# ACADEMICS' CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

## *ÖĞRETİM ELEMANLARININ ÇATIŞMA YÖNETİMİ DAVRANIŞ BİÇİMLERİ*

**Münevver Ölçüm ÇETİN**
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**ABSTRACT** : Throughout the centuries, "conflict" has been observed as a major problem in educational organisations. With the coming of the 21st century "conflict" became one of the most important tools in the development of organisations when it is carefully managed. The purpose of this study is to determine the reasons underlying conflict and how they are handled by academic and administrative staff. A group of academics who work at public and foundation universities in Istanbul in the 2001-2002 academic year constitutes the scope of this research. Sample group has been chosen randomly from the universities in Istanbul. The questionnaire was given its final form after a series of unstructured interviews and related literature (Rahim 1983; Thomas, 1977) review. Analysis of the data has been done by using SPSS programme. T Test and One Way Anova Tests were used to determine the significant differences.

**Keywords :** Conflict management strategies, conflict management, functional conflict, dysfunctional conflict

*ÖZET : Uzun yıllardan beri "çatışma", eğitim örgütlerinde önemli bir problem olarak algılanmıştır. 21. Yüzyıldan itibaren çatışma, dikkatli yönetildiği takdirde, eğitim örgütlerinin, gelişmesinde önemli bir araç haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, çatışmanın altında yatan nedenleri ve bunların öğretim elemanları ve yönetim kadrosu tarafından nasıl ele alındığını incelemektir. Devlet ve vakıf üniversitelerinde 2000-2001 akademik yılında görev almış öğretim elemanları bu araştırmanın çalışma grubunu oluşturmaktadır. Çalışma grubu, İstanbul içindeki üniversitelerden basit tesadüfi örneklem yoluyla seçilmiştir. Anket, bir dizi yapılanmamış görüşme ve konuyla ilgili literatürün (Rahim 1983; Thomas, 1977) gözden geçirilmesinden sonra son halini almıştır. İstatistiksel verilerin analizinde SPSS Programı kullanılmıştır. Manidar olan sonuçların belirlenmesinde, T Testi ve Tek Yönlü Varyans analizi kullanılmıştır.*
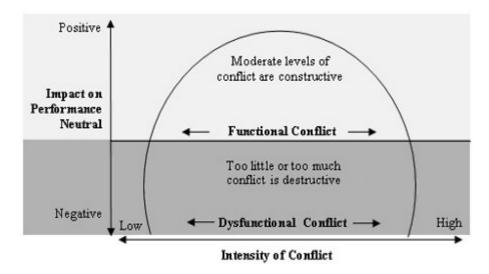
**Anahtar Kelimeler** : *Çatışma yönetim stratejileri, çatışma yönetimi, işlevsel çatışma, işlevsel olmayan çatışma*

## Introduction

Conflict has been a common phenomenon since it is an inseparable part of an organisation. Classical organization theorists believed that conflict produced inefficiency and was therefore undesirable, even detrimental to the organization and should be eliminated or at least minimised to the extent possible. Views toward conflict changed with the emergence of social systems and open system theory.
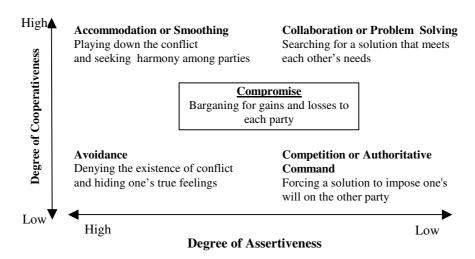
According to Rahim, organisational conflict is considered as legitimate, inevitable, and even a positive indicator of effective organization management. It is now recognised that conflict within certain limits is essential to productivity. Organisational conflict in educational systems is by no means the antitheses of the makings of quality of education (Rahim, 1983 ; Hanson, 1991 : 290). When dealt with in a constructive manner, conflicts encourage creative solutions, lead to unity and support people through change and stressful periods (King, 1999 : 11).

