

# Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Strategies

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## Abstract

*This research is aimed to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and subordinates' conflict management strategies. Research instrument was a 55-item questionnaire which was distributed among 90 employees of Golestan province gas company in Iran out of which 82 was returned and only 79 one was usable. Hence, response rate in this research was 91%. While Validity was approved based on conformity factor analysis results, reliability was approved by Cronbach's alpha which more than 0.7 was. In order to test hypothesis we used Pearson correlation analysis and structural equation modeling. Research findings indicated that emotional Intelligence is negatively associated with problem solving and bargaining strategies. However there isn't any significant relationship between emotional intelligence and control strategy. Since conflict management styles are affected by variety of antecedents, future studies are needed to investigate other influence factors such as personal characteristic, innovation and etc. There is also need to investigate this research among managers and subordinates simultaneously in order to compare results.*

**Keywords:** Conflict management, emotional intelligence, problem solving strategy, bargaining strategy, structural equation method

## Introduction

In these days human resource is one the most valuable organization asset providing competitive advantages for organization. Complex relationships in organization which cause interaction between employees (action and reaction) and employees' co-dependence alongwith their different thoughts, conceptions and believes make "conflict" an inevitable part of today organizations life. Conflict is the result of different opinions to achieve organizational goals which is existing in intra-group relations<sup>1,2</sup>, strategic decision making<sup>3</sup> and other organizational parts. Although conflict foster innovation, creativity and alteration, it wastes organization resources and energy. Therefore conflict management and control are one of the most essential skills for managers<sup>4</sup>. One of the important areas in organization conflict attracting researchers' attention is influence of emotional intelligence on conflict management strategies<sup>5-8</sup>. Emotional intelligence is a new concept emerging in management literature since 1990. This concept explains place of feeling and emotion in human abilities. An individual's emotional competency increases his power to deal with environmental challenges which consequently enhance his mental health<sup>9</sup>. In this regard, the objective of this study is to measure subordinates' emotional intelligence, recognize conflict management strategies and discover relationship between these two variables among subordinates.

**Literature Review: Emotional Intelligence:** Emotional intelligence is the perception of feelings in order to create emotion. Emotional intelligence not only contributes in better

thinking but also helps an individual to be aware of one's own feelings and emotions. It also enhances emotions along with intelligence by harmonizing affections with emotions<sup>9</sup>. In fact, emotional intelligence is one's ability to be aware of one's own feeling and others which help maintain effective relationship with coworkers. There are two main approaches to emotional intelligence, emotional intelligence ability<sup>9</sup> and multidimensional emotional intelligence<sup>7,10</sup>. Mayer and Salovey<sup>9</sup> conceptualize a model emphasizing on cognition part of intellectual and emotional growth. This model consists of four components: perception, assimilation, understanding and management of emotions. Since, emotional intelligence concept changed fundamentally in consequence of its popularization, in this transition the ability of perception and process of emotion combined with some other qualities which results in arising multi-dimensional model. This model with a wide range of characteristic variables is a cognition model, in contrast of Mayer and Salovey model. One of these models dissimilarities is distinction between "attribute" and "information process" of emotional intelligence. The "attribute" concept is correlated with indicators such as empathy, courage and optimism while the "information process" is related to abilities like recognizing, expressing and regulating emotions. According to Goleman<sup>11</sup> model, emotional intelligence components are:

**Self-awareness:** Associated with recognizing emotions we feel and know why. It is also one's awareness of his owns feelings and what he thinks about it.

**Self-regulation:** Emotional balance is called self-regulation. It also contains control of feelings, emotions. Self-regulation is a

fundamental ability with significant effect on emotional behavior control.

**Motivation:** Motivation by the meaning of being effective and initiative is the ability to motivate others and lead them in spite of discouragement. It uses emotions as a tool to achieve goals.

**Empathy:** it is associated with the ability of sympathizing with other's feeling and recognizing their point of views. Empathy is also the ability of realizing and influencing others feelings or being sensitive to their emotions, requirements, and interests.

**Social Skills:** It is associated with the ability of recognition and empathy with others. In this regard creating effective relationships, listening effectively and asking important questions, cooperation, mentoring and negotiation are part of this skill. In the other word, it means recognition and awareness of other's feelings and emotions and listening to them when they need to. This model is the one we use in this research.

