A STUDY OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN AN AIRLINE INDUSTRY: AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was to investigate the difference in conflict management styles and practices between Thai and German flight attendants, and to suggest an appropriate way to overcome conflict encountered on each flight. The conflict being researched is the conflict that arisen between Thai and German flight attendants in the workplace – generally during in-flight operations. However, conflict is ubiquitous; hence the main objective is not to eliminate it but to learn how to manage it so that the destructive elements are controlled while the productive aspects are enjoyed.

Methods: A qualitative analytical method was utilized to examine the subjects' (Lufthansa German Airlines flight attendants) viewpoints by using focus group interviews. In these case studies, several Thai and German flight attendants were purposely selected for interview.

Results: Even though the main objective of this study is to investigate appropriate strategies to manage conflicts for both Thai and German flight attendant of Lufthansa German Airlines, it has been found that there is no single way of managing conflict. However, the finding indicated that whereas Thais tend to choose confrontational styles (competing**);** most of Germans surprisingly preferred non-confrontational style (compromising) in their conflict management which contradicts to the theory of Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980). This striking result may be due to intercultural setting.

Discussion: Despite the fact that it is the main objective of this study to investigate appropriate strategies to manage conflicts for both Thai and German flight attendant of Lufthansa German Airlines, it has been found that there is no single way of managing conflict. That is, there is no single appropriate strategy to deal with such conflicts. It is therefore the responsibility of each person or group to be conscious of the problem, subsequently to select the most suitable strategy depending on the context in which the problem has emerged.

Introduction

The study of diversity is important for organizations in the 21st century. Businesses are faced with an increasingly competitive and globalize world economy and demographic changes (Johnston & Packer, 1987). As a result, modern management must find effective ways to manage the increasing heterogeneity in its workforce and consumer base (Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Daus, 2002). Heterogeneity can be defined as variety of gender, race, and ethnicity in an organization. It is widely recognized that culture shapes people's interpretation of behavior and the style of their interaction with others in the workplace. Culture, however, influences methods of communication among people. Some people place the emphasis on direct and simple styles of communication; others rely heavily on indirect and complex methods. It has been observed, for example, that whereas Germans and Americans are direct, the French and Japanese are indirect (Hall & Hall, 1990, p. 120). Thailand is also considered to have an "indirect" culture. People with an indirect style of communication often make assumptions – possibly incorrect -- about the level of knowledge possessed by their counterparts regarding significant communication through speech, facial expressions, gestures, and other kinds of body language.

As cultures vary worldwide, the confrontation in different styles of communication can lead to conflict. According to Lewicki (1999), conflict is ubiquitous and a part of life which is inevitable, particularly in a culturally heterogeneous workplace. Coping with conflicts which arise between parties from different cultures is rather a difficult task. Hence, some rules are recommended to improve the management of conflict where cultural differences exist: (1) learn the other side's culture, (2) avoid over reliance on that knowledge (do not stereotype), (3) bridge the culture gap by using your own culture, the other side's culture, some combination of both cultures, and third culture.

It is interesting to consider whether individual adjustment of cultural approach influences the ways in which interracial colleagues deal with conflicts.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the difference in conflict management styles and practices between Thai and German flight attendants, and to suggest an appropriate way to overcome conflict encountered on each flight. The conflict being researched is the conflict that arises between Thai flight attendants and German flight attendants in the workplace – generally during in-flight operations. As mentioned previously, conflict is ubiquitous; hence the main objective is not to eliminate it but to learn how to manage it so that the destructive elements are controlled while the productive aspects are enjoyed.

In this investigation, a qualitative analytical method will be utilized to examine the subjects' (Lufthansa German Airlines flight attendants) viewpoints by using focus group interviews. Several Thai and German flight attendants will each be purposely selected for interview.

This study anticipates that it will shed some light on the question of how intercultural colleagues manage conflict and recommend the appropriate styles of conflict management to create a better work environment and improve team work, which is the organizational objective.

Research Questions

1. What strategies of conflict management do Thai and German flight attendants prefer for handing in-flight conflicts?
2. To what extent does culture play an important role on the way Thai and German flight attendants manage conflict?
3. Apart from culture, what factors influence the selection of conflict management styles?

