

Effectiveness Conflict Management Guidelines of Leaders in the Universities under Liaoning Province*

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Abstract

Effective conflict management is essential for promoting organizational harmony, leadership effectiveness, and institutional performance in higher education. This study aimed to develop evidence-based guidelines for effective conflict management among university leaders in Liaoning Province, China. A mixed-methods research design was employed, involving 352 university leaders and staff from five universities in Liaoning Province. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis (EFA), whereas the qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis.

The findings revealed that effective conflict management among university leaders comprises five key dimensions: (1) establishment of good interpersonal relationships, (2) environmental change, (3) reward and punishment systems, (4) leadership models, and (5) conflict management strategies. Based on these findings, 24 practical guidelines were developed to support university leaders in managing organizational conflicts more effectively. These guidelines are expected to strengthen leadership capabilities, improve organizational climate, promote harmonious campus environments, and enhance institutional effectiveness. Furthermore, the proposed framework provides a valuable reference for conflict management practices in higher education institutions within Liaoning Province and other comparable educational contexts.

Keywords: Effectiveness; Conflict Management; Leadership Guidelines; Higher Education; Liaoning Province

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in organizations and plays a significant role in shaping leadership effectiveness, organizational performance, and institutional

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sustainability. In higher education institutions, conflicts frequently arise from differences in organizational goals, resource allocation, communication, academic autonomy, and interpersonal relationships among administrators, faculty members, and staff. Consequently, effective conflict management has become an essential leadership competency for maintaining organizational harmony and improving institutional performance (Folger et al., 2021).

The concept of conflict management has evolved considerably over time. Early approaches regarded conflict as a disruptive force that should be eliminated through hierarchical authority, formal regulations, and administrative control (Gelfand et al., 2012). However, the Human Relations Movement of the 1920s and 1930s shifted attention toward interpersonal relationships, employee satisfaction, and social interactions as important determinants of organizational effectiveness. Subsequently, research in organizational behavior recognized conflict as an inevitable organizational phenomenon that, when managed appropriately, can stimulate creativity, innovation, and organizational learning. (Worapongpat, 2025c). During the late twentieth century, Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) approaches, including negotiation, mediation, and arbitration, became increasingly important in resolving organizational conflicts. (Soomro, et. al., 2023). More recently, digital transformation and virtual communication technologies have introduced new challenges and opportunities for conflict management in higher education institutions, particularly within online and hybrid working environments (Hart & Rodgers, 2024).

In contemporary universities, leaders face increasingly complex conflict situations resulting from institutional reforms, performance evaluation systems, competition for research funding, resource allocation, faculty workload, and organizational change. (Peihua, D. (2018). Previous studies have demonstrated that leadership behaviors, communication quality, emotional intelligence, and organizational culture significantly influence conflict management effectiveness. (Worapongpat, 2025d). Leaders who promote trust, transparency, collaboration, and participative decision-making are more likely to resolve conflicts constructively while enhancing organizational commitment and employee satisfaction (Worapongpat, 2025f).

In Liaoning Province, China, universities are undergoing continuous educational reforms and organizational transformation to improve educational quality and institutional competitiveness. (Worapongpat, 2025e). These changes have intensified conflicts related to administrative management, academic performance, resource distribution, and professional autonomy. Although numerous studies have investigated conflict management in higher education, most have focused on general leadership theories or conflict resolution strategies without developing comprehensive, context-specific guidelines for university leaders in Liaoning Province. Furthermore, few studies have integrated quantitative and qualitative evidence to construct a systematic framework for effective conflict management. (Khan, 2017).

To address this research gap, the present study employed a mixed-methods approach to identify the key dimensions of effective conflict management and develop evidence-based guidelines for university leaders in Liaoning Province. (Makjod, et. al., 2025). The findings provide a comprehensive framework consisting of five dimensions and twenty-four practical guidelines that can enhance leadership effectiveness, strengthen organizational relationships, improve institutional governance, and promote

harmonious campus environments. The proposed framework also offers valuable implications for conflict management practices in higher education institutions in China and other comparable educational contexts.

Objectives

1. To develop and validate effective conflict management guidelines for university leaders in Liaoning Province using a mixed-methods approach.

