# Training and cultural context in the Arab Emirates: fighting a losing battle?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the delivery of corporate objectives in customer service in the training of employees in a cultural context at odds with the proposed training outcomes.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A training program created to encourage collaborative and competitive styles in customer interaction, delivered in a major bank in the UAE, was the focus of the case.

**Findings** – A literature review suggests that collaborative and competitive styles (of all the five conflict mode preferences) are positively correlated with business performance. The overwhelming preference for compromising and avoiding styles found amongst trainees in this bank showed that specific cultural context can significantly modify the desired outcomes of Western-style training programs. The conflict mode preferences seen to encourage collaborative and competitive styles were significantly below best-practice averages in this case.

**Research limitations/implications** – Significant differences are discovered between the attitudes of the trainee group and the conflict mode preferences described in an international benchmarking study of excellence and quality in customer service.

**Practical implications** – The practical implications for training effectiveness in the Arab world (one of the largest consumers of corporate training worldwide) are explored, together with a study of how the current approaches to training in the region might be modified to improve training results.

**Originality/value** – This study of 70 UAE bank trainees suggests that in the task of trying to achieve corporate needs to increase efficiency, productivity and profitability, culture poses an important barrier. The paper provides further evidence of the importance of cultural context in management practices, in a little-studied region of the world.

**Keywords** Training, Cultural studies, Banking, Customer service management, Employees, United Arab Emirates

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the impact of cultural context on conflict mode preference, and hence the effectiveness of training of new recruits in basic business skills, including negotiating skills, conflict resolution and dealing with customers generally. The research findings suggest that business skill training outcomes based upon international standards and assumptions may be significantly modified by the pre-existence of culturally specific beliefs and values.

A problematic issue here is that of international standards in business skills training, particularly in negotiating and conflict resolution. There is an assumption here that these standards can be identified and have been validated by previous research. The definition of what comprises international standards with regards to

appropriate behaviors in conflict situations and the implications for business success has been taken from a range of sources. However, these definitions have predominantly been taken from sources originating in North America, Europe and Australia, yet they are being applied all over the world.

The work of Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and the development of their "Conflict Mode Instrument", widely quoted in undergraduate and postgraduate textbooks as well as in research papers, has been used as a diagnostic tool for determining conflict mode preferences amongst our sample cohort. This approach to conflict mode identification and the link with personality is well established. The authors define five modes of conflict: Competing, Accommodating, Collaborating, Compromising and Avoiding. These five modes were adapted from the ground-breaking work of Blake and Mouton (1964) that linked personality strategies to conflict resolution, defined as: Forcing, Smoothing, Problem-solving, Sharing and Withdrawing.

Although each style is seen as having advantages and disadvantages in particular contexts, Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) observe that "most researchers share the view that an integrating style is best for managing conflicts in organizations, because this style is aimed at solving the problem, respects the needs and interests of both sides, and is based on achieving a satisfactory outcome for each side".

Most studies of conflict mode preferences and their impact on the acquisition of business skills (and hence contribution to business success) were developed in the West. Analysis of cultural context in conflict-mode preference is generally lacking in the copious literature on conflict management. This paper thus tries to fill this gap, alerting trainers operating around the globe to factors that could negate their efforts to achieve management-led communications and customer service objectives.

## The cultural context

A useful starting point in any current discussion of training and values in the Arab world is the UN sponsored *Arab Human Development Report, 2002*, further updated and developed in 2003. This report is a "no holds barred" social audit of the Arab world and it provides some valuable insights into the social and human development context within which this current study takes place, noting that:

> The Arab region suffers from a severe shortage of detailed data and information necessary to undertake a comprehensive examination of human development, especially with respect to the dimensions of institutional context and knowledge acquisition (*AHDR, 2002*, p. 25).

Thus, there are very few serious studies that focus specifically on training issues in the Arab world, so the current study will hopefully contribute to a useful body of knowledge in this area.

The report attempted to gauge what Arabs considered to be the most important issues they faced. Amongst other conclusions, the report states that "overall, the poll clearly suggests that job availability is the most common concern of youth" (*AHDR, 2002*, p. 30).

