

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

Training section

Services and conflict management: Cultural and European integration perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 11 August 2009

Keywords:

Conflict management styles
Turkey
Services management
European integration

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses and discusses the implications of three important characteristics (assertiveness, performance orientation and gender egalitarianism) of Turkish culture from a conflict management styles perspective in the light of the prospective integration of Turkey with the European Union (EU). The analysis of the three cultural characteristics indicates that Turkish people are more likely to resort to avoiding, accommodating and compromising strategies in situations of conflict, rather than collaborating and competing. The study shows that there are important differences between Turkey and its main trading partners regarding assertiveness, performance orientation and gender egalitarianism.

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1. Introduction

The issues of efficiency and effectiveness are becoming increasingly more important for service businesses. The efficiency and effectiveness of service business are influenced by a variety of factors. Intra-individual or interpersonal conflict is one of the factors which impinge on the level of efficiency and effectiveness an organization attains. In an organization the way people perceive conflict and how they approach and handle conflict is rather important from a conflict management and resolution perspective.

This paper analyses and discusses conflict management styles of service providers from a conflict handling viewpoint. The three cultural characteristics, assertiveness, performance orientation and gender egalitarianism, of Turkish culture are analyzed and discussed in comparison with Turkey's main trading partners in the EU (European Union).

The dimensions of conflict management styles in service businesses are analyzed with reference to the findings of, especially, House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004), Hall (1976, 1983), and Hofstede (2001, 2003) and a number of other cross-cultural studies.

The study of conflict management styles from a cross-cultural perspective is important, particularly as Turkey will be joining the EU within the next decade or so, subject to Turkey's progress in making the necessary structural adjustments.¹ Although Turkey with its fast growth economy,² and relatively younger population offers many benefits to the EU, there are

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¹ On 17th December 2004 at the Brussels summit the leaders of the European Union member states offered a formal date to start accession talks with Turkey on 3rd October 2005. Although Turkey will still not be a member of the EU for at least another 10 years, receiving a formal date to start accession talks can be considered as a major success when one looks at the 45-year-long EU adventure of Turkey starting in 1963 with a protocol signed between Turkey and the Union.

² Turkey, with its GDP of \$627.2 billion, ranked as the 17th largest economy in the world in 2006 (World Bank, 2007). Its exports reached 85 billion dollars in 2006 and 105.9 billion dollars in 2007 (Foreign Trade Directorate, 2007). Turkey's mission of integration with the EU are reflected in its trade figures too, as 57% of Turkey's exports are to the EU countries, and 43% of its imports are from the EU countries.

serious concerns among certain EU technocrats as to the limits of the EU's *absorption capacity* of this large country, with a population of 72 million (World Bank, 2007), and with certain distinct cultural differences.

2. The rationale for the study

The rationale for the study is twofold. First, contrary to what some people may think, the European Union is not only about economic integration, as it has many cultural and social aspects. Besides, macroeconomic, cultural and social issues are usually intertwined, and have implications at microlevel too, both for individuals and for business firms. Cultural differences both within and across countries can result in conflictive communication.

Through the enlargements over the years the European Union has become a multicultural *society*. Many researchers validate the fact that diversity can result in increased conflict. Individuals may react negatively to the cultural practices of others (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Pearson & Stephan, 1998; Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). In the light of the prospective integration of Turkey with the EU, it is considered worthwhile to explore and understand Turkish culture from the viewpoint of conflict. It is believed that this understanding would help human resources and marketing managers operating not only in Turkish businesses but also operating in businesses in other EU member countries, and in the world in general.

Second, it is considered that an understanding of conflict management and the influence of conflict on dimensions of conflict management styles are relatively more significant for service businesses. In service organizations as many as 90% of staff may have direct contact with the consumer, compared with only 10% in manufacturing. This increased contact with the customers usually causes customers evaluate services based on personnel alone providing those services. Research indicates that 60 per cent of service failures are initiated with frontline employees (Tax & Brown, 1998). Unless service failures are resolved satisfactorily, there may be serious negative implications for services firms such as customer dissatisfaction, negative word-of-mouth, and loss of customers (Babakus, Yavas, Karatepe, & Avci, 2003; Karatepe, 2006).

According to Ross and Boles (1994) when customers participate in the service production and delivery process, the service providers perform a boundary-spanning role which serves as the interface between the service firm and the customer. Previous studies suggest that personnel filling these boundary-spanning positions between the organization and its customers experience high levels of role conflict resulting in both intra-individual and interpersonal conflicts (Behrman & Perreault, 1984; Hsieh & Yen, 2005; Papadopoulou-Bayliss, Ineson, & Wilkie, 2001; Parkington & Schneider, 1979; Shamir, 1980). This is due to the fact that service providers may encounter incompatible job demands or expectations from both customers and management (Hsieh & Yen, 2005; Jackson and Schuler, 1985).

Additionally, as frontline employees are the lowest paid members of service firms, they are more susceptible to high levels of role stress (Weatherly & Tansik, 1993) and emotional exhaustion Boles, Dean, Ricks, Short, and Wang (2000) arising from various types of conflicts they may experience.

Goods products are produced first, then stored, distributed, sold and consumed. Due to the separable nature of products, manufacturing businesses may achieve economies of scale through centralised production. Apart from the potential disadvantages relating to economies of scale, the inseparability characteristic of services has serious quality implications. For goods products, there exist many opportunities for monitoring quality before the product reaches the customer. However, as the production and the exchange activities usually take place at the same time, and usually with the participation of the customer, services are more prone to cause dissatisfaction for the customer as there will not be many opportunities to make corrections before a service is delivered to its final customer. It is commonly known that the quality of the service received by external customers cannot be higher than the quality of the service received by internal customers, at least in the medium and long run. Therefore, any inappropriate behavior displayed by employees, such as interpersonal and interfunctional conflict occurring at the presence of customers, may have far more serious quality and customer satisfaction implications for service businesses. This means that particularly the inseparability nature of services requires a more significant emphasis to be placed on the marketing, human resource planning, recruitment and selection, motivation, training and development, performance appraisal and compensation activities in service businesses.

Based on the above explanations it may be stated that a deeper understanding of conflict for services managers in Turkey, and managers who have any relationship with Turkish businesses has paramount of importance as Turkey has a significant services sector which has been continuously growing. The contribution of the services sector to the GDP of Turkey has grown from 37% in 1968 to 64% in 2005 (World Bank, 2007). Additionally, the employment in services has grown from 26% in 1980 to 46% in 2005. As one of the important service sector industries Turkish tourism ranked as the 9th in the World Tourism League in 2005 with 20.3 million tourists representing a 2.5% of all tourist arrivals in the world (World Tourism Organization, 2006). In terms of tourism revenues, with 18.2 billion dollars and 2.7% share of the total market, Turkey ranked as the 8th country in the world.

Consequently, as explained above and will be explained further below, conflict management styles of employees may have highly significant implications for business firms, especially the ones operating in the services sector where employees are on the front lines of intercultural encounters. This also means that there is a strong need to develop and implement appropriate training interventions in business firms operating in the services sector. Following a series of explanations, analysis and discussions of conflict management styles in Turkish culture from a business management

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