**Conflict Management:** Conflict is an apparent struggle between at least two individuals when one of them feels that lack of facilities, goal incompatibility, and interferes with others hinders their goal achievement<sup>12</sup>. It is a phenomenon with positive and negative influences on employee and organization performance. Functional conflict enhances organizational performance and health whereas dysfunctional conflict causes performance reduction, struggle and strain in organization<sup>6</sup>. Functional use of conflict requires recognition and perception of its nature and antecedents along with acquiring conflict control and management skills which is one of the most important management skills these days. This skill has significant role in organizational managers' succession. Functional conflict could increase innovation, creativity and effective change in organization and consequently assist managers to reach their goals<sup>13</sup>. Some researchers believe that conflict is the third subject after god and love that most occupies human mind<sup>14</sup>. There are trends cooperating to make conflict unavoidable such as: constant changes, more variety in employee composition, more team works (virtual and self oriented teams), less face to face communication, more world economy with inter cultural transactions<sup>14</sup>.

Conflict management is recognition and control of conflict in a rational, fair and effective way. Conflict can be managed by utilizing skills such as effective communication, problem solving and negotiation. In view of the fact that our ability to manage conflict could change its result, first of all we should recognize and analyze it in order to distinguish initiation reasons. Then the critical point is to select appropriate style<sup>14</sup>. According to Blake and Mouton's<sup>15</sup> management network, there are two conflict behaviors- cooperation (concerned for others) and assertion (concerned for self). Combining these two types of behavior result in five styles of conflict management as follow:

**Avoiding** (low cooperation and low assertion): Ignore both parties profit by withdrawing a conflict or suspending a solution<sup>16</sup>.

**Compromising** (intermediate in assertion and cooperation): It involves a situation where both parties sacrifice some of their desires to reach to a compromise<sup>17</sup>.

**Integrating** (high assertion and high cooperation): seeking mutually advantages achievements by both parties<sup>17</sup>.

**Obligating** (low assertion and high cooperation): Try to satisfy other party needs despite of sacrificing own desires<sup>17</sup>.

**Dominating** (low cooperation and high assertion): Demonstrate utilization of authoritative and imperious method to control a conflict<sup>17</sup>.

On the other hand, Putnam and Wilson<sup>18</sup> combine these five styles into three named problem solving, control and bargaining. These three styles are used in this research as conflict management styles.

**Conceptual Model:** Researches indicate that managers or employees in possession of high level of emotional intelligence and technical experience will suppress newly established conflicts, team and organization weakness, communication vagueness, obscurity in mutual communication with more awareness and expertise<sup>19</sup>. Goleman<sup>11</sup> also believed that employees with higher emotional intelligence have higher competencies in negotiation and problem solving.

Individuals with high emotional intelligence could understand conflict better, recognize it faster and direct it by the means of empathy and confidence resulting in a place in which employees have higher mental health. In this environment individuals feel valued, accepted, supported and relied, therefore, could have healthy relationships. This nurture their mental health, productivity and profitability. Functional conflict becomes real in such an environment. Srivasan<sup>20</sup> in his study found that there is positive relationship between management experience and emotional intelligence. Sunindjoet al.<sup>21</sup> explore this relationship among leaders. They realize that leaders with high emotional intelligence have tendency toward adaptive and cooperative leadership styles.

According to Susan<sup>12</sup> when participants are exposed to a conflict with their boss, following compromising style they tend to use collaborating style. Are also mentioned positive relationship between emotional intelligence and compromising and integrating conflict management styles, and declared that integrating style is predictable by emotional intelligence. Yu et al.<sup>22</sup> studied subordinates conflict management style relation with managers' emotional intelligence among 227 MBA students in China. In this study they discovered positive relationship between managers' emotional intelligence and compromising and integration styles.

Fahim<sup>23</sup> study about emotional intelligence relation with conflict management among operational and teaching managers in

selected universities revealed that emotional intelligence is negatively associated with control style and positively associated with problem solving style whereas it is not related to bargaining style.

Vatankhah et al.<sup>24</sup> in their study declared that amount of managers' emotional intelligence is associated negatively with bargaining style in conflict management while there isn't any valid relation between amount of emotional intelligence and compromising and control styles.

Keramati and Roshan<sup>25</sup> study about emotional intelligence relevance to conflict management styles demonstrated that emotional intelligence is positively associated with bargaining style. This result indicates that along with escalation in emotional intelligence tendency to use problem solving style increases in comparison to control and bargaining styles. Table 1 briefly demonstrates various studies about correlation between emotional intelligence and conflict management style.

