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## Conflict Management Strategies – A Comparative Analysis of the Employees Working For Service Sectors

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### Abstract

Conflicts are experienced every day by both individuals and groups. Conflict appears in a social situation as any disagreement over the issues of substance or emotional antagonism that create friction between individuals or groups. Conflict is usually manifested in a flight, collusion, a struggle, a contest, a mental strife, an agony etc. Conflicts can be constructive or destructive. When kept within tolerable limits, conflict can be a source of creativity and performance enhancement; it becomes destructive when these limits are exceeded. An optimum level of conflict needs to be maintained by an organization, i.e. there should be enough conflict to prevent stagnation, stimulate creativity, allows release of tension and initiate the seeds of change and rejuvenation, yet not so much as to be disruptive or deter co-ordination of activities..

Depending on the nature, conflict can be perceived, latent, manifest, line and staff, organized and unorganized conflict. Most typically, conflicts develop through a series of stages, beginning with antecedent conditions and progressing into manifest conflict. There are several sources of conflict. Often inter-personal conflicts arise because of organizational change, personality clashes, and different sets of values, threats to status, contrasting perceptions and lack of mutual trust. On the other hand intra-personal conflicts arise mainly on account of role ambiguity and role conflict. Since conflict is a part and parcel of human life and is inevitable in work organizations, this needs resolution. The process of managing conflict to achieve constructive rather than destructive results is clearly essential to organizational success. This process of conflict management can be pursued in a variety of ways

In this empirical paper, the authors have proposed to discuss various dimensions concerning to managing conflicts, their resolution methods and a comparative analysis of how conflicts are managed in the manufacturing sector and the service sector.

***Key words: Friction, diffusion, intra-personal, antagonism and dysfunctional mode***



## **Introduction:**

In today competitive scenario every employee wants a healthy working atmosphere in the organization. To create a better working environment Conflict management has received increasing attention, as there is a shift in attitude towards conflict in the organizations during the last two decades. (Puranik Rakshith). Organizations, by definition, require people to work together and communicate with one another—often in pairs. Ideally, these interpersonal relationships should be productive, cooperative, and satisfying. In reality, managers find that they are not always that way. Almost every working relationship will produce some degree of conflict across time. Whether the conflicts will be destructive or constructive depends on the attitudes and skills of the participants (as well as time pressures and resource shortages). Since conflict is seemingly unavoidable, particularly in a scholarly setting, it is obviously necessary for administrators to be able to recognize conflict, to view its constructive as well as destructive potential, to learn how to manage conflict, and to apply conflict management strategies in a practical way (Fleet Wood Karen)

## **Conceptual Framework:**

The term conflict has been defined varyingly by social scientists and there is no dearth for definitions. Conflict appears in a social situation as any disagreement over issues of substance or emotional antagonisms that create friction between individuals or groups (Schermerhorn, 2005). The term conflict indicates a process when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first party cares about (Robbins, 2006) Conflicts when kept within tolerable limits can be a source of creativity and performance enhancement; it becomes destructive when these limits are exceeded. An optimum level of conflict needs to be maintained by an organization, i.e. there should be enough conflict to prevent stagnation, stimulate creativity, allows release of tension and initiate the seeds of change and rejuvenation, yet not so much as to be disruptive or deter co ordination of activities

