

# Investigation of Factors Influencing Escalation of Conflict Strategies

## An Experimental Study

\*P Padmavathy Dhillon, B.N.Srivastava & Chetan Joshi

Organization Behavior, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, India  
[padmavathyd11@email.iimcal.ac.in](mailto:padmavathyd11@email.iimcal.ac.in)

### Abstract

In the context of innovation implementation, we studied the main effects of performance feedback and two-way interaction effects of performance feedback with self-confidence, oppositional intensity and slack respectively on the escalation of conflict strategies namely dominating, collaborating and avoiding using the data from 235 Indian managers. Feedback was found to have a main effect on escalation of dominating strategy while self-confidence on escalation of collaborating and de-escalation of avoiding strategy respectively. Two-way interaction of self-confidence with feedback and opposition intensity on escalation of dominating and collaborating strategy was also significant. The overall findings were supportive of behavioral decision theory and escalation to commitment theory.

**Keywords:** Behavioral decision theory, escalation to commitment theory, self-confidence, organization slack, oppositional intensity, conflict strategy, performance feedback, escalation-de-escalation of conflict, experimental study, hierarchical regression

### Introduction

Escalation of commitment has been broadly studied since the last three decades with respect to the crucial decisions relating to financial and resource investments (Lant & Hurley, 1999), new product development (*see for a review* Krill, 1998), marketing (Lages, 2000), online auctions (Ariely & Simonson, 2003) etc. and keeps on growing as a dynamic area of study. Despite the existence of a large body of research on escalation decisions in investment decisions at the individual level, the literature on escalation of conflict strategy is rather scarce. Conflict escalation refers to an increase in the intensity of a conflict and the severity of its tactics (Michelle, 2003). The main conditions that lead to conflict escalation include threats to ego, differences in viewpoints and especially when one feels that he/she is personally responsible for the failure (Staw, 1976). Conflict escalation leads to a piquant situation giving way to negative feelings like anger, fear, anxiety etc. It might further lead to poor decision making like entrapment (Brockner, 1992) or escalation of commitment (Staw, 1976) whereby the disputant may spend enormous amounts of time, efforts and resources in order to 'save face' because none of the parties involved want to admit they were wrong. They consider total commitment as the only choice getting eventually trapped into an escalatory path of ever-increasing commitment

(Rubin, Pruitt & Kim, 1994). This effect becomes more pronounced if the individual possesses high level of confidence. Highly confident managers owing to the self-attribution of the past successes consider themselves to possess a skill set and decision-making abilities far more capable and superior than others which makes them to rely on their own judgment in decision-making rather than searching for more information (Billett & Qian, 2008). Thus it can be said that biased elucidations of the negative criticism prevents them from perceiving the mistake in their past decisions and choices, hence keeping the highly confident managers away from completely handling the negative information resulting in making them more prone to escalation to the prior course of action.

In our present study, we studied the main effect of performance feedback and interaction effects of feedback with participant's self-confidence, intensity of opposition, organization's financial condition (i.e. slack) on conflict escalation (particularly dominating, collaborating and avoiding) in an innovation implementation context. For this, a conflict situation was simulated by manipulating the conditions of organization slack and oppositional intensity simulated conflict situation. The role of organization slack is studied because organizations need to have sufficient amount of resources (slack) in order to encourage innovations (Geiger & Cashen, 2002). Further it has been found that self-confidence plays the most significant role in those firms that have huge cash and unused debt (Goel & Thakor, 2008). Similarly, oppositional intensity is likely to influence the escalation of conflict strategy of the individual (Ketrow, 1999). This question is important to study because conflicts are bound to occur in the course of interpersonal or team interaction. Also, how the conflict is managed at work determines the effectiveness of individual employees, teams and the entire organizations (Tjosvold & Okun, 1979). It thus becomes necessary to handle such conflicts in an appropriate manner to facilitate effective strategic decision-making process in the organization. Considering individual's preferences in dealing with such conflict becomes important. Further, according to behavioral decision theory (Cyert & March, 1963) which propounded the notion of bounded rationality allows various decision biases of the decision maker including his/her personality traits e.g. self-confidence, reputation and relative power (Lewicki, Saunders & Barry, 2006). These biases creep in the form of selective and distorted attention to goals, differential perceptions of priorities of goals and are affected by the limits of individual and organizational memory. Important issues of organizational strategy are prone to both task and relationship conflicts which results in quasi-resolution of conflict. Thus, it becomes essential to study how these biases influence the escalation of conflict strategies adopted by an individual during strategic decision making process. To address these concerns a 2-stage laboratory study was conducted using scenarios of high/low slack, high/ low opposition intensity and self-confidence as predictor variables influencing students (acting the role of the CEO) conflict strategies in stage I, followed by a stage II of additional variable of positive/negative performance feedback with second stage conflict strategies responses serving as dependent variables of conflict escalation.