**Table-1**

**Conceptual study in various researches about relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management style**

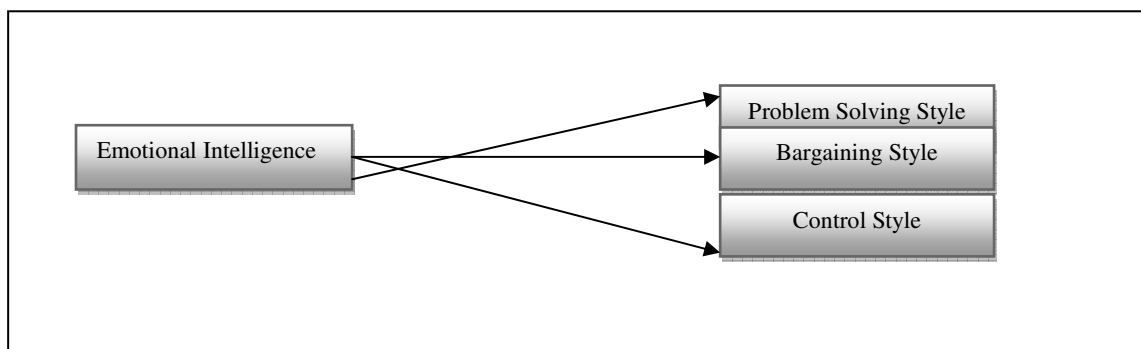
| Relation                                    | Research  |
|---|---|
| Emotional intelligence and problem solving  | (Rahim,2002), (Susan,2006), (Sunindijo et al., 2005) (Yu et al.,2006), (Fahim,2005) |
| Emotional intelligence and bargaining style | (Rahim,2002), (Sunindijo et al., 2005), (Keramati, Roshan,2006)                     |
| Emotional Intelligence and control          | (Fahim,2005), (Keramati, Roshan,2006)   |

**Hypotheses:** H1: Subordinates' Emotional Intelligence is positively associated with Problem solving style. H2: Subordinates' Emotional Intelligence is positively associated with bargaining style. H3: Subordinates' Emotional Intelligence is positively associated with control style.

## Research Methodology

This research is application study from the viewpoint of goal and analytic-survey research from the viewpoint of method and is based on covariance matrix with the use of structural equation analysis. Data of this study were collected from employees' of Golestan province gas organization. Total number of employees in this organization is 100. Statistical sample society is 79 according to Cochran formula with 95% confidential level. Considering response rate less than 100%, 90 questionnaires were distributed randomly and 82 are returned among which 79 are usable.

To measure variables, standard measures extracted from literature review. Measures which supposed to be used in Iran customized with translation- back translation method. 25 items was adapted from Weisinger<sup>26</sup> to assess Emotional Intelligence. After factor validity, 0.79 alpha reliability was adequate for this measure. We measure employees' conflict management style with Putnam and Wilson<sup>18</sup> OCCI measure. This measure consists of three style, bargaining, problem solving and control with 0.719, 0.71, 0.716 alpha reliability, respectively. This scale asks respondents to specify their reaction in conflict situations. Validity measured by two methods, formal validity and factor validity. Formal validity assured by gathering some of management department academic faculties and students opinion about instrument. However, factor validity was ascertained by conformity factor analysis using SPSS VER19. It's result displayed in table 2. First of all in factor analysis we have to make sure the number of data is sufficient for this analysis. Hence, we use KMO and Bartlet test. If the amount of KMO indicator was close to 1 (usually more than 0.5) data are appropriate for factor analysis. Therefore, in this research with all KMO more than 0.5, data are appropriate. On the other hand, in Bartletttest which examines factor analysis appropriateness for structural exploration sig should be less than 5% for each item. In this research 4 item of emotional intelligence, 1 item from problem solving style, 1 item of bargaining style and 2 item from control style with sig less than 0.3 were omitted and rest of the items employed in analysis.



**Figure-1**  
**Conceptual Model**

## Results and Discussion

Different statistical analysis method including Pearson correlation in order to calculate zero order correlation coefficient, structural equation method in order to evaluate suitability of this model was employed. Analysis was done with AMOS V.20 and SPSS V.19 software.

**Descriptive results:** 40% of respondents categorized between the age of 20-30 and 30-40 years old, while 14% was in 40-50 range and only 6% was in over 50 years old range. High majority of respondents, 34%, had between 1-5 years work experience, 26% had 6 to 10 and 22% had 11 to 15 years experience. However, 18% of respondents with over 18 years had highest work experience. 59 respondents out of 79 were men and 20 were women. Degree distribution among 79 respondents is as follow: 13 diploma, 20 high diploma, 44 bachelors and 2 masters.

Relationship among variables was examined by Pearson correlation analysis. Its result including degree of correlation, cronbach's alpha, average and deviation are presented in table 3.