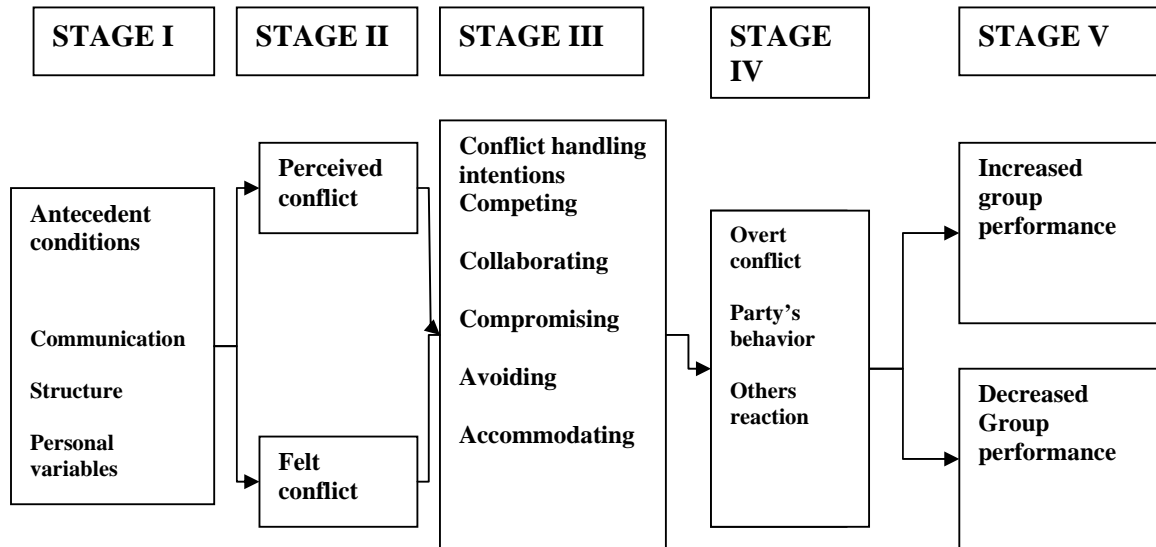
There have been varying opinions about the role of conflicts in organizations. The early approach (traditional approach) to conflict assumed that all conflicts were atrocious. Predominant in 1930s and 1940s, the traditional school of thought, view conflicts negatively and was used synonymously with terms such as violence, destruction and irrationality to reinforce its negative connotation. Where as another school of thought ‘Human Relations’ ,dominant from 1940s and 1980s, viewed conflict as natural occurrence in all groups and organizations and advocated acceptance of conflicts. The Interactionists ,1980s onwards, differing with the earlier views, perceive conflicts as a virtue to be encouraged on the grounds that a harmonious, peaceful ,tranquil and cooperative group is prone to becoming static, apathetic and non responsive to needs for change and innovation.

## **The Sources And Levels of Conflict:**

Conflicts can be encountered in different forms in organizations – intrapersonal level, interpersonal level, inter group level and inter organizational level. Intra personal conflict occurs within individual because of actual or perceived pressures from incompatible goals or expectations. Interpersonal conflict occurs between two or more individuals in opposition to each other. Intergroup conflicts occur between groups in organizations and inter organizational conflict between organisations. The present empirical study attempts to throw light upon interpersonal conflicts among executives working in the corporate sector and employees of service sector. There are several sources of conflict. However these sources depend upon the mindset of the parties involved in a situation. Interpersonal conflicts arises from an array of sources such as personality clashes, difference in sets of values/ideology, threats to status, organizational change and contrasting perceptions and lack of mutual trust.( Davis Keith,2005)

**The Process:**

Most typically, conflicts develop through a series of stages, beginning with antecedent conditions and progressing into manifest conflict. The conflict process can be seen as comprising of five stages: Potential opposition or incompatibility, cognition and personalization, intentions, behavior and outcomes. The process is illustrated below.



Source: based on S.P. Robbins & Seema Sanghi (2006), Organizational Behaviour, Singapore: Pearson Education, p386

**The Resolution Strategies:**

Since conflict is a part and parcel of human life and is inevitable in work organizations, this needs resolution. The process of managing conflict to achieve constructive rather than destructive results is clearly essential to organizational success. This process of conflict management can be pursued in a variety of ways. An important goal always should be to achieve conflict resolution—that is, a situation in which the underlying reasons for a given destructive conflict are eliminated. Various authors have suggested different modes of conflict resolution. Udai Pareek, has identified eight styles of conflict management: resignation, isolation, withdrawal and cover up under Avoidance/Dysfunctional modes and fighting, compromise, arbitration and negotiation under Approach/Functional modes. Robbins (2006) and Thompson (1992) have suggested a broader classification viz., Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding and Accommodating. As these five modes show primary conflict handling intentions, they have been used for analysis in this empirical study.