Whether or not conflict benefits academics and colleges depends on two factors : first one is the intensity of the conflict and the other is the way conflict is managed. The inverted "U" curve depicted in the figure below shows that conflict of moderate intensity can be good for performance. This functional conflict, or constructive conflict, stimulates people towards greater work efforts, cooperation, and creativity. At very low or very high intensities, dysfunctional conflict or destructive conflict occurs. Too much conflict is distracting and interferes with other more task-relevant activities; too little conflict may promote competency and the loss of a creative, high performance edge (Schermerhorn, 2001 : 339).



**Figure I. The Relationship between Conflict and Performance** (Schermerhorn, 2001 : 339)

In terms of interpersonal styles, people respond to conflict management in different ways. These ways shift between the degree of cooperativeness and the degree of assertiveness. Cooperativeness is the desire to satisfy another party's needs and concerns while assertiveness is the desire to satisfy one's own needs and concerns. figure below shows the five interpersonal styles of conflict management that result from various combinations of the two (Schermerhorn & Chappell, 2000 : 218).

High

Degree of Cooperativeness

**Accommodation or Smoothing**
Playing down the conflict
and seeking  harmony among parties

**Collaboration or Problem  Solving**
Searching for a solution that meets
each other's needs

**Compromise**
Barganing for gains and losses to
each party

**Avoidance**
Denying the existence of conflict
and hiding one's true feelings

**Competition or Authoritative
Command**
Forcing a solution to impose one's
will on the other party

Low

High                                                                                Low

**Degree of Assertiveness**

**Figure 2. Interpersonal styles of conflict management.** (Schermerhorn,
Chappell, 2000 : 218)

The chronic morphing and misuse of "win-win" conflict management style implies
that conflict is somehow negative. To the contrary, Lobel (1994) states that the
absence of conflict might be a sign of an unhealthy organisation. Additionally,
conflict can be constructive for organizations because it can lead, if handled
constructively, to change, adaptation, and survival. The key, then is to engage in
techniques that allow individuals and organizations to handle conflict productively
(McNary, 2003 cited from Labovitz, 1980 ; Lobel 1994). Despite its adverse effects,
today conflict is viewed by most experts as a potentially useful aspect of organisation
because it can, if properly channelled, be an engine of innovation and change. This
view recognises the necessity of conflict and explicitly encourages a certain amount
of controlled conflict in organisations (Dessler, 1998 : 511).

## Purpose, Methodology and the Research Sample

The main purpose of this study is to determine academics' conflict management
styles at universities. A series of works have been undertaken in order to collect data
for the research. Related literature and different types of questionnaires on conflict
developed by researchers (Rahim, 1983 ; Thomas, 1977 and Karip 1999) have been
analysed and a draft questionnaire was prepared. This questionnaire was applied to
40 academics at a pilot study. For the basis of obtaining more reliable data the study
was followed by face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire was given its final shape
after having academics' comments on the topic. Public and foundation universities in
Istanbul constitute the scope of this research. The scope of this research is limited to
two public and two foundation universities in Istanbul. It is assumed that the items in
the questionnaire were appropriate to test academics' conflict management styles.
The purpose of this study is to give an idea on how academics handle conflict in their
institutions.

In this study, conflict management styles were analysed under five headings, which
are "competition, compromise, collaboration, avoidance and accommodation". The

figure below is a draft illustration for the strengths and weaknesses for each style and the appropriate situations to use those styles.