Literature Review

Conflict management theory has evolved from early approaches emphasizing authoritative suppression of disputes toward contemporary perspectives that view conflict as an inevitable and potentially constructive organizational phenomenon. Modern frameworks highlight the importance of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and adaptive strategies that balance resolution efficiency with the constructive use of task-related conflict. Effectiveness in conflict management is therefore not limited to resolving disputes, but also includes efficiency, adaptability, and the capacity to transform conflict into innovation and organizational learning (Tjosvold et al., 2016; Tack & Vanderlinde, 2020).

In higher education institutions, conflict is particularly complex due to dual structural tensions: (1) faculty–leadership conflicts involving workload allocation, research autonomy, and performance evaluation, and (2) interpersonal conflicts among faculty driven by resource competition and divergent academic priorities. These conflicts directly influence organizational climate, academic productivity, and institutional cohesion. As a result, leadership capacity becomes a central determinant of whether conflict produces dysfunctional outcomes or constructive engagement.

Empirical studies emphasize that leadership style and personal competencies significantly shape conflict outcomes. Transformational leadership has been shown to improve team cohesion and job satisfaction, while pragmatic leadership styles may be more effective than charismatic styles in preventing task conflict from escalating into relational conflict. In addition, leaders' political skill and emotional intelligence play a moderating role in conflict processes by reducing negative emotional spillover and supporting creativity and performance within teams (Van de Vliert, 2013; Worapongpat et al., 2025).

Within higher education contexts, effective leaders foster open communication, constructive feedback mechanisms, and emotionally supportive environments that reduce conflict intensity and promote organizational performance (Wu, 2023). Emotional intelligence further strengthens leaders' ability to regulate group emotions and maintain a positive organizational climate, which is essential for sustaining collaboration in research and teaching environments.

In the context of Liaoning Province universities, which include diverse institutions such as Dalian University of Technology, Northeastern University, and Liaoning University, effective conflict management is particularly important due to institutional diversity and varying governance structures. Strengthening leadership-guided conflict management is therefore essential for improving educational quality, research collaboration, and long-term institutional sustainability.

Despite extensive theoretical and empirical studies, there remains a lack of context-specific, empirically derived frameworks that integrate leadership competencies

and conflict management strategies tailored to Chinese provincial universities. To address this gap, this study applies Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to identify the underlying structural dimensions of effective conflict management in this context and to develop a systematic set of leadership guidelines.

EFA is particularly suitable for this purpose as it enables the identification of latent constructs by analyzing correlations among observed variables, thereby reducing dimensional complexity and revealing underlying factor structures. Prior research has demonstrated its usefulness in organizational and psychological studies for scale development and construct validation, supporting its application in this study to build a validated, context-sensitive model of conflict management effectiveness.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to develop and validate a comprehensive set of effective conflict management guidelines for university leaders in Liaoning Province. The study was conducted in two sequential phases: (1) qualitative exploration and instrument development, and (2) quantitative validation and guideline refinement.

1.1 Population, Sample, and Key Informants

Phase 1: Qualitative Exploration

The first phase aimed to explore perceptions and practices of effective conflict management among university leaders. A review of relevant literature and theories was conducted to establish a conceptual foundation.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were then conducted with 13 key informants selected purposively from five universities in Liaoning Province. Participants included university presidents, deans of secondary colleges, directors of academic departments, and heads of student affairs, all of whom had direct experience in leadership and conflict management.

Phase 2: Quantitative Survey

The target population for the quantitative phase consisted of approximately 2,800 university personnel, including administrators (e.g., presidents, deans, department directors, and student affairs officers) and faculty members across the same five universities in Liaoning Province.

Using appropriate sampling techniques, a sample of 352 respondents was selected for questionnaire distribution. This sample size was deemed sufficient for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and structural validation of the proposed constructs.

Phase 3: Expert Validation (Focus Group)

To refine and validate the proposed conflict management guidelines, a focus group discussion was conducted with nine experts, including senior professors and experienced university administrators from the same institutions. Participation was voluntary, and discussions were conducted in an open and structured manner to ensure depth and relevance of feedback.

Time Frame

The study was conducted during the 2024 academic year.

2. Research Instruments

Three main instruments were used in this study:

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Used in Phase 1 to collect qualitative data on leadership experiences and conflict management practices.

Five-Point Likert Scale Questionnaire

Designed to measure perceptions of effective conflict management across identified dimensions. The scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Used in Phase 3 to evaluate, refine, and validate the preliminary set of conflict management guidelines.