Using two dimensions – cooperativeness (the degree to which one party to satisfy the others party's concerns) and assertiveness (the degree to which one party to satisfy his or *her* own concern) the five intentions are described as follows

- ◆ **Competing** (assertive and un co-operating): A desire to satisfy one's interest, regardless of the impact on the other party to the conflict.
- ◆ **Collaborating**: (assertive and co operative): A situation in which the parties to a conflict each desire to satisfy fully the concerns of all parties
- ◆ **Avoiding** (unassertive and uncooperative): The desire to withdraw from or suppress a conflict
- ◆ **Accommodating** (unassertive and co operative): The willingness of one party in a conflict to place the opponent's interest above his or her own.



- ◆ **Compromising** (midrange on both assertiveness and cooperativeness): A situation in which each party to a conflict is willing to give up something

Using these five dimensions, the investigators have evaluated the conflict handling intentions of executives & Journalists. The maxima to be followed in conflict resolution process is “*An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*” because if one corrosive conflict emerges it leads to thousands of issues, costing much beyond the ability of the group.

### Objectives of The Study:

This empirical study has been conducted by the authors keeping in view the following objectives:

- To know the various causes and sources of conflict.
- To know the levels at which conflicts occur dominantly.
- To understand the perceptions of respondents on conflict management.
- To study the resolution strategies.
- To arrive at managerial implications of conflict management.
- To suggest ways, means, if any to make conflict management

### Research Methodology:

To generate basic data for this empirical inquiry the authors have adopted questionnaire method. A structured questionnaire was administered by the authors based on the modified version of a 35 item instrument described in *M A Rahim s, “A Measure of Styles Handling Interpersonal Conflict”*. This was distributed in two sets in order to facilitate comparison; i.e to 60 executives out of which 50 responded and 60 journalists out of which 48 responded . The questionnaire was used to find out the perceptions of the respondents on the management of conflicts, and these were evaluated on a 5 point Likert scale (1 Strongly Disagree -5 Strongly Agree).This questionnaire contains items related to the resolution strategies which was originally designed and developed by M A Rahim and modified by the authors. While the primary data was gathered through questionnaires, the secondary data was gathered by referring to websites, books, reports and articles.

### Results and discussion:

The data generated by the authors through the survey are analysed and interpreted below to draw meaningful conclusions. The results of the empirical study are as under:

#### 1. Conflicts are inevitable:

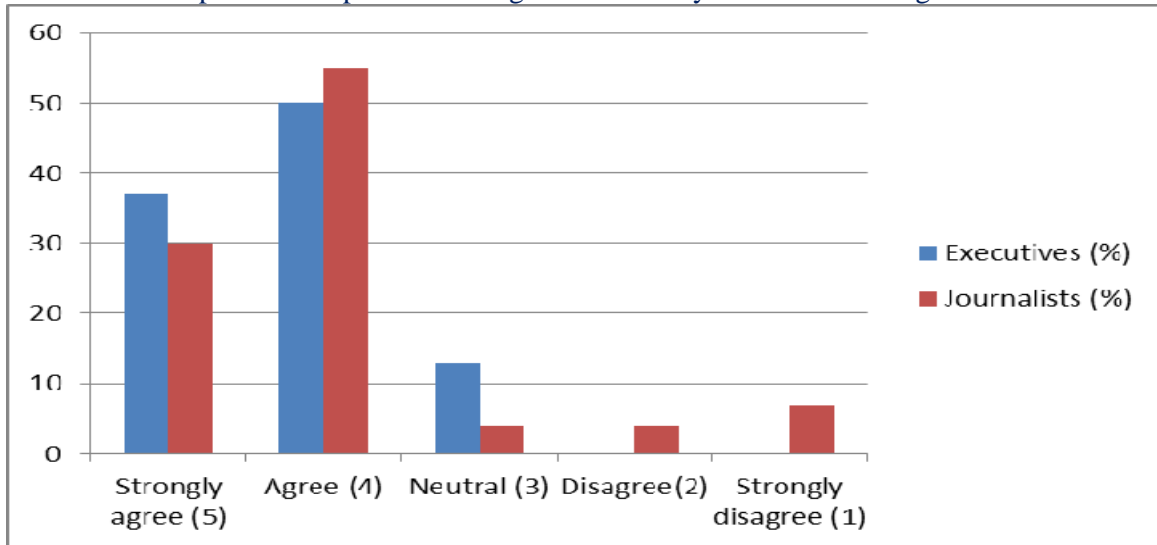
It is quite essential to understand the perception the executives with regard to conflicts in organisations. The following table and bar diagram clearly depicts the perception of the executives regarding the existence of conflicts in organisations.