Terms and Definitions

1. Conflict

One of the popular definitions of conflicts offered by Coser (1967) as cited in Wilmot and Hocker (2007), asserted that conflict is " a struggle over value and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aim of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rivals" (8). It varies in intensity; may be seen as a (1) mild difference, (2) disagreement, (3) dispute, (4) campaign, (5) litigation, or (6) fight or war. Conflict can also be defined as an express struggle between at least two independent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals. In addition, an investigation of theories of relational conflict done by Walkins as cited in Littlejohn (1999) analyzed the essential conditions of conflict forming into an operational definition as follows:

(1) Conflict requires interaction between at least two parties.
(2) Conflict evokes a mutually desired yet mutually unobtainable goal.
(3) Each party involved in conflict has four possible actions : a) to reach a mutually acceptable goal; b) to settle the conflict; c) to evoke sanction against the other side; and d) to communicate something to the other side.
(4) Each party may perceive conflict differently.
(5) Each party has resources that may be increased or diminished by implementing the four possible actions above.
(6) Conflict ends only when each party is satisfied.

2. Conflict Management Systems (CMS)

Conflict management Systems (CMS) are" the structure that are developed in an organization to facilitate processing conflict" (Conbere, 2001p. 217) as cited in Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2013). CMS within given organizations simultaneously reflect and inform organizational goal, value and structures.

3. Intercultural Communication

Within the context of the global workplace, intercultural communication looks at how people communicate (verbally and nonverbally), manage, work together, approach deadlines, negotiate, meet, greet, build relationships and much more. Companies and individuals looking to do business within the global workplace often fail to address such areas before doing business abroad. This can and does lead to poor performance and lost deals. Greater understanding of intercultural differences, etiquette, protocol and communication as well as more informed planning will certainly lead to a much higher probability of achieving business goals.

Conceptualization of Conflict that intertwined with communication and culture

With rapid changes in the global economy, technology, transportation systems and immigration policies, the world is becoming a small, intersecting community. We find ourselves having increased contact with people who are culturally different. In a global workforce, people bring with them different work habits and cultural practices. They may also have different desires, end goals, and emphasis in an intercultural encounter. In this 21st century global world, people are constantly moving across borders, into and out of a country. Neighborhoods and communities are changing. In what was once a homogenous community, we may now discover more diversity and cultural values in flux (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2013). Thus the study of intercultural conflict communication involves, at least in part, cultural group member differences. Intercultural conflict is the perceived or actual incompatibility of cultural values, situational norms, goals, face orientations, scarce resources, styles/processes, and/or outcome in a face-to-face (or mediated) context within a sociohistorical embedded system. Nevertheless, to be a communicator in this century, both the appropriateness and effectiveness feature, together with the productivity, satisfaction, and ethical choice features are part of the intercultural conflict competence criteria (Spitzburg &Changnon, 2009). If inappropriate or ineffective conflict behaviors continue, the miscommunication can very easily spiral into a complex, polarized intercultural conflict situation.

"A person cannot not communicate"

Remland (2003) stated the above sentence to emphasize that we communicate all the time, so human interaction is inevitable, particularly in this era of globalization. Interaction and communication are intertwined. According to Rubin and Stewart (2004) human communication is the process through which individuals in relationship, group organization, and societies respond to and create messages to adapt to the environment and one another. It is also unavoidable for all inhabitants on earth to be interconnected. However, it is impossible for individuals from all part of the world to completely understand each other; since their backgrounds are different. These differences among people are shaped by culture. To anthropologists, culture refers to a fundamental set of persistent characteristics associated with particular group of people, typically ethnically based. The purpose of culture is to make life predictable and understandable for members of that group; it has been referred to as "shared programming of the mind" of the entire social group which is stable over time and leads to the same person showing more or less the same behavior in similar situation. Communication and culture are inseparable; as Hall (1997) postulated that "Culture is communication and communication is culture" and "There is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture". In other words, culture plays a dominant role in human life. It is imperative that person understand how culture operates as the first step toward improving intercultural communication which can be defined as the circumstance in which people from diverse cultural backgrounds interact with one another. Within the context of the global workplace, intercultural communication emphasizes how people communicate (verbally and nonverbally), manage, work together, and build relationships.