**Conflict Management Styles**

| | GAINS | LOSES | APPROPRIATE SITUATION |
|---|---|---|---|
| **COMPETITION** | • Chance to win everything<br>• Exciting<br>• Exercise own sense of power | • Chance to lose everything<br>• Alienates others<br>• Discourages others working with an academic<br>• Potentially larger scale conflicts in the future | • When quick, decisive action is vital<br>• On important issues where unpopular actions need implementing<br>• On issues vital to organisation's welfare when an academic knows he / she is right<br>• Against people who take advantage of non-competitive behaviour |
| **COMPROMISE** | • No one returns home empty handed<br>• May or may not encourage creativity<br>• "Keeps the peace" | • Since neither side is totally satisfied, conflicts are likely to recur later<br>• Neither size realizes self-determination fully | • When goals are important, but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes<br>• To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues<br>• As a backup when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful |
| **COLLABORATION** | • Both sides win<br>• Creativity in problem solving<br>• Improves quality of solution and commitment<br>• Maintains relationship<br>• New level of understanding of situation<br>• Better chance for long-term solutions | • Time , in the short run<br>• Loss of sense of autonomy | • To find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised<br>• When academic's objective is to learn (professional development)<br>• To merge insights from academics with different perspectives |
| **AVOIDANCE** | • No energy or time expenditure<br>• Conserve for fights "that are more important" | • Less stimulation<br>• Less creative problem solving<br>• Little understanding of the needs of others<br>• Incomplete comprehension of work environment | • When an issue is trivial, or more important issues are pressing<br>• When an academic perceives no chance of satisfying his/ her concerns |
| **ACCOMMODATION** | • Others may view the academic as supportive<br>• Energy free for other pursuits<br>• Little muss or fuss no feathers ruffled | • Lowered self-assertion and possibly self esteem<br>• Loss of power<br>• Absence of your unique contribution to the situation | • When an academics realises that he/ she is wrong<br>• When issues are more important for others to build social credits for later issues |

Adapted from the works of (Ronald Fry, Jared Florian and Jacquie McLemore), (Kolb, Osland, Rubin, 1995 : 286) ; ( Robbins 1986 : 306)

## Data Analysis

The data were analysed quantitatively using SPSS software package. In the analysis of the data descriptive values were given; T Test, One Way Anova and Chi-Square were used to determine the meaningful differences.

## Problem Statement

"What kind of conflict management styles do academics use at universities?" is the problem statement of this study. Related sub-questions which are aimed to be answered in this study are as follows :

- How often do academics experience conflict at their faculties?
- With whom do academics experience conflict most?
- Are there meaningful differences among academics' conflict management styles related to the type of university they work?
- Are there meaningful differences among academics' conflict management styles related to their experience?
- Are there meaningful differences among academics' conflict management styles related to their titles?
- Are there meaningful differences among academics' conflict management styles related to gender?

## Findings

The questionnaire was sent to 200 academics and 150 responses were received which is equal to a response rate of 75 per cent. An analysis of the data relating to the respondents revealed that 2,8% were professors, 3,4% were assoc. professors, 13,8% assistant professors, 40,7% lecturers, 39,3% were research assistants. Total population consisted of 46,9% female and 53,1% male. Questionnaires were conducted in 3 faculties. 40% of the respondents were from the Faculty of Science and Literature, 37,9% of the respondents were from the Faculty of Education and 22,1% from Faculty of Business Administration. An analysis of the type of university revealed that 72,4 per cent work at public universities while 27,6 per cent work at foundation universities. Nearly half of the respondents experience conflict either with their colleagues or with their department heads. 11% experience conflict with faculty administrators and 6,9% experience with university administrators.

## Results and Discussion

- According to Chi-Square results there is a meaningful difference between the frequency of conflict experienced among academics related to faculty variable. (Frequency of conflict : Often : Faculty of Science and Literature; 32%; Faculty of Education 10,9%; Faculty of Business Administration 15,6%). More than half of the respondents stated that they sometimes experience conflict at their faculties. During the interviews conducted it was observed that academics at Faculty of Education are more likely to solve their problems by talking. Another point that must be taken into consideration is that most of the academics who used to work at the Faculty of Education were moved to the faculty of science and literature as a result of the restructuring process conducted by the Council of Higher Education. This might be a reason why conflict is experienced more at the faculty of science and literature. Another study conducted on teachers showed that teachers as a

group are more likely to avoid conflict and be more accomodating than are other professionals. It was also found that teachers' conflict management styles do not vary in different contexts (Cornille, Pestle & Vanwy, 1999).