D (i): The following table depicts the responses relating to inevitability of conflicts in organizations:

Sl.No	Responses	Executives (%)	Journalists (%)
1	Strongly agree (5)	37	30
2	Agree (4)	50	55
3	Neutral (3)	13	4.0
4	Disagree(2)	0	4.0
5	Strongly disagree (1)	0	7.0
	<b>N</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>



Chart no. 1 : Depicts the responses relating to inevitability of conflicts in organizations



The above diagram clearly reveals that the opinions of respondents from both sectors are similar and they feel that conflicts are inherent in social life and felt that conflicts are inevitable in every working relationship.

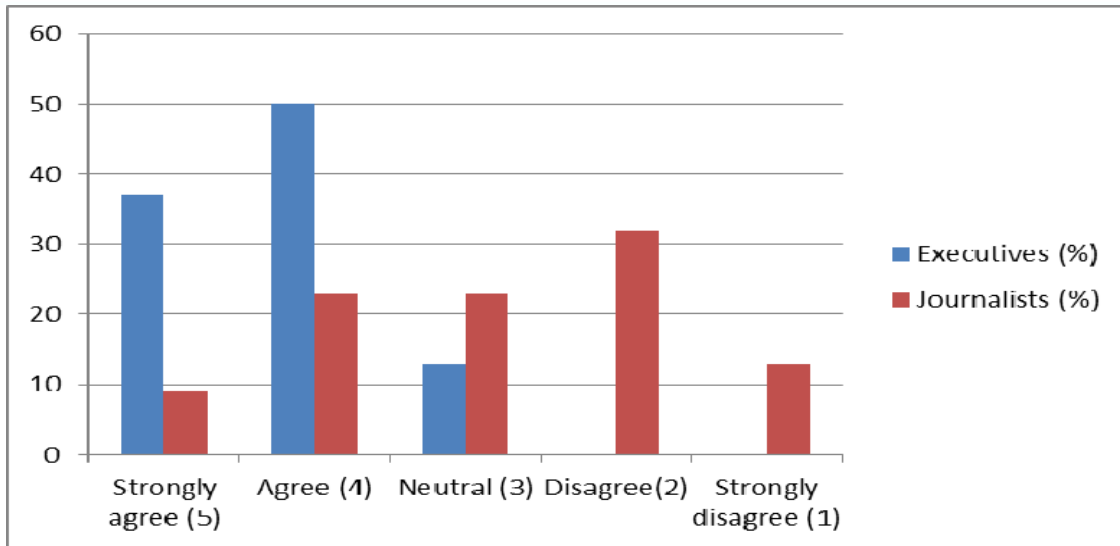
**2. Organizations are designed to create conflict:**

Constructive conflicts are essential in today’s fiercely competitive global economy. The perception of executives about the necessity of conflicts are depicted in the below diagrams.

D (ii): The following table depicts the responses relating to necessity of constructive conflicts for maximum utilization of resources.

Sl.No	Responses	Executives (%)	Journalists (%)
1	Strongly agree (5)	40	9
2	Agree (4)	42	23
3	Neutral (3)	18	23
4	Disagree(2)	-	32
5	Strongly disagree (1)	-	13
	N	100	100

D (b): The following chart shows the responses relating necessity of constructive conflicts for maximum utilization of resources.



From the chart it is evident that 82 % of the respondents from executive category considered that conflicts are essential for the success of organisations. The respondents felt that an optimum level of conflict needs to be maintained by an organization, as it prevents stagnation, stimulates creativity, allows release of tension and initiate the seeds of change and rejuvenation. But, the same opinion is not shared by service sector employees as 45% disagreed to the statement as they felt that conflicts only increase the hassles in work environment and spoils the creativity.