However, greater understanding of intercultural differences, etiquette, protocol and communication will certainly lead to a much higher probability of achieving business goals. Thus, culture serves as a kind of glue - a social adhesive - that binds a group of people together and gives them a distinct identity as a community. This may also give them a sense that they are a community different and separate from other communities. In multi-national organizations, it is inevitable that employees and managers will bring and strengthen their culture differences to the workplace. It appears, for instance, that Germans become more German, Americans become more American; Swedes become more Swedish. In conclusion, organizational culture maintains and enhances cross-cultural differences that may lead to conflict. Thus conflict management was employed for conflict resolution.

Big Five Model of Personality affecting conflict management

However, some researchers endorse other viewpoints of conflicts. Dallinger and Hample (1995) have determined that individuals differ in the degree to which they take

conflict personally—that is, the degree to which they experience strong negative emotional reactions to specific conflict management incidents and episodes. People who take certain conflict personally are more likely to feel threatened, anxious, or insulted by a particular conflict event. Some researchers argue that taking conflict personally is a trait (an enduring predisposition that differs across individuals). That is those who are more likely to take conflict personally are more likely to have non-confrontational (avoiding or accommodating) styles of managing conflicts; to feel persecuted by, and have a higher stress management reaction than those who use a forcing (competing) conflict style. In fact, there are several ways in which personality may be related to conflict; particularly interpersonal conflict which necessarily involves more than one individual. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the personality of both individuals (actor and partner) might influence the experience of conflict. However, in examining the relationship between personality and conflict, the Five-Factor Model can be exploited as an organization framework. This model was developed by personality psychologists (e.g., Goldberg, 1993) and known as "Big Five" which is comprised of:

1) Extraversion - being sociable, assertive, and talkative.

2) Agreeableness - being flexible, cooperative, and trusting.

3) Conscientiousness- being responsible organized and achievement oriented.

4) Emotional stability - being secure, confident, and not anxious.

5) Openness - being imaginative, broad-minded, and curious (Barrick & mount, 1991, p.3)

It can be concluded that individual differences in personality manage conflict differently. Consequently, the outcomes of these conflicts depend on how the parties manage their disagreements. In international organizations mediation is one of the preferred techniques for dealing with conflict. Mediation can be defined as an extension of negotiations where the parties to a dispute seek the assistance of, or accept an offer of help from, a party not directly involved in the conflict, to resolve their differences without invoking the authority of the law.

Several conditions are thought to be necessary for mediation to occur.

1) Mediation is likely to be used when a dispute is long, drawn out or complex

2) It often comes into play when the parties own conflict management efforts have reached an impasse

3) A mediator must be available and willing to intervene (Gulliver, 1979), and there must exist some opportunity for the mediator to intervene (Rubin, 1992). This means if the parties wish to avoid any outside intervention, then mediation will not take place.

4) Mediation is likely to be used when the parties calculate that it will help them reach a better settlement than they can achieve on their own; that the mediator will provide them with a face-saving way out of the conflict or means of influencing their

opponent; or when rejecting mediation will result in greater harm than accepting it (Bercovitch, 1992; Kleiboer, 1992).

Conflict Cycle

Hall (1993) viewed conflict and its escalation as a play in three acts identified as the 'conflict cycle':

(1) **Conflict escalation**: one party tries to both physically and psychologically force and dominate the other into submission.

(2) **Reaching Climax**: the situation ends in stalemate where it seems impossible to settle for an argument.

(3) **Settlement**: the parties finally move towards agreement in the dramatic production. Hall added that not all conflicts have to completely follow this cycle since some may be managed and resolved before reaching a third stage.

Nature of Conflicts

Conflict is ubiquitous in human affair (Putnam, 2009, p.211); it occurs naturally and routinely everywhere. Some cultures that emphasize individualism and competition among people are likely to place a positive value on conflict (for example, English-speaking countries, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, and Germany), whereas some other cultures that emphasize collaboration, cooperation, and conformity negatively value conflict (for instance, Asian countries, Latin America countries, Portugal, Greece, and Turkey). In other words, some and many societies perceive "conflict" with a negative connotation. Some people view it as a battle to win, while others view it as a situation to avoid. Therefore, those who are not well prepared to resolve any conflict will be at a disadvantage since managing differences or handling conflict is rather a difficult task. It can frequently affect and damage relationships if parties' concerns are not well-managed or if they resolve them ineffectively. The following are five types of conflicts distinguished by Deutsch (1971): (1) Intrapersonal (within an individual), (2) Interpersonal (between individuals), (3) Intragroup (within a group), (4) Intergroup (between groups), and (5) International (between nations).