### **Hypothesis Development**

**Conflict Strategies:** Rahim (1983) provided a framework consisting of five conflict management strategies based on two dimensions i.e. concern for self (assertiveness) and concern for others (co-operative). These five conflict management strategies are dominating, collaborating, avoiding, obliging and compromising. In this study we studied three conflict

strategies of the decision maker, namely dominating, collaborating and avoiding. The rationale for studying only these three conflict strategies follows from the literature. DeChurch, Mesmer-Magnus & Doty (2013) in their meta-analysis of 45 independent studies consisting of a total number of 3,218 teams came up with three major conflict strategies namely dominating, collaborating and avoiding as conflict handling approaches within teams.

**Performance feedback:** Greve (2003) revisited the behavioral decision theory of Cyert and March (1963) where they show that organizations learn from performance feedback given their initial goals and their aspirations. The feedback gives rise to the occurrence of a loop mechanism referred to as "path dependence" where achievements in the past results in an inclination towards similar performance in the future. Thus, it can be said that performance feedback acts as a reality check and leads to modification in behavior directed towards goal achievement.

*Hypothesis 1: Participants will tend to escalate to dominate more under condition of positive feedback as compared to negative feedback; (b) participants will tend to escalate to collaborate and (c) avoiding strategy more under condition of negative feedback as compared to positive feedback*

**Interaction effect of Self-confidence and Performance feedback:** Past research has shown that highly confident CFOs invest in more projects and innovation because they overestimate the value of their investment projects and underestimate the likelihood of failure (Galasso and Simcoe, 2011). Further, high-confident managers are found to be less compromising in the choices they make due to their inability to acknowledge their irrational way of information processing which can therefore prompt their dedication to a former course of action (Neale & Bazerman, 1985). Moore & Cain (2007) further supported this finding by suggesting that the greater the variations in the competitive environment, the harder it is for the highly confident managers to re-examine their prior choices. Therefore, as self-confidence increases, participants would escalate their dominating strategy (i.e. greater concern for the cause of 'self' than 'others') under negative feedback to showcase their dedication to a former course of action.

*Hypothesis 2: Performance feedback and self-confidence will have interaction effect on dominating strategy such that under negative condition of feedback, participants will tend to escalate their dominating response as their self-confidence increases as opposed to participants under positive condition of feedback*

**Interaction effect of Oppositional Intensity and Performance Feedback:** The way in which a conflict is expressed will have an effect on the manner in which the conflict process unravels, the various views and responses of the parties involved (Ketrow, 1999). Weingart et al. (2014) denoted oppositional intensity of conflict as the extent of force the sender expresses opposition during a given conflict event. It has been found that as the intensity of opposition increases i.e. as the parties involved argue more forcefully in favor of their viewpoints results in making both the parties more ego involved and defensive where yielding to the other party's stand suggests a threat to the identity and loss of face (Staw & Ross, 1987). Further, self justification theory states that in order to psychologically defend oneself for a wrong decision one is personally responsible for and to prove to others that he/she is 'right' makes the individual to further increase the commitment of resources (in the form of more effort, time, and money) (Staw, 1976).