**2. Resolution strategies used in conflict management:**

1. Competing strategies :

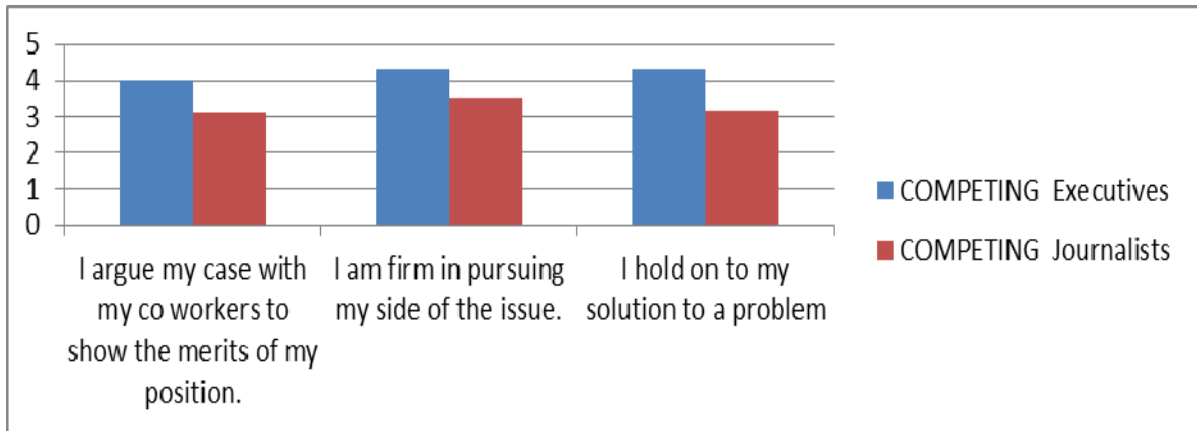
**Competing** strategy refers to a desire to satisfy one’s interest, regardless of the impact on the other party to the conflict. It is regarded as assertive and un co-operating. The responses elicited from the two sectors with reference to the use of competing strategy in conflict management are given below.

D (iii): The following table depicts the responses towards use of competing strategy

COMPETING		
Statements	Executives	Journalists
I argue my case with my coworkers to show the merits of my position.	4	3.108
I am firm in pursuing my side of the issue.	4.316	3.53
I hold on to my solution to a problem	4.342	3.144
	84.38667	65.21333

It may be noted in the above table that respondents (84.38%) from the executives categories prefer to compete and stress on their stand irrespective of the impact of it on others. Not many respondents from Journalists category (65%) are so particular about it. A difference in the nature of job results in difference in the usage of competing strategy.

D (c): The following chart depicts the responses towards use of competing strategy



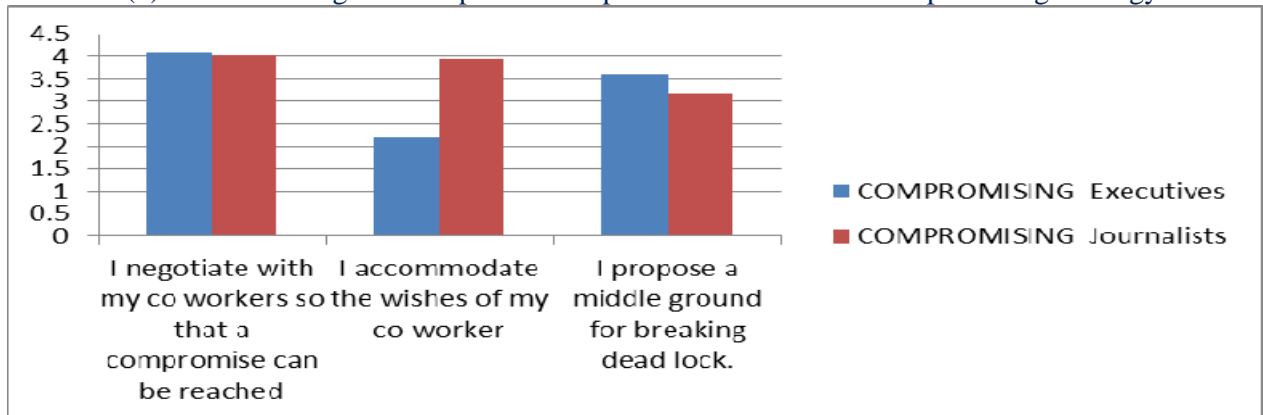
**2. Compromising**

*Compromising* is a midrange on both assertiveness and cooperativeness. It refers to a situation in which each party to a conflict is willing to give up something.

