural values, "cultural homogeneity", was discovered among Western and Chinese employees. This study confirmed that Chinese people still hold collectivistic cultural values despite their exposure to Western values and influence. Of the four cultural dimensions, individualism and masculinity did not contribute much to the prediction of any of the five conflict management styles.

The results also show that the Chinese are more avoiding, obliging, and dominating than the Americans and the French. Although holding different cultural values, the Chinese did not differ from the Americans and the French in their compromising style.

Foreign language competence and leadership style were also found to influence conflict management.