*Hypothesis 3: Opposition intensity and performance feedback will have an interaction effect on dominating strategy such that after facing high opposition intensity participants under negative condition of feedback will tend to escalate their dominating response as opposed to participants under positive conditions of feedback*

**Interaction effect of Slack and Self- confidence:** Slack refers to excess resources available at the disposal of the organization (Bourgeois, 1981). A recent finding by Goodie (2003) named ‘paradoxical betting’ which suggests that as the level of confidence increases, participants were increasingly eager to acknowledge the wagers, even though the normal wager values relentlessly declined with increasing levels of confidence. This notion found support in decision accuracy literature which suggests that with the increase in availability of information, people’s belief in their ability to make a better decision increases but it comes at the cost of decrease in decision accuracy (Zacharikis & Shepard, 2001). Further, Malmendier and Tate (2005) found that highly confident CEOs having an access to abundant internal resources, i.e., large cash reserves and low debt had a greater tendency to conduct an acquisition rather than a rational CEO. Therefore, it can be suggested that at high levels of slack opposed to low levels, the low confident participants by virtue of his being risk averse would prefer to avoid uncertainty and withdraw from the escalation situation by incurring smaller but certain losses and save the remaining resources for other fruitful endeavors. High confident participants due to their risk seeking nature would not differentiate much between high/low slack conditions and go ahead with escalation.

*Hypothesis 4: Slack and self-confidence will have an interaction effect on avoiding strategy such that participants in high slack condition will escalate their avoiding response strategy as their self-confidence decreases as opposed to participants in low slack condition.*

## **Method**

The study was done in two stages. Out of 268 managers attending the MDP program at a premier business school who participated in the first stage, two hundred and thirty five (75.9% male) participants participated in the second stage of the study. The average age for the final sample of 235 participants was 36.94 years, SD=8.78 and work experience of participants Mean = 13.42 years and SD= 8.44 years. We employed a 2 (Opposition intensity posture: encouraging versus discouraging) X 2 (low slack (i.e. moderate debts and low reserves) versus high slack (low debts and high reserves) X 2 (Annual Performance feedback: positive versus negative) between participants design. Self Confidence was used as continuous data independent variable with gender and work experience as control variables to seek participant responses on escalation of conflict strategies -dominating, collaborating and avoiding as dependent variables. The second section consisted of the same hypothetical scenario that the participant had read one month back while attempting the responses for Stage 1. The same scenario was given again to him/her for recalling purposes. In this scenario the participant played the role of a CEO of a large Indian electrical components manufacturing firm. In this role, participants read one episode of CEO’s interaction with the top management team (TMT) regarding the implementation of innovation in the company given the market threats from the entry of new competitors (with similar product). In each version of the questionnaire, the description of the episodes included the manipulations of the financial condition of the firm (slack) and the opposition intensity of the TMT posture with respect to the innovation implementation. Based on this information, they had taken their

decision in Stage 1 (one month back) by filling out their preference on a Likert Scale for a set of 21 items measuring the dominating, collaborating and avoiding response strategy. Now, they were further provided with an annual performance feedback (either positive or negative manipulation) about how the firm performed in the current year after the decision they took in Stage 1. Now based on the feedback they received, the participants had to again mark their preference for the same set of twenty one items measuring the three dependent variables, viz. conflict strategies –dominating, collaborating and avoiding for Stage 2. Escalation scores were calculated by measuring scores in second stage. Self-Confidence was measured by six item scale adapted from Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer & Galinsky (2012 with cronbach alpha at .79 and explained 49.65 % variance. The three types of conflict strategies namely dominating, collaborating and avoiding were measured by a 21 item scale consisting of seven items for each of the three response strategy. For each individual, an overall dominating, collaborating and avoiding strategy was calculated by doing a mean scores for the respective set of items of dominating, collaborating and avoiding. For each individual, an overall dominating, collaborating and avoiding strategy was calculated by doing a mean scores for the respective set of items of dominating, collaborating and avoiding. The overall reliability of the dominating conflict strategy measured by Cronbach's alpha for dominating is .73, for collaborating .76 and for avoiding .77.