Coefficients in this table indicate that highest correlation coefficient belongs to problem solving relation with bargaining style with the amount of 0.574, whereas smallest correlation coefficient quantity belongs to bargaining style relation with emotional intelligence.

**Hypothesis test:**  $\beta$ s quantities for relationships in model after testing the casual model is demonstrated in figure 2. Factor load of each item of variables were significant and demonstrated in table 4. The largest quantity among three paths is associated with emotional intelligence relation with bargaining style while smallest quantity belongs to emotional intelligence relation with control style which is not significant. Emotional intelligence has the strongest influence on bargaining style with 80.1% correlation coefficient and predictability of problem solving style by emotional intelligence is 15.6%.

Desirability of model adjustment is ascertained by adjustment indicators. Acceptable quantity for each variable is displayed in this table to compare with their quantities in model. According to this table all quantities were higher than acceptable and they indicate satisfactory adjustment of SEM method except RMR and RMSEA which are 0.11 and 0.09 respectively.

**Table-2**  
**Factor analysis results**

| Factor                 | KMO   | Bartlett | R-square | Repeating time |
|------------------------|-------|----------|----------|----------------|
| Emotional Intelligence | 0.598 | 0.00     | 76.39    | 5              |
| Problem Solving style  | 0.739 | 0.00     | 66.36    | 2              |
| Bargaining Style       | 0.61  | 0.00     | 65.54    | 2              |
| Control Style          | 0.659 | 0.00     | 69.81    | 3              |

**Table-3**  
**Average, deviation, reliability and variable correlation**

| Variable                  | Average | Deviation | 1        | 2       | 3       | 4       |
|---------------------------|---------|-----------|----------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. Emotional intelligence | 4.2     | 0.63      | (0.798)  |         |         |         |
| 2. Bargaining style       | 4.42    | 0.83      | -0.072   | (0.719) |         |         |
| 3. Problem solving style  | 3.85    | 1.07      | -0.311** | 0.574** | (0.71)  |         |
| 4. Control style          | 3.99    | 0.36      | 0.088**  | 0.211*  | 0.296** | (0.716) |

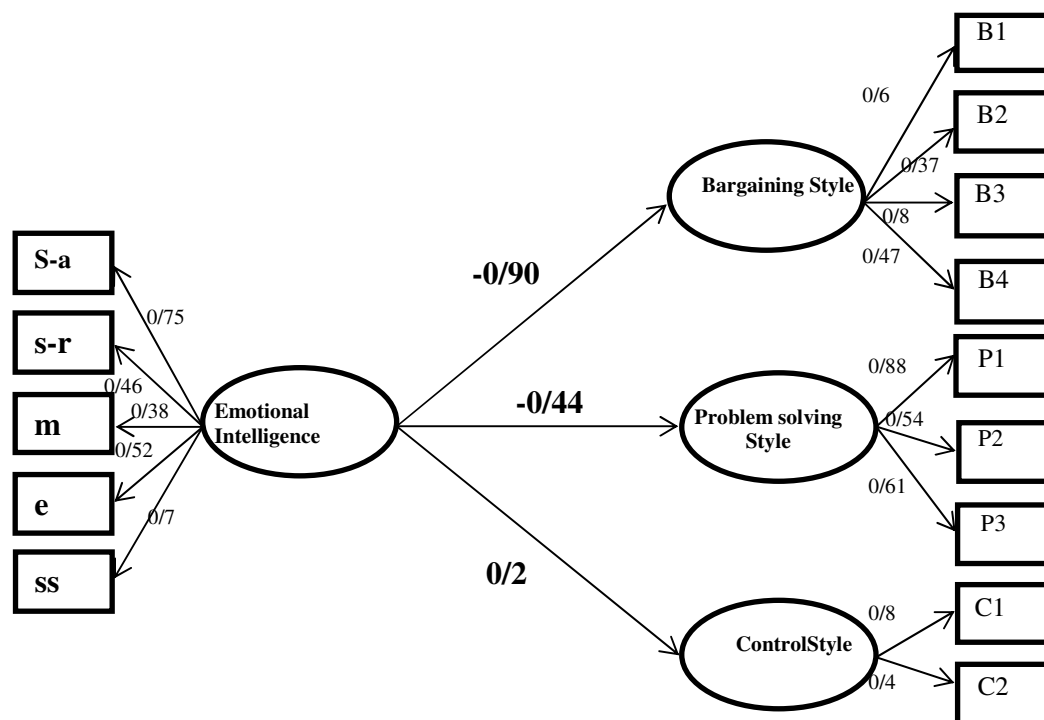
Note: \*\* correlation [1-tailed] with significance level  $P < 0.01$ ; \* correlation [1-tailed] with significance level  $p < 0.05$ , Numbers in brackets demonstrate Cronbach's alpha