3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in four sequential stages consistent with the mixed-methods design:

3.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using content analysis, involving coding, categorization, and theme development to identify key dimensions of effective conflict management in higher education leadership.

3.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation (SD), were used to summarize demographic characteristics and assess perceived levels of conflict management effectiveness.

3.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

EFA was conducted to identify the underlying factor structure of effective conflict management. This included assessing latent dimensions, reducing observed variables, and validating construct structure. The results were used as the empirical foundation for guideline development.

3.4 Focus Group Analysis and Guideline Development

Focus group data were analyzed using thematic and comparative analysis techniques. Findings from all phases (literature review, interviews, survey results, and focus group discussion) were integrated to develop the final set of conflict management guidelines for university leaders.

Results

1. Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify the underlying structure of effective conflict management among university leaders in Liaoning Province. The analysis extracted five distinct components comprising a total of 63 measurement items. Factor loadings ranged from 0.665 to 0.877, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.60, indicating strong construct validity and adequate item representation for each factor.

Table 1: Extracted Components of Effective Conflict Management

Order	Components	Number Variables	of Factor Range	Loading
1	Establishment of Good Interpersonal Relations	15	0.685 – 0.877	
2	Environmental Change	11	0.687 – 0.854	
3	Inappropriate Reward and Punishment System	13	0.671 – 0.839	

Order	Components	Number Variables	of Factor Range	Loading
4	Leadership Model	10	0.711 – 0.831	
5	Conflict Management	14	0.665 – 0.868	
	Total	63	0.665 – 0.877	

2. Description of Extracted Components

2.1 Establishment of Good Interpersonal Relations

This component consisted of 15 items with factor loadings ranging from 0.685 to 0.877. It reflects interpersonal communication, trust-building, and collaborative relationships, which are fundamental to reducing conflict escalation and promoting organizational harmony.

2.2 Environmental Change

This dimension included 11 items, with factor loadings between 0.687 and 0.854. It captures the influence of institutional restructuring, policy shifts, and organizational environmental dynamics on conflict emergence and resolution processes.

2.3 Inappropriate Reward and Punishment System

This component comprised 13 items, with loadings ranging from 0.671 to 0.839. It reflects perceptions of fairness, transparency, and consistency in institutional evaluation, reward allocation, and disciplinary mechanisms, which significantly influence conflict intensity.

2.4 Leadership Model

This factor included 10 items, with factor loadings between 0.711 and 0.831. It highlights the role of leadership style, decision-making behavior, and administrative approaches in shaping conflict outcomes within universities.

2.5 Conflict Management

This final component consisted of 14 items, with loadings ranging from 0.665 to 0.868. It represents formal and informal strategies, procedures, and techniques used by university leaders to identify, manage, and resolve conflicts effectively.

3. Summary of EFA Findings

Overall, all items demonstrated factor loadings above the recommended minimum threshold of 0.60, confirming strong relationships between observed variables and their respective latent constructs. The distribution of items across components (10–15 items each) indicates a balanced and well-structured measurement model.

These results confirm that effective conflict management in higher education leadership in Liaoning Province is a multidimensional construct composed of five interrelated factors, providing empirical support for the structural validity of the measurement instrument.

4. Development of Conflict Management Guidelines

Based on the integration of findings from the literature review, qualitative interviews, quantitative survey results, and focus group discussions, a total of 24 practical conflict management guidelines were developed for university leaders in Liaoning Province.

A focus group of nine experts (senior professors and university administrators) reviewed and refined these guidelines. Their feedback was analyzed thematically, leading to the final organization of the guidelines into five key thematic areas, aligned with the five extracted EFA components.

5. Final Summary Statement

In summary, the study identified five key dimensions of effective conflict management among university leaders in Liaoning Province:

- (1) Establishment of Good Interpersonal Relations,
- (2) Environmental Change,
- (3) Inappropriate Reward and Punishment System,
- (4) Leadership Model, and
- (5) Conflict Management Practices.

These dimensions formed the empirical foundation for a structured set of 24 validated conflict management guidelines, supporting improved leadership effectiveness and organizational harmony in higher education institutions.