So, perceived lack of job opportunities by young people in the Arab world in particular may be a contributing factor in workplace behavior. This study discovered that a sample group of bank trainees do demonstrate attitudes and behaviors that are related to self-preservation. This may help explain the divergence between the sample group's attitudes and the outcomes of studies in North America, Europe and Australia

(upon which the literature review of preferred conflict mode and business performance outcomes is based).

The report also asserts that human development is dependent upon a democratic socio-political environment which fosters "opportunity, empowerment and equality ... [for] all citizens" (*AHDR, 2002*, p. 115). The report goes on to argue that democracy is the:

> ... form of government that is best able to establish the kind of flexible and dynamic educational system that is essential for building, developing and empowering the individual of the new Arab age (*AHDR, 2002*, p. 115).

This link between democracy and empowerment suggests that the existence of non-democratic systems in the Arab world may lead to *dis*empowerment. This perception of disempowerment can significantly influence workplace behaviors, encouraging self-preservation, the avoidance of blame, and perceived need to execute tasks without any error.

The cultural context thus can lead to an aversion to risk. In relationships with colleagues and customers, this manifests itself as an aversion to exercising, valuing or enabling discretionary workplace attitudes and behaviors. This can compromise positive business outcomes for the organization concerned (such as in making sales, developing customer relationships and building teamwork amongst colleagues).

In order to further understand the cultural context, two theorists have had a major influence on understanding cross-cultural behavioral issues – Hofstede (1984, 1994) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997).

In particular, Hofstede's work on cultural difference has been reported widely. Fundamental to his work is his recognition of four dimensions of culture (Hofstede, 1984), described as individualism ("I" versus "we" consciousness), power distance (levels of equality or the importance of status), uncertainty avoidance (the need for rules and regulations) and masculinity (attitudes towards achievement and the roles of men and women). Hofstede's subsequent research reveals that "Arab Countries" score highly on both power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1994).

The underlying hypothesis to these "cross-cultural management" studies is that business attitudes and resultant behaviours, including attitudes with respect to negotiating and conflict resolution both with customers and colleagues, can be, and often are, culturally specific. Thus, we could expect to find within the Arab world attitudes and behaviours that reflect these imperatives. These could manifest themselves in avoiding and compromising stances within customer and colleague relationships.

What has not been examined to date, however, is the issue that concerns this paper. That is, the efficacy of *training* in Arab cultures that attempts to promote international standards in negotiating and conflict resolution. It is the aim of this paper to suggest that international values in respect to handling conflict with customers and colleagues may be compromised in the face of oppositional cultural contextual values. This has obvious implications for the design and delivery of such training programs, and their attempts to achieve corporate management objectives in communications and customer service.

**Conflict mode benchmarks**

Conflict has been defined as "the struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources, in which the aims of the groups or individuals involved are not only to obtain the desired values, but to also neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals" (Porter and Taplin, 1987). The vital issue here is the use of conflict for positive outcomes, especially in terms of dealing with colleagues and customers and thus impacting on business performance.

As mentioned above, Thomas and Kilmann and their Conflict Mode Instrument (1974), identifying the *Competing, Compromising, Avoiding, Accommodating* and *Collaborating* modes, was used as part of the training approach in this case study of 70 first-level entry UAE national recruits at a major UAE bank (identified in this study as "the bank"). These concepts were matched to the definition of "ideal" negotiating and conflict resolution styles as indicated in a literature review.

This literature survey suggests that a problem-solving (or *collaborating*) style is seen as generally effective in most organizational conflicts, especially where there are communication problems or in solving strategic problems linked to goals, policies and long-term planning in organizations (Wood *et al.*, 2004, p. 604). Furthermore, "research shows that managers believe that a compromising style hampers performance and the attainment of goals" (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967, pp. 1-47).

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) explain that there are "no universal right answers" in relation to their Conflict Mode Instrument and that effectiveness depends on the requirements of the situation and the skill in which the conflict mode is used. Significantly, they list warning signals for the overuse or under-use of each mode.