D (iv): The following table depicts the responses towards use of compromising strategy

COMPROMISING		
Statements	Executives	Journalists
I negotiate with my co workers so that a compromise can be reached	4.1	4.06
I accommodate the wishes of my co-worker	2.184	3.93
I propose a middle ground for breaking dead lock.	3.605	3.191
	65.92667	74.54

D (d): The following chart depicts the responses towards use of compromising strategy



The above table and chart both show that more number of respondents from journalism(74.54%) are willing to go for a compromise than the respondents from executive category(65.92%) .

**3. Collaborating**

*Collaborating is an* assertive and cooperative strategy. It refers to a situation in which the parties to a conflict each desire to satisfy fully the concerns of all parties



D (v): The following table depicts the responses towards use of collaborating strategy

COLLABORATING		
Statements	Executives	Journalists
I try to investigate an issue with my co-workers to find a solution acceptable to us.	3.789	4.106
I use give and take so that a compromise can be made.	2.342	4.042
I try to bring all our concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved in the best possible way.	4.315	3.68
	69.64	78.85333

D (e): The following chart depicts the responses towards use of collaborating strategy



The analysis of the data revealed in table no D(v) shows that respondents from journalism are following a more assertive in approach and are willing to accommodate the wishes of the fellow workers (78.85%) than respondents from executive category (69.64%).

4. **Avoiding**

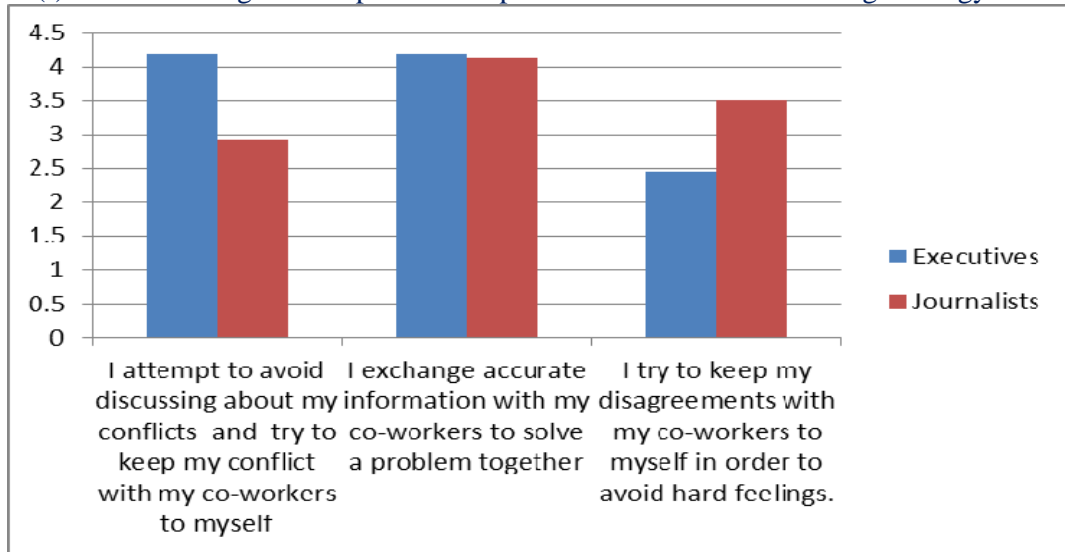
*Avoiding* is a unassertive and uncooperative strategy . the people who prefer to use this strategy have a desire to withdraw from or suppress a conflict which in the long run may have cascading effects.