In this study, the researcher concentrated only on *Interpersonal* conflict, specifically between Thai and German cabin crew of Lufthansa German Airlines. To elaborate on this, Lewicki, Saunders, Barry, and Minton (2004) viewed interpersonal conflict as "a conflict that occurs between individual people such as bosses and subordinates, spouses, siblings, or roommates" (p. 15). In this circumstance, interpersonal conflicts may arise between colleagues at the same level (cabin crew/cabin crew), or colleagues at different levels (purser/cabin crew, cockpit/cabin crew). However, disputants are more likely to choose different conflict solution strategies based on whether the conflict involves peers, subordinates, or supervisor.

Strategies for Managing conflicts

Five conflict-handling intentions based on two dimensions-cooperativeness (the degree to which one party attempt to satisfy the other party's concern) and assertiveness (the degree to which one party attempt to satisfy his or her own concerns) can be identified: *competing*, *avoiding*, *accommodating*, *compromising*, and *collaborating* (Thomas and Kilmann, 1975)

1. **Competing**

Competing or forcing is a win-lose orientation. It designates a situation in which one person or group attempts to acquire complete dominance. This strategy is appropriate when quick decisions are vital and there is insufficient time for discussion.

2. **Avoiding**

Avoiding or withdrawing is employed to as a form of denial; people or groups use this approach to ignore that a problem exists. They may physically or psychologically remove themselves from the conflicts. Considered from an individual satisfaction standpoint, withdrawing create a lose/lose situation because neither party to the conflict really accomplishes what they want. Hence, parties utilizing this style will withdraw from the problem or conflict. They tend to be passive, silent, and prefer not to do anything to arrive at conflict solution (Lewicki, et al, 1999).

3. **Accommodation**

Accommodation means giving in to the other's needs while neglecting your own. People who are insecure in their relationships may accommodate because they are so upset by the prospect of conflict that they will do anything to avoid it. Considered from an individual satisfaction standpoint, accommodation is a win/lose situation for the individuals. The one side gets what it wants, and the other side gives up what it wants. From a relational satisfaction standpoint, habitual accommodation has two problems. First, conflicts resolved through accommodation may lead to poor decision making because important facts, arguments, and positions are not voiced. Second, habitual accommodation results in one person's talking advantage of the other. This one-sidedness can damage self-concept and lead to feelings of resentment that undermine relationships.

4. **Compromising**

Compromising is attempting to resolve conflict by providing at least some satisfaction for both parties, resulting in a compromised outcome. Under this approach, both people have to give up part of what they really want to believe, or have to trade one thing they want in order to get something else. Consequently, there is no clear winner or loser since both parties gain some satisfaction. However, from a relational satisfaction standpoint, compromising may be considered as neutral to positive solution.

5. Collaborating

Problem solving through collaborating involves an attempt to fully address the needs and issues of each party, and to arrive at a solution that is mutually satisfying. It appears where there is a win-win orientation. Each person or group confronts the problems with equal concern. This approach encourages identification of areas of agreement and disagreement, and selection of a solution to the problem that incorporates both parties' perspectives. It can be considered as an approach that will require the most time to resolve the conflict, but it is proved to be the most appropriate and the most effective means of managing conflict (Rubin and Pruitt, 1994).

To provide a more explicit picture, below is the summary of Thomas and Kilmann's communication styles of conflict management behavior (1974). This is a two-dimensional model based on degree of cooperation to satisfy other's need, and the degree of assertiveness to satisfy one's own needs. These five styles of conflict management are represented in the dual concerns model as follows (see Table 1)

Table 1Conflict –Handling Styles

Style	Degree of cooperation (concern other's need)	Degree of assertiveness (concern one's own needs)
1.Competing	Low	High
2.Accomodating	High	Low
3.Avoiding	Low	Low
4.Collaborating	High	High
5.Compromising	Moderate	Moderate

Methodology

In this study, the researcher decided to employ qualitative methods by using focus group interviews for data collection. This method was employed in order to gain insight into how subjects view and experience conflict in their careers. It is essential to employ a qualitative method which is based on semi-structured interview. It allows the researcher / interviewer to question systematically and simultaneously several individuals.

