

Transitioning Conflict Management Strategies towards Sustainability: Scale Development and Validation

Suhair Mereish

Westminster Business School, University of Westminster,

London, UK

mereiss@westminster.ac.uk

Summary

The paper aims to develop a scale for measuring employees' conflict management styles in sustainable organisations. As organisations transition toward sustainability, conflict accompanies the changes across economic, environmental, and social domains. A significant challenge in this transition is the persistent tension between socio-environmental protection and economic growth. Addressing this tension requires organisations to adopt more comprehensive and sustainability-oriented approaches to conflict management, yet existing conflict management frameworks remain largely detached from sustainability considerations.

To address this gap, the study aims to develop a conflict management scale tailored to organisational sustainability. The research will follow a five-step scale development approach. In particular, scale items will be generated through a comprehensive review of the literature and well-established tools for conflict management and sustainability. Next, the developed items will be checked by three specialists in the field of conflict management and sustainability. Following this, data will be collected using a negotiation-based scenario reflecting sustainability-related organisational conflicts, followed by a newly developed sustainability-oriented conflict questionnaire. The survey will be distributed to approximately 1,000 employees working in large for-profit organisations across industries and organisational levels. Lastly, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses will be conducted to validate the scale.

The study is expected to identify five distinct conflict management styles: preserving, resisting, balancing, avoiding, and complying, reflecting varying levels of concern for profitability and socio-environmental sustainability. This research contributes by advancing conflict and sustainability literature through a novel sustainability-oriented conflict management model and

by offering a practical diagnostic tool to support sustainability-aligned conflict management in organisations.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The processes of industrialisation and globalisation have confronted organisations with complex challenges related to structural arrangements, staffing roles, and resource allocation. These challenges have given rise to various forms of conflict and have necessitated significant changes in the ways organisations understand, manage and respond to conflict (Salau, 2023). While conflict is frequently regarded as a functional and inevitable aspect of organisational life, most recommendations concerning organisational conflict continue to focus on its resolution or minimisation. Conflict is commonly defined as an interactive process characterised by disagreement, incompatibility, or divergence occurring within or between social entities, including individuals, groups, or organisations. Such conflict may arise from incompatible needs, competing interests, scarce resources, or divergent values, attitudes, and aspirations guiding behaviour (Rahim, 2023).

Over several decades, conflict management research has produced a range of influential models aimed at explaining how individuals respond to conflict situations. Follett (1940), who was the first to conceptualise conflict, identified five main approaches to manage it: compromise, domination, integration, suppression, and avoidance. Subsequently, Blake and Mouton (1964) proposed a conceptual framework for classifying interpersonal conflict-handling styles and identified five distinct modes: smoothing, withdrawing, forcing, compromising, and problem solving. These modes were conceptualised based on managerial attitudes, specifically the degree of concern for production and concern for people. The framework was redefined by Thomas (1976) by focusing on the intentions of the parties involved. The conflict-handling modes were classified into five types based on two dimensions: cooperativeness, defined as the extent to which an individual seeks to satisfy the concerns of the other party, and assertiveness, defined as the extent to which an individual seeks to satisfy their own concerns.

Building on these conceptualisations, the Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory–II (ROCI–II) was developed (Rahim, 1983), in which conflict-handling styles were differentiated along two fundamental dimensions: concern for self and concern for others (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979; Rahim, 1992). The first dimension reflects the extent, ranging from low to high, to which an individual seeks to satisfy personal concerns, while the second represents the extent to which

an individual aims to address the concerns of others. These dimensions capture the motivational orientations individuals adopt during conflict situations (Rahim, 2023). Notably, the interaction of these dimensions gives rise to five distinct styles of interpersonal conflict management (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979), which are: 1) integrating, which is characterised by collaboration between the parties, involving openness, the sharing of information, and the exploration of differing perspectives in order to achieve a mutually acceptable solution; 2) obliging, which involves minimising differences and emphasising areas of agreement in order to accommodate and satisfy the needs of the other party; 3) dominating, which is characterised by a win–lose orientation, in which an individual employs assertive or coercive behaviours to impose their position and achieve desired outcomes; 4) avoiding, which involves withdrawal or disengagement, such as postponing issues or sidestepping conflict, resulting in neither party's concerns being addressed; and 5) compromising, which involves mutual concession, whereby each party relinquishes some demands in order to reach an acceptable agreement (Rahim, 2023). Essentially, while these models continue to dominate both academic research and managerial practice and have significantly advanced understanding of interpersonal conflict, they remain largely detached from contemporary organisational challenges—particularly those related to sustainability.