D (vi): The following table depicts the responses towards use of avoiding strategy

AVOIDING		
Statements	Executives	Journalists
I attempt to avoid discussing about my conflicts and try to keep my conflict with my co-workers to myself	4.184	2.914
I exchange accurate information with my co-workers to solve a problem together	4.184	4.127
I try to keep my disagreements with my co-workers to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.	2.447	3.51
	72.1	70.34



D (f): The following chart depicts the responses towards use of avoiding strategy



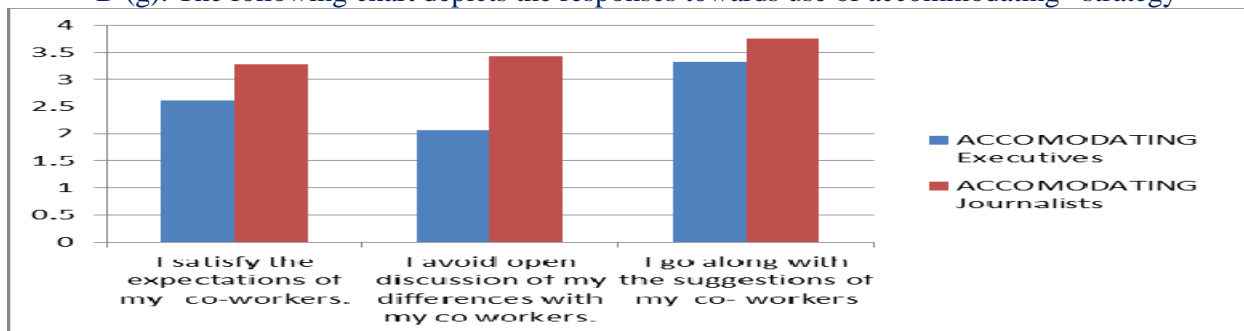
The information in the above table reveals that in both sectors around 70% of the respondents would prefer to adapt this strategy than go for a direct combat with their coworkers.

**5. Accommodating :**

*Accommodating* is unassertive and co-operative strategy. It refers to the willingness of one party in a conflict to place the opponent’s interest above his or her own.

ACCOMODATING		
Statements	Executives	Journalists
I satisfy the expectations of my co-workers.	2.605	3.276
I avoid open discussion of my differences with my co workers.	2.052	3.425
I go along with the suggestions of my co- workers	3.315	3.744
	53.14667	69.63333

D (g): The following chart depicts the responses towards use of accommodating strategy