A high score for the Collaborative mode can result in too much time spent solving problems, and may not encourage collaborative behaviors in the other party (given that it takes two to effectively solve a conflict). Under-use of this mode can mean a lack of appreciation of differences as opportunities to learn or solve problems. It can also mean lack of commitment to problem-solving outcomes.

Being overly Competing in approach can result in intimidated colleagues who are reluctant to share problems. Being low on the Competing preference can mean a tendency to feel powerless, be vacillating and unable to take a firm stand, even on an issue about which one feels strongly.

Accommodating, when used in extreme can be a sign of too much deference and lax discipline. Under-use suggests problems in building goodwill and a lack of recognition of legitimate exceptions to rules.

Over-use of Compromising is seen as reflecting a lack of appreciation and awareness of the important issues of the principles, values and long-term objectives of the organization. It also suggests an emphasis on bargaining and trading, creating a cynical climate of gamesmanship, and undermining interpersonal trust. Under-use reflects embarrassment over bargaining and refusal to make concessions.

Finally, the over-use of Avoiding suggests a lack of co-ordination where participants avoid discussions of issues, the use of a dysfunctional amount of energy devoted to caution and the avoidance of issues, and the need for issues to be faced and resolved. Important decisions may be made by default, without adequate consultation. On the other hand, the under-use of Avoiding can result in the stirring up of hostilities and the feeling of being over-whelmed by too many issues.

A useful compendium by the *Harvard Business Review* confirms the textbook summaries that emphasize the importance of the collaborative or problem-solving approach to conflict. Overall, conflict is seen as healthy, as long as this conflict gives rise to productive and creative problem resolution. For example, corporate harmony and individual initiative can be preserved when managers try to understand their differences (through Collaborating), whilst Avoiding tends to reduce creativity (Schmidt and Tannenbaum, 1960). Meanwhile, "enriched problem solving" has the benefits of welcoming differences, promoting understanding, clarification, a recognition and acceptance of feelings; the establishment of ground rules; the maintenance of relationships and enhanced communication.

In another *HBR* article, two different approaches to problem-solving are suggested. These are helping the disputants to see the issues from each others' point of view, and the forming of views about an ideal relationship between the two groups. It is suggested that Co-operative and Collaborative behaviors can be encouraged and mediated by neutral facilitators (Blake and Mouton, 1984).

The conflict-handling approach outlined by Keiser (1988) suggests that confrontation (or Competing/forcing behaviors) "will poison the water" and Compromise "will rob you of your margin". The solution is to "lure your customer into a search for inventive answers to tough problems".

Other writers arguing for the creative and positive use of conflict and the role of active problem-solving include Pascale (1991) and Pascale *et al.* (2000) who discuss the value of self-renewal and company renewal through the creating and breaking of paradigms. There will always be battles between the forces of tradition and the forces of transformation, and that these must be dealt with proactively and not Avoided or Compromised.

de Bono (1986) also argues against Compromise and consensus in conflict. With his life-long emphasis on the study of thinking, de Bono suggests that "the way the mind works impacts on the attitude to conflict" and that people disagree because they see things differently, they want different things, their thinking style encourages them to act in a certain way, or because they feel they are supposed to do a certain thing. Thus conflict handling involving fighting (Competing) and negotiating and bargaining (Compromising) are *not* the answer, but there is a need to "design a way out" to achieve "de-confliction", based on understanding differing realities and working together to fully explore the issues, perhaps using the Six Thinking Hats technique (de Bono, 1986).

Avoiding is frequently discussed in the conflict literature for its negative influence on conflict outcomes. It is used by conflict participants who do not see the conflict as important, who are not prepared to spend time on it, who procrastinate, who avoid emotional involvement and, as a result, indulge in "gunny-sacking" or the carrying around of grievances as if stored in a sack (Mayer 1990). Avoiding is described as "exclusion, withdrawal and behavioral de-escalation" (Canary and Stafford, 1994), focusing on the status quo without the process of "value-adding" to an existing relationship.

Some texts argue a cognitive development process linked to conflict handling with the moving away from Competing at an early age to the "use of non-confrontation or

Avoidance" strategies in adolescence (Canary and Stafford, 1994) followed by a problem-solving Collaborating approach in later life.