Discussion

Research Objective 1: Identify the core dimensions of effective conflict management among university leaders The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) identified five distinct and theoretically meaningful dimensions of effective conflict management: interpersonal relations, environmental change, reward and punishment systems, leadership model, and conflict management processes. These results indicate that conflict management in higher education is a multidimensional construct that integrates both relational and structural elements. The emergence of interpersonal relations and leadership model as dominant and distinct factors highlights that conflict in universities is primarily shaped by human interactions and leadership behavior. This finding is consistent with prior research emphasizing that interpersonal trust, communication quality, and leadership actions are central determinants of conflict outcomes in organizational settings (Adeel et al., 2019; Worapongpat et al., 2025). High factor loadings and strong communalities further confirm that the observed variables reliably represent their underlying constructs rather than random variation. The separation of structural dimensions such as reward and punishment systems and environmental conditions suggests that institutional frameworks independently influence conflict dynamics. This aligns with organizational conflict theory, which argues that both interpersonal processes and organizational structures jointly shape conflict emergence and resolution (Bhadra et al., 2024; Worapongpat et al., 2025). In the context of universities, where professional norms, hierarchical structures, and evaluation systems are highly formalized, these factors naturally emerge as distinct but interrelated dimensions.

Research Objective 2: Develop practical guidelines for improving conflict management The integration of qualitative interviews, survey data, and focus group discussions resulted in the development of 24 practical guidelines distributed across the five identified dimensions. Expert validation further refined these guidelines into actionable strategies, including open communication mechanisms, early warning systems, fair evaluation procedures, leadership development initiatives, and post-conflict follow-up processes. These findings demonstrate that the statistical constructs identified through EFA can be effectively translated into practical management interventions. For example, the interpersonal relations dimension is operationalized through team-building activities and communication enhancement strategies, while the reward and punishment system dimension is addressed through fairness-oriented administrative reforms and grievance mechanisms. This transformation from latent

constructs to applied guidelines strengthens the ecological and practical validity of the study. It reflects the value of mixed-methods research, where qualitative insights explain the underlying meaning of quantitative groupings and expert input ensures feasibility and contextual relevance (Chattopadhyay, 2020; Worapongpat et al., 2025). The involvement of expert panels further enhances the credibility and applicability of the proposed framework, increasing the likelihood of successful implementation in real institutional settings. The findings are consistent with literature advocating for multi-level conflict management interventions, combining structural reforms, leadership development, and process-based strategies to improve organizational outcomes (Coleman, 2012).

Research Objective 3: Validate the statistical adequacy and applicability of the guidelines The psychometric evaluation provided strong evidence supporting the validity and reliability of the measurement model underlying the proposed guidelines. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value of 0.967 and significant Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The extracted model explained 67.259% of the total variance, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold and indicating strong explanatory power. All items demonstrated substantial factor loadings, and no cross-loading issues were detected, confirming a clean and stable factor structure. These results suggest that the developed guidelines are grounded in a statistically robust framework and reflect stable latent constructs within the studied population. From a methodological perspective, the study followed established best practices for instrument development, including theory-driven item generation, expert review, and empirical validation through EFA. This sequential process enhances both construct validity and practical relevance, consistent with prior recommendations in scale development literature (De Wit et al., 2012; Worapongpat et al., 2025). Overall, the results suggest that effective conflict management in higher education requires an integrated approach that combines interpersonal development, structural reform, leadership capacity building, and systematic conflict monitoring mechanisms. These components collectively contribute to improved trust, collaboration, and institutional stability.

Knowledge Contribution

This study generates new empirical and context-specific knowledge on the multidimensional nature of effective conflict management among university leaders in Liaoning Province. The findings demonstrate that conflict management in higher education should not be understood as a narrow administrative task, but rather as a systemic leadership capability shaped by interconnected interpersonal, structural, and organizational factors.

Through Exploratory Factor Analysis, the study confirmed that effective conflict management is composed of five interrelated dimensions: interpersonal relations, environmental adaptation, reward and punishment systems, leadership model, and conflict management processes. These dimensions form a coherent and statistically validated structure (KMO = 0.967; cumulative variance explained = 67.259%), indicating both strong construct validity and practical relevance supported by expert evaluation.

A key contribution of this research is the development of 24 evidence-based and context-specific guidelines tailored to the organizational realities of higher education

institutions in Liaoning Province. These guidelines translate empirical findings into actionable strategies, including early conflict detection mechanisms, diversified resolution approaches, leadership competency development, environmental optimization, and continuous post-conflict monitoring systems. In contrast to many Western-oriented models that emphasize formal negotiation and mediation techniques, this study highlights the central role of relational maintenance and organizational harmony, reflecting the contextual influence of Chinese higher education culture.

