

## Managing Intragroup Conflicts in Cross-Cultural Teamwork in Construction Projects in Sri Lanka

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### A B S T R A C T

Construction projects, which deal and work together with foreign countries provide a greater contribution to economic growth of Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is very important to have successful outcomes from these multi-cultural projects, which require higher level of workforce management. Presently, foreign countries like China and South Korea have emerged Sri Lanka's main sources of foreign and commercial loans in an environment where, the island is seeking to rebuild and modernise infrastructure. While dealing with those countries, the foreign culture is deeply influenced to the project team development, which has many differences from Sri Lankan cultural features. Therefore, this study was attempting to investigate on managing intragroup conflicts in cross-cultural teamwork to enhance the performance of construction in Sri Lanka with foreign contractors. A qualitative approach was followed in which multiple case studies were selected as the most appropriate method for the research. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews were conducted for each case to collect the data. Captured data was analysed by manual content analysis method. Empirical investigation has been validated to three intragroup conflict types as task conflict, process conflict and relationship conflict. Moreover, it has been revealed that cross-cultural dimensions such as communication, trust, management and uncertainty should be managed properly as they are highly influencing to the intragroup conflicts in Sri Lankan context. Further, research findings disclosed that using apps, organisational management, hierarchical structure, proper documentation are the strategies to manage intragroup conflicts.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural dimensions, cross-cultural teamwork, intra group conflict management

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## 1. Introduction

The construction firm must create predictable use of global construction prospects that helps to hold the improvement in construction, by considering material, process, expertise and further, the construction has rehabilitated unlimited deal due to the effects of growing globalisation within construction industry (Ofori, 2000). The recent study by Ochieng and Price (2010) argued that the importance of cross-culture and strategies to overcome challenges related to cross-cultural teamwork may lead to successful project achievement. Foreign involvement with Sri Lankan construction projects, Bon and Crosthwaite (2001) reported that there is a great opportunity for world-wide construction projects to be executed in Sri Lanka. Moreover, China has emerged as one of the Sri Lanka's main sources of foreign and commercial loans in an environment where, the island is seeking to rebuild and modernise infrastructure (Lanka business online, 2010). Therefore, different firms from different countries contract for big infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka such as buildings, ports, highways, railways and stadiums.

According to international construction projects in Sri Lanka, conflicts can occur due to various reasons. Toor and Ogunlana (2006) observed that most challenging factor of construction projects is improper coordination within team members, which leads to intragroup conflicts within the teams (Passos & Caetano, 2005). Academics acknowledged main types of intragroup conflicts related with teamwork to achieve particular scope (Simons & Peterson, 2000; Liu & Leung, 2002; Jehn, 1997). Identified intragroup conflicts are task conflicts, process conflicts and relationship conflicts (Jehn, 1997).

Due to the challenges involved in construction industry, if team members work as a cross-cultural team it creates more conflicts (Mahalingam & Levitt, 2007). Since the construction industry is critical in nature, because of cost, time and quantity it seems difficult, yet it is possible to minimise the effect by proper management (Soni et al., 2017). The approach of cross-cultural conflict management on construction can be identified by solving problems in a sensible manner by communicating among project team members and within project teams, creating a clear mechanism, creating management and good supervision.

Predominantly in developing countries, where construction activities are comprehensively prejudiced by other nationalities, cross-cultural interfaces perform a significant role in negotiations, technical skills, knowledge, construction process and construction project contacts (Ochieng & Price, 2009). By collective nature of construction industry, significant nature of cross-culture (Ochieng & Price, 2010). Ranupandjojo and Husnan (1994) emphasised that cross-cultural conflicts occur because of using rare resources jointly, carrying out activities together and having different cultures, status, goals, values, and perceptions.

However, there are no popular studies of any empirical work that elaborated explicitly on how the cross cultural dimensions are related with intragroup conflicts in an international cross-cultural project. Therefore, it is essential to identify, how to manage intragroup conflicts task, process and relationship with them to the cultural dimensions and how such intragroup conflicts should be resolved by top management of the cross-cultural construction project team. By considering this research problem, the aim of this study is to investigate how to manage the intragroup conflicts in cross-cultural teamwork in construction projects in Sri Lanka.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Cross- cultural teamwork in construction industry**

Presently, working on cross-cultural teamwork in construction industry has been increased in Sri Lanka (Weatherley, 2016). Managing for cross-cultural construction work is a key to control the participation of different cultural team members (Pheng & Leong, 2000). Generally, team members from different cultures have altered opinions, morals and values related with personalities, which affect cross-cultural teamwork management (Hoecklin, 1994; Harris et al., 2004). It is necessary to interrelate with team members whose social aspects are prejudiced by other cultural significances corresponding to skills in communication, leadership and interpersonal in order to manage the cross-cultural teamwork (Pheng & Leong, 2000). Currently, construction organisations demand for cross-cultural teamwork development and there is increasing interest in revolutionising construction process (Ochieng & Price, 2009).