In general, a brief literature review suggests that Collaborative behaviors are related to positive outcomes in a conflict scenario with a positive impact on business. This positive impact is seen in terms of sales results and the building of customer relationships, together with improving teamwork in organizations. Competitive behaviors can be positive but not always of long-term benefit. Accommodating behavior is seen as having a neutral impact on customers and colleagues (sometimes positive, sometimes negative, depending on the scenario); and Compromising and Avoiding behavior is seen as generally having a negative affect on customers and colleagues.

## The United Arab Emirates case study

The research for this paper is based on a study of a sample group of 70 first-level entry school-leavers (from educational institutions across the Emirates) who have recently joined the bank. This group is known in the bank as "*Al Mishaal*", an Arab word meaning "The Torch". These school-leavers are seen as torch-bearers for the bank in the future. This perspective is directly related to the process of "Emiratisation" in the UAE where there is a requirement that banks must have achieved a staffing target of 40 percent UAE nationals by 2010.

The bank has been particularly successful in this area and has achieved substantially higher Emiratisation levels than most of its competitors, to the extent of winning the prestigious Dubai Human Development Awards which, despite its name, is focused almost entirely on the results of an organization's localization drive and the enablers of this process.

The case study group comprises male and female school-leavers, all UAE nationals, aged between 17-19, sourced from schools in Dubai and surrounding Emirates, such as Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah.

In the process of their orientation and training, these new employees have been exposed to business skills training which subscribes to the Western (i.e. North American, European and Australian) values previously discussed in relation to the literature review of research in conflict handling. The aim of this training has been to prepare the new recruits for their subsequent placements in the bank's front-line customer interface.

At the conclusion of this five months of training, the recruits were asked to complete a diagnostic instrument, the *Thomas Kilmann Mode of Conflict Inventory,* which asks a series of questions (in pairs with the choice of "A" or "B" options) designed to identify conflict mode preferences between the possibilities of being predominantly competitive, collaborating, compromising, accommodating or avoiding. In completing this questionnaire, the new recruits revealed their attitudes to their perception of customer and colleague relationships in conflict situations (interpreted as any instance of professional disagreement with differing opinions and agendas).

It should be noted that at the bank, customers are relatively "high-touch" and require a hands-on problem-solving approach to ensure customer satisfaction. Typical customer problems were identified – such as late or wrong delivery of credit cards, disappointment over loan allowances, delays over new account opening – all scenarios

requiring a large degree of "problem-solving freedom" and "problem-solving complexity" given that the scenario placed participants in a leading customer service role and did not assume the active presence of a higher authority. The employees of the bank were also required to develop productive and positive relationships between themselves in the daily execution of their duties.

The 70 new recruits, in five groups of around 12-15 participants, were inducted in separate monthly batches over a five-month period. These 70 new employees were presented with the scenario of the need to improve the financial results and customer service quality ratings of their particular bank branch, primarily through improved selling skills, customer relationships and inter-employee teamwork. Several conflict scenarios were outlined and the participants examined strategies for successful outcomes that would lead to customer retention at the same time enhancing teamwork. This exercise was presented to them towards the end of their training, after they had been exposed to other business skill training activities, including presentations from managers across a range of business activities in the bank.

The scenario was outlined in which they were responsible for sales to new and existing customers in their branch, but where several damaging conflicts had emerged in their attempts to sell new and additional products and services. Conflicts had also broken out with fellow employees in the course of their daily work together in the branch. These conflict situations were presented as neutrally as possible, but with the unspoken suggestion of potential opportunities for the branch in terms of developing new customers and expanding business with existing customers. Relationships with colleagues were presented as necessary for the on-going running of the branch. In the scenarios, their particular branch had performed less than satisfactorily, disappointing head office in terms of its track record of obtaining new customer business and repeat customer business (could be higher) and inter-colleague support and teamwork (could be better).

As a result of the scenarios, the participants were charged with the task of completing a questionnaire identifying how they would respond to a number of different situations involving customers and colleagues.