• As a result of One Way Anova Analysis significance was found between academics' conflict management styles related to title variable. Tukey HSD Test was used to determine the source of significance. For dimension 1 (Collaboration) significance was determined between assoc. prof and assist. prof. Assistant professors seem to be using collaboration technique more than assoc. professors. As for Dimension 2 (Accommodation), the source of meaningfulness was between research assistants – professors and research assistants - associate professors. Research assistants use accommodation style more than professors but when compared to associate professors, associate professors use this technique more. The reason for research assistants to use accomodation style can be explained in terms of title and experience. Research assistants are in a way has to be obedient towards their superiors because their contracts are renewed by their superiors once in a year or one in two years.

• The same difference was found in terms of experience as well. Academics with 11-20 years of experience accommodate more. The reason might be that the older they get the more collaborative they become. (Years of experience, Mean 1-5 years : 29,6842; 6-10 years : 29,9836; 11-20 years : 33,8235; 21 and above years of experience : 31,400; $p < 0,05$; F= 3,349). A study focused on conflict management styles related to work experience suggest that under low-power opponent condition there was higher preference for dominating and a lower preference for avoiding, obliging, and integrating. Inexperienced subjects did not change their choice of using different conflict management styles in view of their opponent's power (Drory & Ritov, 1997).

• T test done on academics' conflict management styles and gender revealed that male academics use accommodation style more while handling conflict in their departments. Male academics said that they are the ones who accommodate when a conflicting situation is experienced. (mean : female : 1,75; male : 2,24; F= 2,98 p<0,05) This result might be interpreted in terms of women's place in the society. Although men and women have been accepted equal for a long time, subconsciously women might still be trying to prove themselves. The influence of demographic differences on conflict management styles was analysed in another study. The results indicated that visible forms of work group differences (e.g. sex) increase relationship conflict, while differences regarding informational demographics (e.g. education) increase task-focused conflict. It was also found that the similarity of values among members regarding group processes decreased both task and group conflict (Jehn, Shadwick & Thatcher, 1997). Another study reflects the role of gender on conflict management styles in another way. In the study masculine individuals were highest on the dominating conflict style, whereas feminine individuals were highest on the avoiding style, and the androgynous individuals on the integrating style. Further, upper organizational status individuals were higher on the integrating style, with the lower status individuals reported greater use of avoiding and obliging styles (Green et al., 2002). Numerous factors determine the way academics handle conflict in their institutions. Antonioni (1998)

found a relationship between the big five personality factors and the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict. The main results indicate that extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness have a positive relationship with integrating style. Extraversion has a positive relationship with dominating, while agreeableness and neuroticism have negative relationships with dominating. Extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness have a negative relationship with avoiding, while agreeableness and neuroticism have a positive relationship with avoiding (Antonioni, 1998 : 50).

- Another meaningfulness was observed between academics' conflict management styles and the university variable (F= 3,885; Public university Mean : 61,04 std : 7,2634; Foundation university : Mean : 56,60 std : 9,2731; p<0,05). Conflict management style of competition is used more among academics who work at foundation universities. Academics at foundation universities seem to be more unease with their positions since their contracts are renewed on a yearly basis. Performance based pay rise used at some foundation universities might be another reason which increases competition among academics.

## Recommendations
- Due to conflict at schools and problems in their private lives, academics at times might need professional help. Therefore "Psychological Counselling Service" should be provided to the academics as well as to the students.

- Although competition is beneficial both for academics and the institutions, it might cause some serious health problems when it turns into a personal conflict rather than a professional one. Therefore managers should be trained so as to solve this type of non-academic problems.

- Significant relationship between conflict management styles and the character type has been determined by Antonioni. Since changing a person's character is almost impossible, conflict resulting from character differences can be solved in "Weekly Professional Talks". In this way problems among academics might be solved before they arise.

- Academics who constantly tend to use accommodation and avoidance technique more might be sent to in-service training courses so as to solve their self-esteem problems.

- Long term contracts can be a solution for academics to focus on their academic works rather than worrying about their positions.

- Since most academics are expecting promotion for a higher position, and since there are limited positions available within an institution, academics find themselves in a meaningless competition. This kind of competition is dysfunctional which creates tension within an institution. Thus policy makers should try to find ways of dealing with this problem without hurting academics' feelings and without de-motivating them.

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