Another important insight is the identification of environmental and structural conditions—such as resource allocation, workplace environment, and perceived fairness—as critical determinants of conflict emergence and escalation. This finding challenges the traditional assumption that conflict is primarily driven by interpersonal disagreement, demonstrating instead that organizational systems play an equally significant role in shaping conflict dynamics.

From a broader perspective, the new knowledge produced by this study contributes to the improvement of governance practices in higher education institutions. Enhanced conflict management capacity among university leaders is expected to foster more stable academic environments, improve faculty well-being, increase institutional efficiency, and promote collaborative organizational cultures. Ultimately, these outcomes support the development of high-quality human capital and contribute to long-term institutional sustainability and social harmony.

Conclusion

This study developed and validated a comprehensive framework of effective conflict management for university leaders in Liaoning Province using a mixed-methods approach. The findings confirmed that effective conflict management is a multidimensional construct consisting of five key components: (1) Establishment of Good Interpersonal Relations, (2) Environmental Change, (3) Inappropriate Reward and Punishment System, (4) Leadership Model, and (5) Conflict Management Practices.

The quantitative results from Exploratory Factor Analysis demonstrated strong construct validity, with a KMO value of 0.967 and a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < 0.05$), confirming the adequacy of the dataset for factor extraction. The five-factor model explained a cumulative variance of 67.259%, indicating strong explanatory power and structural stability. All factor loadings exceeded the acceptable threshold, further supporting the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

Based on the integration of literature review, qualitative interviews, survey analysis, and expert focus group discussion, a set of 24 practical and context-specific guidelines was developed and refined. These guidelines were organized according to the five validated dimensions and provide a structured framework for improving leadership practice in conflict management within higher education institutions.

Overall, the study contributes an empirically supported and context-sensitive model for understanding and improving conflict management among university leaders in Liaoning Province. It offers both theoretical value in

extending conflict management research and practical value in guiding leadership behavior to enhance organizational harmony and institutional effectiveness in higher education settings.

Recommendations

1. Practical Recommendations for University Leadership and Institutions

University leaders are encouraged to integrate the 24 developed conflict management guidelines into daily administrative and decision-making practices. These guidelines should be used as a practical framework for early conflict detection, structured response planning, and post-conflict follow-up, ensuring a more proactive and systematic approach to conflict management.

Higher education institutions should implement regular capacity-building programs aimed at strengthening the conflict management competencies of leaders and faculty members. These programs should emphasize key skills such as communication, negotiation, emotional intelligence, and collaborative problem-solving, which are essential for reducing conflict escalation.

Institutions are also advised to establish transparent and standardized reward and punishment systems. Ensuring fairness, consistency, and accountability in evaluation and disciplinary procedures can significantly reduce conflicts arising from perceived injustice or bias.

In addition, organizational structures and working environments should be optimized to reduce systemic sources of conflict. This includes clarifying job responsibilities, improving resource allocation, and enhancing internal communication channels to minimize misunderstandings and operational inefficiencies.

University leadership teams should adopt a multi-method conflict resolution approach, combining formal procedures and informal strategies to address diverse conflict situations. This flexibility is essential in accommodating different personality types, cultural expectations, and contextual variations within academic institutions.

Finally, institutions should establish a systematic conflict monitoring system to track unresolved issues, evaluate intervention outcomes, and ensure formal closure of conflict cases. Such mechanisms will help prevent recurring disputes and support long-term organizational stability.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies are encouraged to test the applicability of the 24 conflict management guidelines in other regional or international higher education contexts to assess their generalizability and external validity.

Comparative research between Chinese and non-Chinese universities is recommended to further explore the influence of cultural values on conflict formation and resolution strategies, particularly in relation to relational dynamics and institutional governance styles.

Longitudinal studies should be conducted to examine how conflict management practices and leadership behaviors evolve over time, particularly in response to changes in institutional structure or leadership experience.

Future research should also employ Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to further validate and examine the causal relationships among the five identified dimensions of conflict management, providing deeper explanatory insight beyond exploratory factor analysis.

In addition, incorporating perspectives from teachers, administrative staff, and students would enhance data triangulation and provide a more comprehensive understanding of conflict dynamics within universities.

Finally, emerging technologies such as AI-based conflict early-warning and monitoring systems should be explored as innovative tools to support proactive conflict detection and evidence-based decision-making in higher education governance.

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