It was emphasized that the behaviors of customer service personnel had one of three different results on the customer in terms of achieving sales or at least ensuring customer retention: positive, neutral or negative. Competitive and collaborative behaviors had a positive impact; accommodating was neutral; and compromising and avoiding were potentially negative. The objective of the exercise was to maximize the positive impact on the customer base and lead to higher sales for the branch.

These 70 new recruits began their induction program with a fairly basic level of English language speaking, reading and writing ability. During their training they attended daily intensive English classes, mostly with the British Council.

To facilitate understanding in a second-language English environment, each of the 30 questions (matched either/or statements) were described in detail with practical examples. Extensive mirroring techniques were used (by two trainers per group per session in this particular exercise) to ensure understanding of the points. In one-on-one coaching during the group discussions, participants were asked to explain their reasons for making their choices. Although there was inevitably some

misunderstanding, it was felt that the choices made by the participants reflected their
beliefs, especially since these were reinforced by their verbal explanations.

### Analysis of the research findings: the completed questionnaires

The literature review in the field of negotiation and conflict resolution and its
conclusions of ideal conflict handling behaviors was used to provide an international
benchmark for purposes of comparison to the results of this sample.

According to the literature, Collaborative and (to a lesser extent) Competitive
behaviors were seen as having the most positive impact on sales and business
performance; Accommodating behaviors (allowing the customers and colleagues to
"win" in the conflict situation) as neutral; and Compromising and Avoiding behaviors
were regarded as the most negative, leading to lost sales, reduced margins,
unprofitable customer relationships and hence declining business performance overall.

In contrast with these views, the participants from the bank chose a diametrically
opposite series of preferences.

Some participants worked individually and some worked as groups. However, there
was little significant difference between the individual scores and the group scores.
The reason here was that many of the participants, in order to clarify their
understanding of the concepts, discussed most of the elements in the group before
deciding their "individual" score. Many were exhibiting risk-averse and
uncertainty-avoiding behaviors during the exercise itself, seeking approval from
others for their choices, depending on others for opinions, following the path of which
was the most conventional approach, and avoiding making decisions at all. The first of
four monthly batches underwent their training during the Holy Month of Ramadan,
and some participants said they felt too weak and unable to concentrate due to hunger
from fasting to make decisions.

In analyzing the highest and second-highest preferences of the five conflict modes of
the 70 participants, it was discovered that by far the highest scores were given to the
preference for Compromising or Avoiding. Only six of the 70 participants did not
record either compromising or avoiding as their top two preferences.

"Proposing a middle ground", "trying to find a position intermediate between
his/hers and mine", "trying to get the other person to settle for a *Compromise*" and
"finding a combination of gains and losses for both of us" were listed by 44 of the 70
participants as their first or second choice. According to international norms, this can
be seen as a negative behavior in a conflict situation that, although expedient, produces
a poor quality and only temporary solution to the conflict, does not lead to long-term
profitable customer retention, or lasting and positive workplace relationships.
Twenty-six participants chose compromising as their primary preference by a
substantial margin over other preferences.

Second, "letting others take responsibility for solving the problem", "*Avoiding*
unpleasantness for myself", "postponing the issue so I have time to think about it" and
"thinking that differences are not worth worrying about" was recorded by 42 of the 70
participants as their first or second choice. Eighteen participants saw this as by far
their preferred behavior in a conflict situation. According to field tests in the West, this
mode ranks as the very lowest in modes designed to achieve a successful outcome in a
conflict situation with a customer, leading to rapid customer account loss, increased

customer dissatisfaction due to lack of conflict resolution, and diminishing colleague trust.

Third, Competitive behaviors – regarded as more positive in achieving successful customer conflict outcomes – were chosen by only ten participants of the 70 as reflecting their attitude to winning customer business. This preference is seen as less positive compared with the Collaborating preference, however. "Win-win" is widely argued as preferable to "win-lose" in sustaining long-term business performance.

Fourth, Accommodating behaviors – seen as neutral in international surveys of conflict handling and as being appropriate only in circumstances where the conflict was of little importance to the organization to build customer relationships through promoting harmony – were identified by another ten participants as their first preference in customer or colleague conflict.