### **2.2. Concept of conflict in cross-cultural teamwork**

Conflict is the fundamental disagreement between two parties frequently related with issues of distinctiveness (Cartwright & Cooper, 2000). Conflict habitually begins when individual identifies matters in different ways and opposition between the individual and others, about cultural orientations like comforts, views, desires and morals (De Dreu et al., 1999). Furthermore, cross-cultural construction projects are more vulnerable to conflicts resulting from different contracts, cultural backgrounds, views, languages, and technical standards within team members (Gad et al., 2011; Nguyen & Larimo, 2011). Hence, conflicts are one of the main factors preventing the cooperative teamwork and successful completion of cross-cultural construction projects (Cakmak & Cakmak, 2014). Therefore, cross-cultural team members are needed to be proficient to ascertain conflicts and deal with them an operative way (Chan & Suen, 2005).

### **2.3. Intragroup conflicts**

It is challenging to escape conflicts within the organizational life time, since having stakeholders with different opinions and dissimilar scopes while all the members are working towards one aim or scope. Hence, any conflict that occurs within team members is known as intragroup conflict. Chen et al. (2014a) categorised intragroup conflicts of projects into three types task conflict, relationship conflict and process conflict.

Chen et al. (2014b) highlighted that task conflict raises arguments among teams members concerning the team member's altered perspectives, thoughts and attitudes related with project. Therefore, task conflict can be observed as assessment tool for responsiveness of arguments for the contribution of own ideas and encounter other's ideas within the project (Guerra et al., 2005).

Zhao et al. (2018) pinpointed that relationship conflict defines discrepancies among teams from interactive inconsistencies. As a conflict, how tasks should be accomplished by the team members, including the distribution of responsibilities and delegation of tasks expressed as process conflicts (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Jehn and Chatman (2000) expressed that task conflict, process conflict and relationship conflict are interconnected. Moreover, there is an opportunity for one conflict to transform into another type of intragroup conflict (Jehn, 1995). When task conflict and process conflict prolonged to a level of concentration that moves the task conflict to focus on

relationship conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). For instance, authors Simons and Peterson (2000) also exposed that construction progress can emerge, where task conflict and process conflict happen. Additionally authors stated that these conflicts at some extent covered relationship conflict due to an increased concentration level of team members, behaviour and truthworthy.

#### 2.4. Effects of intragroup conflict on cross-cultural teamwork

Intragroup conflicts can be construed as discrepancy among team members of a project, who use scarce resources mutually, carry out doing things together, aims and morals (Ranupandjojo & Husnan, 1994). Influence that creates intragroup conflicts in cross-cultural projects summarised according to the previous research done by various authors in Table 1.

**Table 1: Factors Contributing to Intragroup Conflicts**

Intragroup conflicts	Factors contributing to intragroup conflicts	Source of reference				
		[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]
<b>Task conflicts</b>	Failure to react to issues on time	✓		✓		
	Poor management	✓	✓		✓	
	Failure to determine responsibility among team members	✓				✓
	Alteration in methods of doing things			✓		
<b>Process conflicts</b>	Improper documentations		✓		✓	
	Design errors and specifications				✓	
	Improper mechanism use for information distribution		✓			✓
	Delayed in providing information		✓		✓	
	Lack of team spirit	✓	✓			
	Disappointment in plan			✓	✓	
<b>Relationship conflicts</b>	Lack of clarity in distribution of workflow	✓		✓	✓	
	Failure to implement change of work			✓		
	Control and coordination	✓	✓	✓		✓
	Lack of communication	✓	✓	✓		✓
	Calculation of improper work done		✓	✓	✓	
	Hardship of understanding in the work progress		✓	✓		✓
	Adversarial approach in handling conflicts	✓		✓		✓
	Foreign languages	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Sources: [1] (Fenn et al., 1997); [2] (Simons & Peterson, 2000); [3] (Yuki, 2003); [4] (Jehn, 1994); [5] (Boonsathorn, 2007)

## 2.5. Cross-cultural dimensions

Project management team should enthusiastically concentrate on avoiding and preventing conflicts in cross-cultural team by considering cultural dimensions of different nationalities (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001). Table 2 shows the labelling of available cross-cultural dimensions, which have been identified by various authors.