In addition, phenomenological perspective was also employed to seek an understanding how intercultural colleagues who work in the same organization experience and manage conflicts; as it is considered crucial to understand their common and shared experiences of conflicts in order to develop a deeper comprehension of the real causes, and

seek for constructive conflict management. The overall strategy employed in this study is in-depth voice recorder interview to create a detailed record of the subject's experience which will help the researcher understand the research responses more explicitly.

The voice recorder hesitation phenomena include willingness to answer questions or explain situations focused on by the interviewer. Voice factors (tone, hesitation, and pauses) indicate the reliability of some answers, which the researchers are able to perceive as a limitation of the methods of this study.

Subjects of the study

The subjects in this study are flight attendants of Lufthansa German Airlines. They were divided into two groups for interview. The first group consists of three German colleagues, based in Frankfurt, Germany (Headquarters). Two of them are in the position of in-flight managers (pursers); the last one is a flight attendant. This group consists of two female and one male (who represents the only male in this study). The first subject is a female purser (similar to in-flight manager); she has never engaged in conflict with Thai flight attendants directly, but she has experience as a mediator in conflict between Thai and German colleagues on the flight that she was in charge of. The second subject is a male purser in charge of the economy class team of assigned cabin crew in the rear part of the cabin. Although he admires Thai culture, his experience in conflict with Thai colleagues somehow disappointed him. The last subject is a female flight attendant. Surprisingly, she has never experienced being a disputant in conflict with a Thai colleague. On the contrary, she always mediates the problem in such conflicts.

The second group consists of four Thai flight attendants. All of them are female. Subjects' educational levels ranged from completion of a diploma to having a master's degree. All of them have experienced conflict with German colleagues more than once.

For the purposes of this study, it is crucial that the subjects must have experienced conflict with other colleagues who do not have the same nationality (different culture). Thus in this circumstance, the purposive sampling method was used in the process of selecting subjects, which means it enables the researcher to ensure that the subject display certain attributes which are required for this study. Therefore, it was crucial for Thai flight attendants who were selected for an interview to have experience engaged in conflicts with German colleagues. Simultaneously, it was essential for the selected German flight attendants to have their experiences in conflicts with Thai flight colleagues in order to provide information congruent with the research questions. After qualified subjects both Thai and German were purposively selected; the researcher created an informal atmosphere for the interview in order to elicit depth of feeling in describing conflict.

Since the topic of this study is rather sensitive and subjective, and will involve emotion reactions. Thus the researcher attempted to create comfortable atmosphere so that the subject would feel relaxed while talking about their conflict experiences.

Emergence of Key Theme

Theme One: Intercultural conflict calls for intercultural sensitivity.

Cultural sensitivity is one of the elements which play an important role in elevating the quality of working relationship in international organization. According to Bruggen, Kocker, and Neuwlaat (2005), they discovered that in lower level of conflicts, a greater level of trust and satisfaction resulted. In other words, cultural sensitivity has a strong bearing on relationship quality. As sensitivity to an international partners' business develops, quality of relationship tends to improve. Therefore, to enhance the relationship quality, management in exporting firms may find it prudent to devote a substantial amount of resources to cultural training programs.

Lufthansa German Airlines, in an effort to establish the relationship quality among colleagues, provides the Intercultural Communication Seminar for pilots, in-flight managers, and flight attendants. All of them are obliged to participate in this seminar which is organized every year. It has been found to create better understanding and perspectives leading to greater harmony among multinational members of the organization (e.g. German, Austrian, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Indian, and Thai). Since the seminar enables them to openly discuss all kinds of intercultural issues, some vague points of misunderstanding are explicitly clarified. This creates a better relationship among them which could help to reduce conflict in the workplace.

In summary, cultural sensitivity is a meaningful drive of intercultural conflict management. If both parties are sensitive to and aware of their differences at the first stage of communication, conflict might not occur. Yet, if conflict is inevitable, cultural sensitivity could also help to deal effectively with it. However, developing sensitivity to cultural differences is often not sufficient to enable mediators to communicate successfully with disputants of distinctive cultural background. Cultural sensitivity, however, needs to be recognized and actively addressed in multinational organization in order to reduce or at least control conflicts at the initial stage.

Theme Two: In-group/ out-group distinction leads to intercultural conflict.