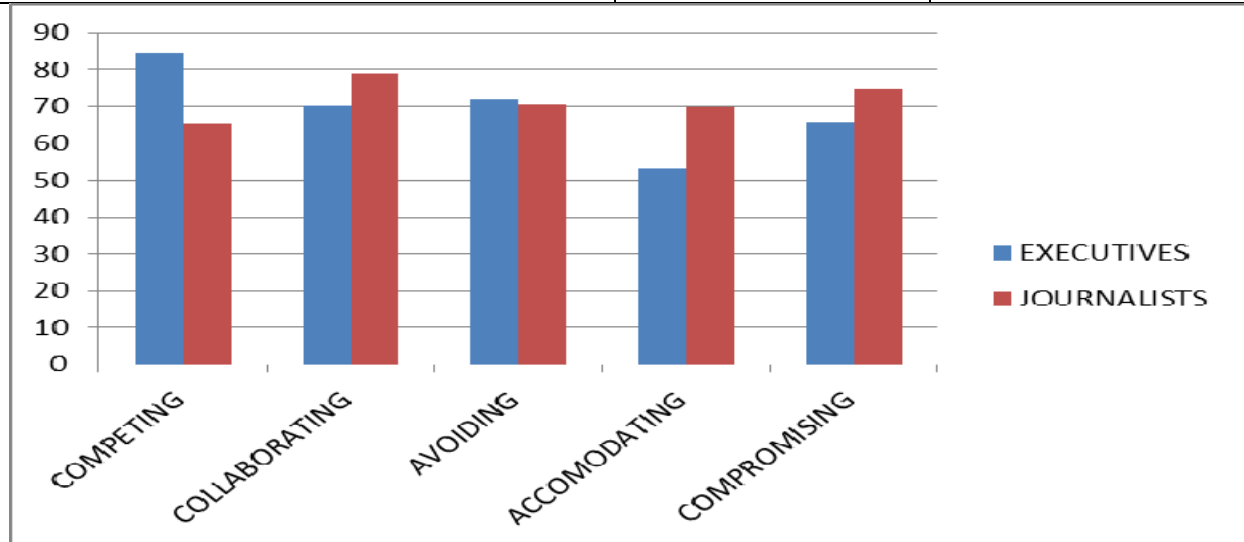


The executive category respondents are very assertive people who prefer to place their opinions above that of their fellow workers and the same is shown in the above analysis only 53.14% of the respondents prefer to use accommodating styles where as in case of respondents from journalism 69.63% prefer to voice others opinion than that of their self.



## 6. CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLES

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLES	EXECUTIVES	JOURNALISTS
COMPETING	84.38	65.21
COLLABORATING	69.94	78.85
AVOIDING	72.1	70.34
ACCOMODATING	53.14	69.63
COMPROMISING	65.92	74.54



An overall analysis of all the conflict management styles reveals that in the respondents from executive category the most predominant style of conflict resolution is ‘competing’ style (84.38%) and the least resorted to method is ‘accommodating’ (53.14%). Whereas in case of respondents from the journalism, the most preferred style is ‘collaborating style’ (78.85%), but along with it compromising (74.54%) style too is used. The least resorted style is ‘Competing style’ (65.21%). A total difference in the mode of resolving conflicts can be noticed by this empirical enquiry and it can be concluded that depending on the mode of work the management style of conflict too varies.

### Conclusion:

Through the analysis conclusion could be drawn that more than 50% of the journalists preferred a ‘collaborating strategy’ to resolve conflicts. This indicates that they prefer to give equal prospect to the other party’s interests and hence can be said that they are very assertive and cooperative in group behaviour. Whereas, the executives exhibit ‘competing intentions’, suggesting that there is ample scope for constructive conflicts, which is for the betterment of the organization. But caution has to be taken to see that the competing intension does not get converted into corrosive conflicts which would result in chaos in the organization. A small percentage of the employees have accommodating and compromising intensions. Due diligence in management is required in this category of employees as a certain level of conflicts needs to be built in the organization’s as “conflict is an antidote for group thinking”. Many of the respondents are resorting to ‘avoidance mode’ where again prudence has to be taken by the organization’s, because anti-conflict cultures have been tolerable in the past but not in today’s fiercely competitive global economy.

Constructive conflicts are necessary for the success of the organization as it improves the quality of decisions, stimulate creativity and innovation, encourage interest and curiosity among group members, provide the medium through which problems can be aired and tensions released, leads to



maximum use of resources and fosters an environment of self evaluation and change. An optimum level of conflict needs to be maintained because inadequate or excessive levels of conflict can hinder the effectiveness of a group or an organisation, resulting in reduced satisfaction of group members, increased absence and turnover rates, and , eventually , lower productivity.

Based on the empirical results, the authors opine that there is optimal level of conflict maintained .Most of the managerial staff felt that conflicts are essential; hence the investigators infer that they are at par with the Interactionists view of necessity of conflicts in organisations. As the authors found that there was mixture of various conflict handling intensions in the executives survey, the following guidelines can be used by managers when faced with conflict:

- ◆ Use competition when quick , decisive action is vital
- ◆ Use collaboration to find an integrative solution to both sets of concerns is too important to be compromised.
- ◆ Use avoidance when an issue is trival, or more important issues are pressing.
- ◆ Use accommodation when one finds out that he is wrong and allow better preposition to be heard
- ◆ Use compromise when goals are important but not worth the effort of potential disruption of more assertive approaches, to arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure and as a back up when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful.

In conclusion it can be stated that there is no uniform method to resolve conflicts, each industrial sector has a different strategy to reduce conflict. Consequence of unresolved conflict may affect job satisfaction and employee loyalty in any given organization. Superior should mediate a conflict by using the right method. Different styles of conflict management have its benefits and weaknesses, users have to identify the most appropriate conflict styles based on the different situation they are in. Conflicts serve as a learning curve for all organizations. Without conflict, an organization will not improve, hence conflicts have to be dealt with due diligence.

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