In parallel with developments in conflict management research, organisations have increasingly been called upon to address sustainability-related challenges (Stoughton and Ludema, 2012). Sustainability is commonly conceptualised through the triple bottom line framework, encompassing social, environmental, and economic dimensions (Balasubramanian and Balaji, 2022). Research indicates that in order to keep the business operating (Balasubramanian and Balaji, 2022), sustainability should be integrated across all levels of an organisation (Hockerts, 2015). Despite this growing emphasis, organisations continue to struggle with the simultaneous management of social, environmental, and financial performance—one of the most critical challenges in corporate sustainability. While the organisations' informal systems actively support sustainability, their formal systems appear to remain predominantly focused on traditional financial performance (Epstein et al., 2012). Researchers argue that organisations need a fundamental shift in their approach to sustainability (Paliwoda-Matiolańska, 2009). Linnenluecke and Griffiths (2010) emphasise that organisations require behavioural changes to advance sustainability.

Importantly, existing research underscores the central role employees play in promoting organisational sustainability. Employees routinely encounter conflict, on a daily or weekly

basis, often devoting a significant proportion of their working time to managing or responding to conflict (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011). These conflicts can negatively affect employee well-being in both the short and long term and can also influence productivity (Van Niekerk et al., 2017) and performance (Mereish, 2020). The ways in which employees handle conflicts can therefore significantly influence the organisation's ability to implement and maintain sustainable practices. However, despite this connection, conflict management styles have never been examined through a sustainability lens in organisations. Further, sustainability-related conflicts often involve trade-offs between competing priorities, such as short-term financial performance and long-term environmental or social responsibility. This paper contends that dominant conflict management frameworks fall short of explaining the complex tensions organisations encounter when attempting to reconcile environmental sustainability with economic development, thus, resulting in a conceptual gap in the literature.

In response to this gap, the present study proposes the development of a new conflict management model explicitly oriented toward sustainability. The proposed model seeks to integrate social, environmental, and economic considerations into the conceptualisation of conflict management, thereby moving beyond traditional interpersonal dimensions. By reconceptualising conflict management styles in relation to sustainability outcomes, the study aims to provide a more holistic framework that reflects contemporary organisational realities.

Methodology – Scale Development

The study aims to develop a scale for conflict management styles for organisational sustainability. It will follow the five-step approach for Taecharungroj et al. (2018) and Cabrera-Nguyen (2010). The items will be developed through a comprehensive review of the literature and well-established tools for conflict management and sustainability, including the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (1978), the Dutch test for Conflict Handling (De Dreu et al., 2001), the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997), and the Corporate Social Responsibility scale (Turker, 2009).

The developed items will be reviewed by three experts in the field of conflict management and organisational sustainability including academics and policymakers. Following this, a negotiation-based scenario that reflects common organisational conflicts involving economic, environmental, and social considerations, along with a newly developed questionnaire assessing participants' preferred conflict management responses, will be emailed to approximately 1000 participants working in large for-profit organisations across different

industries and organisational levels. A snowballing sampling method will be adopted. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses will be conducted to assess and validate the scale.

Expected Results

It is expected that the analysis will reveal five distinct conflict management styles aligned with differing levels of concern for socio-environmental sustainability and profitability. The anticipated scales are: 1) preserving (characterised by a high concern for both profitability and socio-environmental sustainability); 2) resisting (characterised by a high concern for profitability and a low concern for socio-environmental sustainability); 3) balancing (characterised by a partial concern for profitability and socio-environmental sustainability); 4) avoiding (characterised by a low concern for both profitability and socio-environmental sustainability); and 5) complying (characterised by a low concern for profitability and a high concern for socio-environmental sustainability).