Wochel (2005) identified two roles of culture in intercultural conflict. One is that culture separates people into an in-group and out-group based on the criterion of whether or not they share a common culture. This division creates an essential condition for inter-group or intercultural conflict. The second role is that culture shapes the individual's perception of conflict and how he/she will respond to the conflict. Cultures and closely related concept of ethnicity are major forces drawing the line between in-group and out-group. It includes history, language, dress, religion, and beliefs/attitudes which is the glue that binds people together. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), simply

delineating in-group and out-group is sufficient to ignite in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. In other words, once group identity becomes salient, individuals will advantage their own group and discriminate against the out-group. Consequently, conflict may occur even in the absence of competitive intention.

However, the salience of cultural differences can be reinforced by the rhetoric of nationalism. Congruent with this present study, one of the Thai subjects mentioned that nationalism is the key factor which creates conflict and also influences her German colleagues' conflict management. She further stated that "They" (Germans) think they are in the majority in this company, so they want "us" (Thais) to follow their way. In this circumstance, it can be interpreted that Thais identified Germans as an out-group; simultaneously, they perceived themselves as being discriminated against as an out-group. The word "they" is defined as an out-group, while "us" is perceived as an in-group. Similarly, one Thai flight attendant related a story about a German in flight manager who separated Thai and German colleagues by assigning Thais to work in economy class without offering them an opportunity to choose the position, while Germans had chances to select their working position on board. Being treated distinctively in such a circumstance, the Thai flight attendant perceived it as out-group discrimination. In the circumstances conflict was inevitable.

Theme Three: Intercultural conflict management needs intercultural communication competence

In order to develop knowledge, attitudes, and skills for effective communication with members of different cultures, Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) training is recommended for Thai and German flight attendants. It includes learning appropriate language and communication skills, the ability to interact in a satisfying way in different cultural settings, task productivity, and good social and psychological adjustment (Hammer, 1989). This method relates to Hall's (1959, 1981) work. He described major cultural differences in values and communication codes, for example, high context and low context language. He furthermore postulated that miscommunication across cultures came from people using the values and norms of one culture to explain the behavior of interaction from another. Hall's theory applies to this present study on how Thai and German colleagues engaged in conflicts. Germans value low context communication which conveys meaning directly through words. Thais, in contrast, value a high context communication system which is likely to be more intuitive and less verbal, relying on nonverbal communication to elicit responses and to give meaning to think. This is in alignment with the finding of this study which indicates that Thai flight attendants perceived the directness of Germans as being rude. In Thai culture, face-saving is considered important when interact with people, particularly in conflict interaction. Applying the face-giving tool is an alternative strategy to cope with intercultural conflict between Thais and Germans. Practically, it is

somewhat difficult to learn and understand the concept of "face" in another culture, but in researcher's view, one way to avoid conflict between these two nationalities in Lufthansa organization is to improve intercultural relations through communication, as several subjects of this study mentioned that conflicts came from miscommunication in terms of misinterpretation based on differences in cultures. Although Lufthansa attempts to provide intercultural communication seminars for multinational employees in order to create better environment of working, conflict still exists. The deficiency of the seminar is that it only encourages employees to share generally their intercultural point of views. The researcher would suggest adjusting the seminar in a way that provides more intercultural communication competence for those employees. At least, if conflict cannot be escaped, constructive conflict management can be utilized.

Results

The results of this study indicate that all Thai flight attendants tend to choose competing style for their conflict management. According to Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980), high-context cultures that value collectivist goal, such as Singapore and Thailand are indirect; rely on contextual cues and situational knowledge resulting in the use of implicit reference and indirect speech and actions. Thus, high-context collectivists are more likely to choose indirect approach in a conflict situation. However, the results of this study contradict to the theory of Hall and Hofstede. These striking results may be due to the intercultural setting. As Drake (1995), found that when intercultural negotiating, American and Taiwanese did not necessarily adhere to style predicted by norms based on the cultural dimension. Moreover, Chan and Goto (2003) also discovered that people did not choose a conflict style which was congruent with their cultural values when in conflict with others from different ethnicity to themselves. For example, Hong Kong Chinese employees were more cautious and used the less confrontational strategies in order to maintain positive relationship with Hong Kong superiors. In contrast, they would be likely to use more confrontational strategies that could have more detrimental effects on the relationship with superiors from United States and mainland China. Chan and Goto attributed this to the in-group /out-group distinction. This aspect supports the viewpoint of Thai flight attendant who mentioned that she felt discriminated against by German in-flight manager for assigning her to work in economy class without offering her an alternative. Another argument for people choosing a communication strategy different to the norm when involved in intercultural conflict is that these interactions take place in a "third culture" (Gudykunst, Hammer, & Wiseman, 1977).