Lastly, Collaborative or "win-win" attitudes to conflict were preferred by only eight of the participants as their first choice conflict handling mode.

Collaborative and Competing behaviors, seen as positively impacting on customers, were chosen by the 70 participants only in a small minority of cases. Avoiding and Compromising behaviors, seen as negative in the pursuit of successful sales, were overwhelmingly chosen as principal preferences. Accommodating behaviors, of neutral impact, were chosen to a degree comparable with the fieldwork-testing in the Western benchmarking exercise, where the promotion of harmony and building on an existing relationship by giving concessions important to the customer but unimportant to the organization is seen as an occasional solution to customer conflict situations (see Figures 1 and 2).

## Analysis of the research findings

The sample group's more positive behaviors, especially collaborative and competing approaches, were measured against the main findings of the literature review of conflict mode preferences and impact on successful conflict resolution. In each case, the behaviors regarded as having a positive impact on customer conflict handling and sales outcomes were present, especially the preferences for being accommodating and competing. However, they fell substantially short of the levels required to produce effective conflict handling behaviors as indicated by the literature review. In particular, the importance of collaborative behaviors, in poll position in the Thomas Kilmann
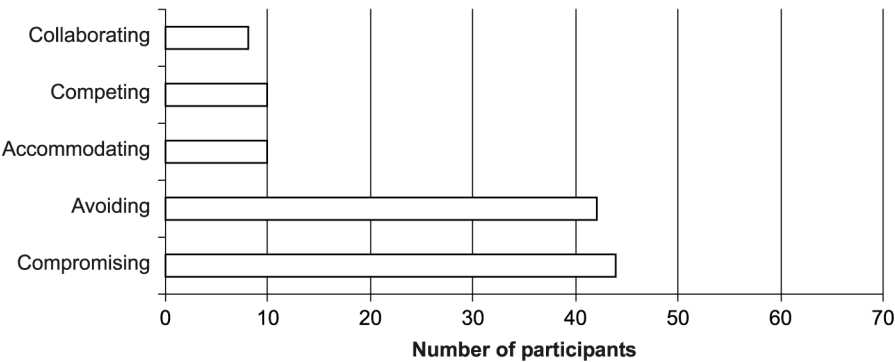


Figure 1.
Preferred conflict mode of 70 participants in conflict mode exercise, first and second choice (by number)

findings, scored least among the conflict mode preferences of our sample group. It seems that "problem-solving" and "sharing", requiring a commitment to work together to solve a disagreement to the 100 percent satisfaction of both parties, involving considerable initiative, creative-thinking and the taking of responsibility, was at odds with the "uncertainty avoidance" culture and the professed need for detailed instructions and guidance in order to avoid unnecessary risk-taking.

Clearly, the preferences for compromising and avoiding in conflict situations of this sample group reflect attitudes in contravention to those suggested by research in the West as the most constructive and positive in customer and collegial relationships. Arguably, the willingness to adopt avoiding behaviors by such a large majority of new recruits who will be in placed in front line sales and customer service roles in their organization, will soon become a major problem for this employer. Furthermore, it can be suggested that no customer, of any socio-political background, will tolerate delays and a lack of decision-making on their issues for long. Many customers exhibit frustration when faced with these attitudes and resultant behaviors and this might result in a negative impact on the competitive performance of the organization in question.

The choice of the avoiding preference (listed by 42 of the 70 participants in their top two) can be seen as reflecting risk-aversion and high power-distance – that to do your job well, you should avoid making any mistakes, even if this means doing nothing. This also suggests a tendency towards convention, of trying not to "screw up" and "keeping your nose clean", and avoiding complaints at all costs. It implies a reluctance to think outside the box, when this might be required to deal effectively with a customer or collegial conflict situation. This preference suggests a continuing concern over job security, a fear of loss of face, reluctance to take responsibility, and concern over what those in authority might do if the dreaded mistake was discovered and a victim had to be found. There is a complete lack of recognition of the value or appropriateness of admitting being wrong, and hence learning from it. It would seem to contradict the customer service dictum of "the customer is always right", preferring "the customer is always right if my boss says so".