**Table-4**  
**Model adjustment indicators**

|                       | RMSEA       | RMR         | NFI        | TLI        | CFI        | GFI        | $df/\chi^2$ |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Acceptable quantities | $\leq 0.05$ | $\leq 0/09$ | $\geq 0/9$ | $\geq 0/9$ | $\geq 0/9$ | $\geq 0/9$ | $\leq 3$    |
| Model quantities      | 0/091       | 0/114       | 0/99       | 0/9        | 0/95       | 0/93       | 1/83        |

**Table-5**  
**Result of hypothesis test**

| Hypothesize  | Standard $\beta$ | Significance Level | Test Result                    |
|--|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Emotional intelligence $\rightarrow$ Bargaining Style      | -0.9             | 0.000              | Approved (significant)         |
| Emotional intelligence $\rightarrow$ Problem Solving Style | -0.44            | 0.000              | Approved (significant)         |
| Emotional intelligence $\rightarrow$ Control Style         | 0.2              | 0.117              | Not approved (not significant) |



**Figure-2**  
**Structural Equation model**

Significance level reported by software is used to test hypothesize. Significance level for H1 and H2 is less than 0.05, however H3 which examine relationship between emotional intelligence and control style will be rejected with significant level higher than 0.05. As illustrated in table 3, H1 and H2 are significant nevertheless H3 is not significant which results in approval of first two hypothesize and rejection of the third.

## Conclusion

As discussed earlier our objective in study was to examine predictability of conflict management style with emotional intelligence. In this process we use several statistical techniques. First of all we employ Pearson Correlation analysis then we test research hypothesize using SEM. Result of this study in support of Rahim et al.<sup>6</sup> Vatankehah<sup>24</sup> and Feiziet al.<sup>27</sup> reveals that emotional intelligence is associated negatively to bargaining style which means managers with higher emotional intelligence have lower intension to put bargaining style to use. Satisfactory social relations, empathy and acceptance of advice and criticism are features of high emotional intelligent individuals. These characteristics prevent managers to utilize bargaining style for conflict management. In addition result provided support for negative association between emotional intelligence and problem solving style in contrast with Rahimet al.<sup>6</sup>, Fahim<sup>23</sup> and Feiziet al.<sup>27</sup> findings. Furthermore, findings of this research express that there isn't any significant relationship between emotional intelligence and control style contrary to Rahimet al.<sup>6</sup> and Fahim<sup>23</sup> research results, although it is compatible with

findings of Vatankehah<sup>24</sup> that managers who select control style in conflict management while they have high concern for themselves, behave against other party's desire regardless of whether it may cause opposition. In this style managers pressure subordinates and impose his or her desire on them<sup>11</sup>.

Research's variables mean are all above average although none of them is satisfactory. Bargaining style with 4.42 has the highest and problem solving with 3.85 has the lowest quantity. In view of the fact that researchers consider conflict management as important as activities like planning, organizing, communication, motivation and decision- making, or even more<sup>14</sup>, one of the most important factors in managing a conflict effectively is manager's ability to select efficient and productive style to prevail the conflict. On the other hand, conflict is inevitable in organizational environment therefore understanding diverse styles of conflict management and their association with antecedents is vital to manage organizational environment. In this regard we suggest strive for creating and enhancing organizational culture in which employees prepare themselves to embrace and manage conflict rather than ignore it. Acquisitive emotional intelligence is either a sign that individuals are capable to nurture and enhance above mentioned ability in them. In the viewpoint<sup>28</sup> of individuals with higher emotional intelligence encounter with environmental conflicts better. As a result organization should heighten employees' emotional abilities in order to increase organization efficiency.

**Limitations and suggestion:** In this study the method of collecting data (survey) and gathering data from convenient sample, limit data generalization and accuracy, and also explaining variables. In addition to survey emotional Intelligence and conflict management styles we use self reported measures as a result, the threat of common method variance is existed because the inherent characteristic of self-reported measure is to reflect respondent self opinion and perception.

In conclusion, since conflict management styles effect by variety of antecedents, future study is needed to investigate other influence factors such as personal characteristic, innovation and etc. There is also need to investigate this research among managers and subordinates simultaneously to compare the result. To achieve more accurate result, it will also be useful to probe relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management styles more precisely with qualitative research method including investigation and observation.

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