In addition, some of Thai flight attendants reported using a combination of competing and avoiding when dealing in conflicts with German in-flight managers. The third subject employed avoiding at the onset, and then she realized that it did not work, so she altered her style of conflict management from avoiding to competing. In contrast, the fourth subject used competing at the beginning, and then changed to avoiding at the end. Avoiding seems

to be the second most-preferred mode among Thai flight attendants. The evidence of this study, however, aligned with Putnam and Wilson's (1982) study which postulated that participants in supervisors' role used more controlling conflict strategies than subordinates who were more likely to use non-confrontational techniques. This finding may be attributed to differences on the power distance and individualist-collectivist dimension. Thai people tend to value high power distance or the unequal distribution of power (Hofstede, 1980). In this study, Thai flight attendants who are considered subordinates in the organization setting probably realized that German in-flight managers whom they engaged in conflicts with have higher status and more power to make a final decision about the situation on board, especially in the direction of conflict outcome. First and foremost, Thai crew respects the German purser as a boss on that flight; and accepts their own positions as being subordinate. This could be the reason why one of the Thais mentioned that "Of course, the final decision was from her (German in-flight manager) that I need to accept at the end".

Regarding German flight attendants' conflict management styles, it appears that compromising is their preferred style when dealing with conflict. This result supports some earlier research findings. Hendel and colleagues (2005) states that the compromising was found to be the most frequent mode used by head nurses in conflict management. Compromise is associated with moderate concern for self-coupled with a strong friendliness tendency. In spite of being a form of a Lose-lose approach, sometimes, because some people are willing to settle for less, a compromise may be agreed on that satisfies neither party completely (Adler & Towne, 1990). In this study, German subjects tried their best to solve the problem by using compromising to create satisfaction for both parties. They believed this would enable both parties to be satisfied with the conflict outcome leading to a better working atmosphere on board since compromising is intermediate in both cooperativeness and assertiveness. Another strategy employed by German is competing, one of the Thai subjects mentioned that she was blamed by the in-flight manager for being late for the briefing in front of all of her colleagues. According to Hall (1989), low context cultures (e.g., United States, Germany) tend to be more heterogeneous and accordingly have evolved more direct communication. Moreover, this result supports the previous study which indicates that supervising nurses in United Kingdom often used competition, compromise and collaboration to handle conflict, whereas subordinates opted for avoidance, collaboration, and dominance (Rahim, 1985). The similar result may be expected because German and British are considered as low context cultures where expressions of assertiveness are common, and relational concerns are not paramount.

Hall (1959) also proposed that Westerner usually have a synchronous approach to time, which results in emphasis on time deadline and sequential and efficient task performance. By contrast, traditionally, Easterners are more polychromous in their approach to time, with less emphasis on prioritizing tasks, and an 'approximate' attitude to time frames. However, this approach to time can be linked to direct versus indirect

communication strategies. Normally, Germans emphasis on time deadlines, so punctuality (particularly in airlines business) is considered very important. When Thai flight attendants arrived at the briefing room just in time, a German in-flight manager might have expected her to be there at least before time. This difference in attitude toward time between these two nationalities needs to be adjusted. From the researcher's point of view, it is essential for Thai flight attendants to adopt German approach to time and adjust themselves to be more punctual, and focus more on clock time in order to avoid conflict at the early stage.

The results of this study also indicate that Thai and German flight attendants employed distinctive strategies in conflict management. Thais preferred confrontational styles (competing), whereas Germans were more likely to use non-confrontational style (compromising) in their conflict management as can be seen from table 2

Table 2 Conflict management strategies employed by Thai and German

Subject	Conflict management strategies employed	
	Thai	German
1	Competing	Compromising
2	Competing	Avoiding+ Competing
3	Avoiding +Competing	Compromising
4	Competing+ Avoiding	----

As mentioned previously, there is no single appropriate or inappropriate way to deal with conflict. No matter what types of strategies will be used, the most significant idea to bear in mind is identifying and confronting conflict at an early stage seems of paramount relevance since conflicts which occurred between Thai and German colleagues on board may affect the effectiveness of teamwork. Consequently, it possibly affects passengers' satisfaction on that flight. Thus, conflict resolution should be a priority among the crew so that it will not negatively influence passengers' satisfaction.