The compromising tendency, listed by 44 as first or second choice by the 70 participants in the exercise, shows a pragmatic, bargaining attitude and lack of
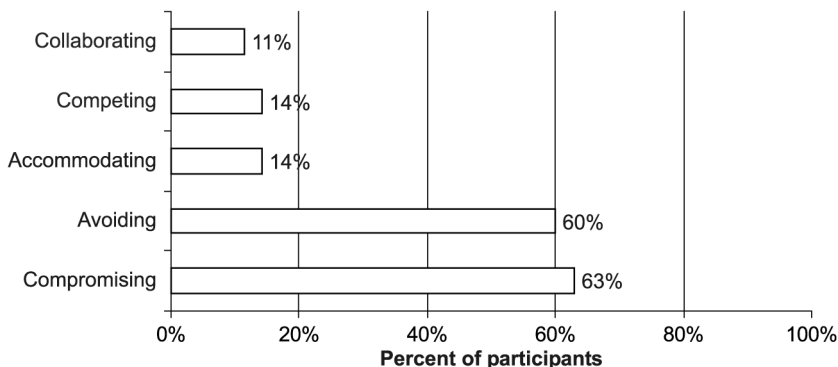


Figure 2.
Preferred conflict mode of 70 participants in conflict mode exercise, first and second choices (by percentage)

long-term, strategic thinking. In Dubai, this is often referred to as "the *souq* mentality" referring to the customers and vendors in traditional market-places where prices are rarely fixed and the outcome of a transaction depends on the bargaining ability of the participants. It also suggests a reluctance to learn new things and to taking risks, and an avoidance of depending on others who know new things when you do not. Conflict resolution resulting in a long-term attitude to achieving a successful outcome for the benefit of both parties involves a scale of commitment at odds with the compromising preference.

These two preferences, of avoiding and compromising, imply a need to know what is going on, a lack of trust, and high power-distance. There may be an unwillingness to work harmoniously in teams, suspicion, and risk-avoidance. There may be a belief that "knowledge is power" and lack of interest in sharing that powerful knowledge with others. There may be a perception by our sample group, as young employees entering the bank, of their duty being to "fit in" and not "make waves". But this is at odds with the international context that emphasizes problem-solving skills and using personal initiative. However, there must be a high degree of trust and comfort before this can take place.

Training initiatives emphasizing delegation, teamwork, empowerment and non-threatening ways of sharing responsibility might help offset an avoiding tendency. With the phenomenon of sales and customer service staff moving between organizations and taking their customers with them (this has been especially the case in private banking), sharing control of the managing of a specific customer (for example) can be a challenge, although it can operate in the interests of the long-term performance of the organization rather than the individual.

## Conclusion

This research project, conducted on this cohort of 70 UAE national new recruits, suggests that sales and other business skills training outcomes based upon international standards of conflict handling and negotiating may be compromised by the pre-existence of culturally specific beliefs and values which may be incompatible with those promoted within training programs. In this study, the training participants – although showing a lively interest in the training – were predominantly influenced by perceptions of how they should react in a conflict situation that are significantly mediated by their socio-political context.

Although this study confirms the general point that Western-style management practices are mediated by national cultural contexts, the limitations of the research design and case study group should be identified. These limitations include the relatively small size of the participant group, the fact that findings are drawn from self-completed assessments based on a scenario (and not on "real life" situations), and that the participant group members are young trainees who, in any environment, might be reluctant to "make waves" and "rock the boat" in their new workplace environment, especially given the shortage of opportunities and job availability outlined above.

However, given these limitations, there are still important implications for the efficacy of a range of business skills training – especially sales, which always involves an element of conflict-handling and negotiating – are clearly substantial with a

possibility of a reduction in organizational performance and competitiveness, especially given the dependence on human assets in the service sector to achieve that competitiveness.