Preliminary Contributions and Implications

The expected contribution of this study is twofold. First, it offers a critical re-examination of traditional conflict management frameworks, highlighting their limitations in addressing sustainability-related tensions and developing a novel sustainability-oriented conflict management model to advance the conflict and sustainability literature. Second, it provides a practical tool to support organisations in diagnosing and developing conflict management strategies aligned with sustainability objectives. By proposing a new conflict management style model grounded in sustainability principles, this paper responds to calls for behavioural change in organisations and addresses the dearth of holistic models that integrate social, environmental, and economic dimensions.

Keywords

Conflict Management Styles, Scale Development, Sustainability

References

- Balasubramanian, N. and Balaji, M., 2022. Organisational sustainability scale-measuring employees' perception on sustainability of organisation. *Measuring Business Excellence*, 26(3), pp.245-262.
- Blake, R.R., Mouton, J.S., Louis B., Barnes and Larry E., Greiner, 1964. *Breakthrough in organization development* (p. 136). New York, NY: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University.
- Cabrera-Nguyen, P., 2010. Author guidelines for reporting scale development and validation results in the Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 1(2), pp.99-103.
- Cloke, K. and Goldsmith, J., 2011. *Resolving conflicts at work: Ten strategies for everyone on the job*. John Wiley & Sons.
- De Dreu, C.K. and Weingart, L.R., 2003. Task versus relationship conflict, team performance, and team member satisfaction: a meta-analysis. *Journal of applied Psychology*, 88(4), p.741.
- Elkington, J., 1997. The triple bottom line. *Environmental management: Readings and cases*, 2(1997), pp.49-66.
- Epstein, M.J., Buhovac, A.R. and Yuthas, K., 2015. Managing social, environmental and financial performance simultaneously. *Long range planning*, 48(1), pp.35-45.
- Follett, M. P. (1940). Constructive conflict. In H. C. Metcalf & L. Urwick (Eds.), *Dynamic administration: The collected papers of Mary Parker Follett* (pp. 30-49). New "York: Harper. (Original work published 1926).
- Hockerts, K., 2015. The social entrepreneurial antecedents scale (SEAS): A validation study. *Social Enterprise Journal*, 11(3), pp.260-280.
- Linnenluecke, M.K. and Griffiths, A., 2010. Corporate sustainability and organizational culture. *Journal of world business*, 45(4), pp.357-366.
- Mereish, S., 2020. *Investigating how individual differences in organisations are associated with employee performance, job satisfaction and climate for innovation: A Quantitative Study in Jordan's Middle Eastern Context* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Westminster).

- Paliwoda-Matiolańska, A., 2012. Social responsibility in business in theory and practice. *Prace Instytutu Lotnictwa*, pp.175-187.
- Rahim, A. and Bonoma, T.V., 1979. Managing organizational conflict: A model for diagnosis and intervention. *Psychological reports*, 44(3_suppl), pp.1323-1344.
- Rahim, M.A., 1983. Rahim organizational conflict inventory–II. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.
- Rahim, M.A., 2023. *Managing conflict in organizations*. Routledge.
- Rahim, M.A., Garrett, J.E. and Buntzman, G.F., 1992. Ethics of managing interpersonal conflict in organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 11(5), pp.423-432.
- Salau, A.A., 2023. A Qualitative Analysis Of Conflict Management Style And Employees' Performance Of Organizations In Northern Region Of Ghana.
- Stoughton, A.M. and Ludema, J., 2012. The driving forces of sustainability. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 25(4), pp.501-517.
- Taecharungroj, V., Tachapattaworakul Suksaroj, T. and Rattanapan, C., 2018. The place sustainability scale: Measuring residents' perceptions of the sustainability of a town. *Journal of place management and development*, 11(4), pp.370-390.
- Thomas, K.W. and Schmidt, W.H., 1976. A survey of managerial interests with respect to conflict. *Academy of Management journal*, 19(2), pp.315-318.
- Thomas, K.W. and Kilmann, R.H., 1978. Comparison of four instruments measuring conflict behavior. *Psychological reports*, 42(3_suppl), pp.1139-1145.
- Turker, D., 2009. Measuring corporate social responsibility: A scale development study. *Journal of business ethics*, 85(4), pp.411-427.
- Van Niekerk, W.M., De Klerk, M. and Pires-Putter, J.K., 2017. Conflict management styles and work-related well-being among higher education employees. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 27(3), pp.221-226.