The finding shows that in some particular situations, conflicts between Thai and German flight attendants were not successfully managed. The reason may be due to the working condition and time constraints.   In this globalization era, especially in the airline business, "time means money" (Kim, 1993) which cause the clock becomes important, and then there is less time for socializing and relationship establishing during the working day. This factor obstructs Thai and German disputants from managing conflict effectively. Some even leave it with no solution. In this kind of situation, the researcher would recommend utilizing a third person intervention or mediator. In this study, the most suitable person should be their in-flight managers, as they are in charge of the cabin section. Moreover, they have been trained to mediate all kinds of conflict which could occur on board. In other

words, they have a certain amount of authority, power and ability to manage conflict in in-flight situations. One of the subjects of this study mentioned that she recommended to her Thai and German colleagues who engaged in conflict on her flight that they solve the problem on their own but both of them needed her assistance to mediate the conflict. According to Bercovitch (1992) and Kleiboer (1996), mediation is likely to be used when the parties calculate that it will help them reach a better settlement than they can achieve on their own.

In conclusion, although the researcher suggests those Thai and German flight attendants' conflicts should be mediated by in-flight managers since they have a certain authority, power, and skill; it is considered very difficult in some circumstances to accomplish this task. Hence, an awareness of cultural differences should be highlighted among these colleagues in order to reduce misunderstanding and adept in intercultural communication. Ultimately, if conflict is inevitable, constructive conflict management can be reached.

Discussion

Despite the fact that it is the main objective of this study to investigate appropriate strategies to manage conflicts for both Thai and German flight attendant of Lufthansa German Airlines, it has been found that there is no single way of managing conflict. That is, there is no single appropriate strategy to deal with such conflicts. It is therefore the responsibility of each person or group to be conscious of the problem, and to select the most suitable strategy depending on the context in which the problem has emerged.

Limitation of the study

Despite the fact that this study was carried out using the qualitative method based on phenomenological perspectives, the researcher required a great amount of time and effort to thoroughly discover the appropriate subjects for a focus group interview. The main reason was not all German flight attendants experience having conflict with Thai regional colleagues, and vice versa. In addition, after the subjects have been properly selected, time constraint was another problem. Due to working condition on board, it was not convenient to conduct an interview. Thus, the interview was organized after landing in Frankfurt, Germany (German home-base). Some of selected subjects had a short period of time of connecting flight back to their residence. Consequently, they cancelled the interview. The researcher, finally, was searching for another subject.

Furthermore, in order to avoid any intervening factors that may result from the researcher who also working in this organization (Lufthansa German Airlines), the researcher tried the best not to interfere, or convince the subject in some point of view. But in fact, the researcher may unintentionally encourage or discourage the expression of particular facts and opinions. However, the questions deal directly with people perspective and behavior

which considered very sensitive. As a result, some subjects may hesitate to criticized or give exact information during an interview.

Contribution of the study

First and foremost, the study would be very beneficial for Thai and German who are working with Lufthansa German Airlines to improve their conflict management skills. Since it provides better and broader perspectives for them to look at conflict in different dimension; leading to more effective in dealing with conflict. It also assists them to prepare themselves to cope with intercultural conflicts in order to arrive at a better conflict solution. Moreover, the study demonstrates a number of strategies employed by two distinctive cultures which may apply for other cross-culture conflict. However, the researcher anticipates that this study will not only be useful for Lufthansa members, but also for those who are interested in improving their conflict management skills; particularly those who are working in multinational organization.

In addition, the findings have revealed some significant information which confirms the previous studies under the same area. As a result, this research study may also be considered as a preliminary research to encourage future researchers who wish to elaborate and continue the study in the identical area. Since the findings help both the researcher and readers to realize the differences and some similarities of conflict management in multinational setting. Nevertheless, this should at least strengthen and enhance the two distinctive cultures relationship so that they can create a better quality of working leading to better productivity of the organization.