**Table 2: Cross- Cultural Dimensions**

Cross-cultural dimensions	Source of reference						
	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[7]
Communication	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Leadership	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Trust	✓		✓				✓
Collectivism			✓		✓	✓	
Team selection		✓		✓	✓		
Uncertainty	✓			✓		✓	
Team development		✓			✓		✓
Management	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

*Source:* [1] (Carmeli, 2003); [2] (Friedman et al., 2006); [3] (Tinsley & Brett, 2001); [4] (Simons & Peterson, 2000); [5] (Yuki, 2003); [6] (Jehn, 1994); [7] (Boonsathorn, 2007)

## 2.6. Relationship between intragroup conflicts and cross-cultural dimensions

Many researchers have identified that project teams, who are culturally varied, face more intragroup conflicts because of cultural preference, bias against team members, communication, uncertainty, different perceptions, and acknowledgements among the team members (Canen & Canen, 2008). Thus, conflicts occur due to misconception and misinterpreting of signs and symbols of other cultures (Cakmak & Cakmak, 2014). Nonetheless, it is difficult to prepare for cross-cultural working situations as a lot of problems are very contextual and a solution to one particular problem may not be readily applied to another situation (Xiao & Boyd, 2010). Most of the cultural knowledge is not formally referenced management, trust and team selection. It depends on experiences of team members within cross-cultural team (Hampden & Trompenaars, 2000). Cross-cultural conflict management includes level of tolerance of disagreement, individual offers, team loyalty, communication and perception to the extent of appropriate intervention by a superior (Fenn et al., 1997). Therefore, proper intragroup management is essential for the enhancement of cross-cultural construction projects.

## 3. Research methodology

The empirical study focused on three (03) ongoing multi complex projects, which were constructed by Sri Lankan consultants and Chinese contractors. Hence, four participants from each case refer Table 3, who work in cross-cultural project teams were selected as per the role they performed. Participants were selected in top managerial level, two from contractor side and two from consultant. However, in this research study three cases had been selected to carry out in depth within the time constraints and limited information due to lack of experienced professionals, who work with cross-culture. Data collected by semi-structured interviews are related with intragroup conflict management, cross-cultural dimensions and currently practicing strategies to enhance intragroup conflict management were observed. The findings were analysed by manual content analysis.

**Table 3: The Profile of the Selected Construction Projects**

<b>Case Name</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Case A</b>	Hotel and Residences complex is a new luxury development in the heart of the capital city Mixed development projects The construction contract was awarded to China It comprises a 42 storey hotel and 30 story residence Completed by 2021 Team members are Sri Lankans and Chinese
<b>Case B</b>	Residences and office complex is a new luxury development in the heart of the capital city Mixed development projects The construction contract was awarded to China It comprises a 50-storey office tower and residence with shopping mall Completed by 2020 Team members are Sri Lankans and Chinese
<b>Case C</b>	Hotel and Residences Complex is a new luxury development in the heart of the capital city Mixed development projects The construction contract was awarded to China It comprises a 55-storey residential, 29 storey hotel with shopping mall Completed by 2021 Team members are Sri Lankans and Chinese

**Table 4: Sources Create Intragroup Conflicts**

<b>Main source</b>	<b>Creation of intragroup conflicts</b>	<b>Case studies</b>		
		<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>
<b>Performance</b>	Delay the progress	✓	✓	✓
	Professional knowledge utilise	✓	✓	✓
<b>Scope changes</b>	Consistent scope changes in progress of work	✓	✓	✓
<b>Scheduling</b>	Programme failure	✓	✓	✓
	Misrepresentation work process activities	✓	✓	✓
<b>Teamwork</b>	Face-to-face interaction	✓	✓	✓
	Interpersonal skills	✓	✓	✓
	Disagreement of decisions	✓	✓	✓
<b>Cost</b>	Cost overrun	✓	✓	✓
	Project suspensions	✓		✓
	Efficiency of construction	✓	✓	✓
<b>Communication</b>	Poor feedback system	✓	✓	✓
	Deliberate blocking of communication flow	✓	✓	✓
<b>personalities</b>	Individual drivers and trustworthy	✓	✓	✓
	Personal skills	✓	✓	✓

## **4. Research analysis and findings**

### **4.1 effects of intragroup conflicts in cross-cultural construction projects**

In standings of the effects of intragroup conflict, participants from Case A, Case B and Case C have mentioned that there are key negative impacts in Sri Lankan context. Table 4 clearly interprets the sources created intragroup conflicts according to the participants.

### **4.2. Relationship between intragroup conflicts and cross-cultural dimensions**

In international context, intragroup conflicts occur in cross-cultural project teams. Cross-cultural dimensions are helpful to manage cross-cultural preference, prejudice against team members, communication, uncertainty, different perceptions, and acknowledgements among the team members. In Sri Lankan context, intragroup conflicts occur between foreigners and Sri Lankans were evidently illuminated by majority of participants from Case A, Case B and Case C. The intragroup conflicts related with cross-cultural dimensions are summarised according to the types of intragroup conflicts in Table 5. Participants were requested to state the currently facing conflicts that occur in cross-cultural construction industry due to cross-cultural dimensions.