## Results

Hierarchical regression analysis was performed for testing hypotheses.

**Dominating conflict strategy:** As shown in Table I(A), the variables self- confidence (CONF), slack, oppositional intensity (OPP) and performance feedback (FEED) were regressed on the criterion. As suggested by hypothesis 1a, the regression coefficient for FEED was found to be significant ( $r = .43, p < .05$ ). Under conditions of positive performance feedback participants escalated to dominate more as opposed to conditions of negative feedback ( $M = 5.67, SD = 1.43$  vs.  $M = 5.24, SD = 1.52, t(233) = 2.24, p < .05$ ). Therefore, *Hypothesis 1a* was supported. In next step, as suggested by Hypothesis 2 the raw regression coefficients for two way interaction CONFXFEED were found to be significant ( $B = -.48, p < .05$ ). As a follow-up analysis, we ran simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) for each of the two conditions of feedback. In the negative feedback condition, the slope for the relationship between FEED X CONF on escalation/de-escalation of dominating response was found to be significant,  $B = .31, p < .05$  as opposed to positive feedback where the relationship was found to be insignificant ( $B = -.10, ns$ ). Under negative conditions of feedback, escalation to dominating increases with the increase in self-confidence. Thus *Hypothesis 2 supported*. The raw regression coefficient of OPPXFEED was found to be non-significant ( $B = .05, ns$ ). Thus *Hypothesis 3 not supported*.

**Collaborating conflict strategy:** As table I (B) indicates, the raw regression coefficient for CONF,  $B = .22, p < .01$  was found to be significant. This suggests that as self-confidence increases, participants escalation to collaborating increases The raw regression coefficient for FEED,  $B = -.02, ns$  was found to be non-significant. Thus, *Hypothesis 1b* was not supported. The two-way interactions of OPP X CONF was found to be significant on the collaborating escalation,  $B = .30, p < .05$  As a follow-up analysis, we ran simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) for each of the two conditions of opposition intensity. In the high opposition condition, the

slope for the relationship between CONF on escalation of collaborative response was significant at  $B = .40, p < .001$  as opposed to low opposition where the relationship was found to be insignificant. After being faced with discouraging posture, participants escalated their collaborating strategy with increase in confidence.

**Avoiding conflict strategy:** As table I (c) indicates, the main effects for self-confidence (CONF), was found to be significant,  $B = -.25, p < .05$ . This suggests that as self-confidence increases, participants escalation to avoiding decreases. The two-way interaction SLACK X CONF was found to be nonsignificant at ( $r = .25, ns$ ). Therefore, *Hypothesis 4* not supported.

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Insert Table I (A), Table I (B) and Table I (C) about here

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### **Discussion and conclusion**

The study highlighted three major findings. First, the role of performance feedback on escalation/de-escalation on dominating response was strongly supported. Second, self-confidence was found to have a significant effect on escalation/de-escalation of the collaborating and avoiding response and also acted as a moderator in the relationship between feedback and dominating strategy. Third, the contextual variables of opposition intensity acted as a moderator of self-confidence on collaborating response strategy. Findings on performance feedback (Hypothesis 1a) were in accordance with behavioral theory (Cyert and March, 1963) and Fredrickson (1985) which suggests that managers in organizations learn from feedback given their initial goals and their aspirations. In this case the performance feedback acted as a reality check and led to behavior modification directed towards goal achievement as is evident by de-escalation in dominating strategy in the face of negative feedback and vice-versa in the face of a positive feedback. As per hypothesis 2, the two-way interaction of self-confidence X feedback supported Staw's escalation theory whereby under negative condition of feedback highly confident participant escalated their dominating strategy to justify their prior course of action (Neale & Bazerman, 1985; Moore & Cain, 2007). Furthermore, we found main effect of self-confidence on escalation of collaborating strategy and de-escalation of avoiding strategy. This suggests risk aversion of low confident participants due to possession of low self-affirmation resources which leads to avoiding strategy. On the other hand, high confident participants owing to high affirmational resources instead of avoiding the situation possess the courage to go out in open and approach the problem head on by collaborating with the other party. Furthermore, after being faced with the discouraging posture of opposition, high confident participants will escalate their collaboration strategy than when faced with an encouraging posture of opposition. This effect of self-confidence X oppositional intensity was found to be significant for collaborating strategy as opposed to dominating strategy (suggested by Hypothesis 3). The rationale for this contradictory finding can be attributed to the mature judgment of reasonableness versus unreasonableness of the strategy to deal with both task and relationship conflict by choosing not to exercise escalation in dominating approach after facing high levels of oppositional intensity and instead collaborate with the opposition. Further, we found that the moderating role of slack was not at all significant for escalation of avoiding strategies (Hypothesis 4). As self-confidence increases, participants tend to use less avoiding strategy and more of collaborating strategy