## Implications for business skills training

Given these findings, it may be necessary to consider adjustments or modifications to business skills training within certain socio-political contexts in order to achieve the desired training outcomes. In this particular scenario there is, firstly, a need for greater clarity about desired outcomes in sales scenarios by the bank, particularly in terms of areas of individual responsibility (to clarify when avoiding is desirable or not, and the impact of delays on a potential customer whilst a decision-maker is being sought), perhaps based on a customer service survey of bank customers.

Secondly, there may be a need here to deal with the possibly negative impact of compromising behaviours exhibited by participants. Which aspects of the bank's policy towards customers cannot, on any account, be compromised? What is the bottom-line in deal-making? How can more proactive, collaborative behaviours, be encouraged?

If the training was combined with the results of the bank's actual service audit (in the same way as a training scenario, but "for real"), then there might be a stronger impression upon the participants – and enough to offset, or at least mediate – the impact of the wider socio-political context. It should be impressed upon the new recruits that the bank's reputation for good customer service rests on these requirements. There should, arguably, be a stronger link between measurable business outcomes and the profitability/achievement of company goals. It could be spelt out more clearly that avoiding behaviors can lose the bank business, and that compromising behaviors might lead to a reduction in the bank's profitability and – worse – lead to a tarnished reputation.

Furthermore, more emphasis by management on the importance of customer service to the bank could enhance the efficacy of its customer service training programs. Basically, training would need to be further institutionalized into the bank's corporate culture (Jones, 2004, pp. 22-4).

Second, for the training outcomes to be achieved, the goals of the training should be linked to a reward system in order to provide an incentive to the staff members to change customer service behaviors. Again, this use of incentives might counter-balance the pressures of the socio-political context.

Third, an organizational culture should be facilitated that supports constructive customer service behaviors in frontline staff. This would mean that supervisors, middle management and senior management would need to attend training sessions with outcomes related to encouraging the development of supportive work environments. Such training would need to pre-date specific customer service training for frontline staff. Of course, there is a problem here: the supervisors and managers themselves are likely to display resistances similar to those suggested in this study indicating a need for a carefully designed program probably delivered over an extended period.

## Areas for further research investigation

Here we have looked at the negative impact of socio-political context on customer service training outcomes. Given the limitations of the research design and case study group, further research could be focused on observations of actual workplace behavior, perhaps through action research. There also might be a possibility of expanding and verifying these insights through interviewing customers, especially focusing on employee reactions to more challenging customer demands. Did the employee try to address the problem by himself or herself, or try to find a more senior manager (avoiding)? Were customers unhappy with the bank's terms, who suggested "deals", accommodated by these employees (compromising)?

Another area of further research would be to contrast a sample group such as the cohort here with a group from a region where the socio-political context could have a much more positive outcome, such as Japan (Jones, 1991, pp. 1-12). Another would be to look at a developing region such as China where the need for customer service and hence training is more recent (Jones, 1997, pp. 25-40 and Jones, 2000, pp. 19-24).

In looking at the success of the implementation of customer service training, it could also be valuable to examine the impact of generational issues. The cohort studied here are young people between 17 and 19 – a group exposed to much of the same media influences as this generation around the world (albeit somewhat censored in the Emirates), and certainly exposed to the same consumer market, particularly in relation to fashion and electronics. They face an even greater generation gap than in the West, given the recent and rapid development of the Emirates. The point was also made that new employees may be anxious to "fit in" and avoid blame for making mistakes. Older employees may be less influenced by these considerations.

There are also gender issues to be taken into account, given that the majority of this cohort was female. Would men act any differently?

Once these issues have been fully resolved, there will be a need to suggest more detailed ways in which effective customer service training can be delivered in the Arab world.

These training solutions could build upon some of the reflections and observations included above, developing specific training interventions designed to offset these potential barriers to learning and therefore training effectiveness. They might also be combined with appropriate recruitment tools and strategies, to identify hiring mechanisms which favor new hires with strong customer service dispositions (Jones, 2003, pp. 18-19). These recruitment processes could include relevant psychometric testing based on developed norm groups (Jones, 1992, pp. 1-5).

In addition, this analysis based on responses to a customer service scenario by this sample of UAE national employees could be usefully augmented by anecdotal evidence covering a wider range of employees in different industry sectors.

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