### **4.3. Strategies of intragroup conflict management in a cross-cultural teamwork**

All participants from three cases highlighted, the importance of communication system using apps and translators and acknowledged receiving the message and interpret it correctly for relevant team members. Case A shows that, "Work in smaller proportion as gang. Recognition differences in language and priority to time management were the major strategies used by the Chinese in Sri Lankan construction projects". Addition to that, Case A expressed as, "It is better to supervise the progress of the construction project to make sure everything is going smoothly".

Raising consciousness on intragroup conflict management of cross-cultural team by working for one scope is another strategy to overcome conflicts. According to Case B expressed that, "Work as a whole team for one target to fulfill the scope or aim of the construction project". Most of the participants stated that responsible contractors and consultants must take the leadership and management in executing of cross-cultural team.

According to Case C depicts that, "Combining multiple views and perspectives of cross-cultural team members is a good strategy to overcome from conflicts". Furthermore, expressed that lower turnover of professionals make conflicts smoothly in cross-cultural teamwork and also stated that, "Always maintain proper documentation process and project team to be fully integrated for taking actions to perform extra necessary tasks without explicit orders".

**Table 5: Responses on Conflict Factors Related with Cross-Cultural Dimensions**

Conflict Type	Factors	Cross-cultural dimensions	Cases		
			A	B	C
<b>Task Conflicts</b>	Lack of comprehension	Management	✓	✓	✓
	Poor feedback system	Communication	✓	✓	
	Personal interests	Trust	✓	✓	✓
	Struggles about judgments	Leadership	✓		✓
	Misunderstanding among members	Harmony	✓	✓	
	Discard divergent ideas	Trust	✓	✓	✓
<b>Relationship Conflicts</b>	Reject deviant behavior	Collectivism		✓	
	Difficulties in procedures and strategies	Management	✓	✓	✓
	Incompatibility between interpersonal relationships	Uncertainty	✓		
	Give priority to collectivism rather than individualism.	Collectivism	✓		
	Accept the opportunity of unconditional truths among team members	Customs			✓
	Meeting decisions are made in Chinese languages	Communication	✓	✓	
	Clashes among team members	Harmony	✓		✓
	Negative remarks	Trust		✓	
	Indirect and passive communication	Communication	✓		✓
	Annoyance between team members	Coordination	✓		
<b>Process Conflict</b>	Conflicts due to the obligations	Management	✓	✓	
	Struggles in overtime and scheduling	Team development			✓
	Construction process	Uncertainty	✓	✓	✓
	Standard operating procedures	Team selection		✓	✓
	Conflicts about work process	Team selection		✓	✓
	Suspensions, terminations and delays	Uncertainty	✓		✓

## 5. Discussion

The study investigated the intragroup conflicts that are affecting to cross-cultural team work in construction projects in Sri Lanka. According to the findings common task conflict factors in many cases are lack of comprehension, personal interests and discarded divergent ideas, which are related with cultural dimensions like management and trust. Relationship conflict factors like language issues, clashes among team and indirect communication mainly highlight the importance of having proper communication system as a cultural dimension. Moreover, cross-cultural dimensions like management and uncertainty have a negative impacts over the Sri Lankan projects, which create process conflicts in standard operating procedures and team obligations. Challenges were facilitated with opportunities for the purpose of intragroup conflict management of construction projects. The findings of literature, case study reveals the intragroup conflict management that should be rooted by managing cross-cultural dimensions properly. Foreign contractors and Sri Lankan consultants know the practical difficulties and the constructability due to cross-cultural impact within the team. This discloses the significant opportunity to implement strategies to cope with cross-cultural dimensions and intragroup conflict management. Current practices of using apps, organisational management, hieratical structure, documentations and team member's well beings have hugely contributed to diminish intragroup conflicts. Sri Lankan

construction industry has the opportunity to reduce intragroup conflicts by adhering to systematic process, which implements the identified strategies.

## 6. Conclusions

In past few years, Sri Lankan construction industry paid attention to create predictable use of global construction prospects that helps to hold the improvement in construction through collaborating with foreign contractors. The main challenge that affects the success of these projects was dissimilarities in cultures of the workforce within the cross-cultural team. The study has revealed that there are several intragroup conflicts such as incompatibility between interpersonal relationships, lack of comprehension, conflicts about work process and etc. between the cross-cultural teamwork in Sri Lankan construction projects. These conflicts have become severe issues while implementing the project, which affect to time and cost overruns and termination of works. Due to the failures, in past years expected economic growth through cross-cultural projects couldn't be achieved. Therefore, it is necessary to address the issue by managing cross-cultural dimensions, which are the main reasons for intragroup conflicts in order to have successful implementation of future projects in Sri Lanka.

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