irrespective of the conditions of slack. Thus we can say that the findings allude to distinctive frame of decision biases due to personality traits i.e. the self-confidence level of the decision maker. The role of contextual cues of performance feedback, and oppositional intensity in superimposing subjective rationality in predicting which unique strategy participant would make is an important contribution of the study. The overall findings are supportive of behavioral decision theory (Cyert & March, 1963) indicating personality trait serving as a decision bias of bounded rationality contingent upon the contextual cues of positive/negative feedback and encouraging/discouraging oppositional intensity posture to choose uncertainty avoidance by collaborating and choosing uncertainty absorption by using dominating strategy. The findings also provided support to the escalation of commitment theory of Staw (1976).

### **Limitation and implication for future research:**

This research suffers from few limitations i.e. the use of scenarios of slack, opposition intensity and feedback to explain a real world phenomenon is limiting the external validity. However, we believe the conflict situations necessitate such scenario based simulations where participants may not feel apprehensive or may give loaded responses. Also a sound and well controlled experiment may stand more robust in drawing conclusions because of high internal validity. The study has practical implications for the screening and selection of CEOs for their decision biases as revealed by their personality traits and other personal characteristics. Corporate governance may also benefit by exposing the budding CEOs and TMT members to conflict management tools and practices from cognitive and behavioral perspective.

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**Table I (A &B) :**Regression Analyses with Escalation in dominating & collaborating conflict Strategy

Predictors	Dominating			Collaborating		
	Model1	Model 2	Model3	Model1	Model 2	Model3
Intercept	4.92	4.89	4.88	7.46	7.56	7.51
Gender	.75	.79	.72	.33	.31	.29
Work Ex	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
CONF		.11	.62		.22**	-.01
Slack		-.16	-.09		.01	-.11
OPP		-.17	-.05		-.12	.15
FEED		.43*	.30		-.02	.02
SLACK X CONF			-.40			.00
OPP X CONF			-.12			.30*
FEED X CONF			-.48*			.20
Slack X OPP			-.29			-.11
Slack X FEED			.23			.30
OPP X FEED			.05			-.39
ΔF	3.02	1.92	1.14	4.97	2.65	1.87
Overall R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.06*	.07	.04**	.08*	.13

Note. † p<.10,\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001, N=235, B=raw regression coefficient.

**Table I(C) :Regression Analyses with escalation in avoiding conflict strategy**

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	B	B	B
Intercept	4.36	4.33	4.38
Gender	-.24	-.22	-.31
Work Ex	.00	.00	.00
CONF		-.25*	-.34
Slack		-.11	-.15
OPP		.33	.22
FEED		-.22	.11
Slack X CONF			.25
OPP X CONF			.13
FEED X CONF			-.30
Slack X OPP			.47
Slack X FEED			-.35
OPP X FEED			-.32
$\Delta F$	4.49	2.21	.91
Overall R <sup>2</sup>	.04**	.07 <sup>+</sup>	.10
df ( regression, residual )	(2,232)	(4,228)	(3,225)

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001, N=235, B=raw regression coefficient.