# The Role of Emotional Intelligence Training in Moderating Conflict Resolution in Virtual Teams

*Emergent Research Forum (ERF)*

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## Abstract

Emotional Intelligence is an important ability of a person to understand and control his/her own emotions, coupling with the ability to understand and manage others' emotions. In operating in the virtual team environment where contextual cues are limited, emotional intelligence is crucial in helping virtual team members in dealing with conflicts. Despite the importance of Emotional Intelligence in conflict resolution in the virtual team environment, there is a gap in the literature, especially when Emotional Intelligence training is needed to remedy team members who are lacking in emotionality control. In this emergency research forum paper, we propose a research to explore to examine the extent to which EI and EI training plays in conflict resolution in a virtual team environment.

**Keywords**

Emotional Intelligence, Conflict Resolution, Virtual Team, Emotional Intelligence Training

## Introduction

The success of a virtual team (VT) is predicated upon its members maintaining good relationships among themselves. While most interactions are pleasant, diverging ideologies and working preferences could resolve in intra team conflicts. Thus, conflict resolution in VT remains an important issue (Paul, Seetharaman, Samarah, & Mykytyn, 2004). While most conflict resolution provided methodologies to cope with the situation, there is little focus on the link between conflicts and emotional behaviors of VT members (Ayoko, Konrad, & Boyle, 2012). Based on Zaccaro and Bader (2003), management of conflicts and control of emotionality are difficult tasks that VT has to face. It is the most important task especially when conflicts are emotionally charged (Hopkins & Yonker, 2015).

Due to the need to control emotionality, emotional intelligence (EI) is a primary vehicle for team members to understand their own emotions and devise meaningful tactics to resolve conflicts (Jordan & Troth, 2004). Unfortunately, many team members do not inherently possess this important skillset in order to handle emotionally-charged events, especially in the virtual environment, where visual cues and contexts are often missing. Despite its prevalence in conflict resolution, there is a gap in the knowledge base regarding the role of EI in conflict resolution. In this emergence research forum paper, we propose a research study to examine the extent to which EI training plays in conflict resolution in a VT environment.

## Literature Review

### Virtual Team and Conflict Resolution

Due to the increasingly reliance on a global work force, organizations have increasingly leverage the use of VT team to achieve organizational objectives. Liu, Magjuka, and Lee (2008) defined virtual team as "a group of people with complementary competencies executing simultaneous, collaborative work processes through electronic media without regard to geographic location". The emergence of new technologies such as online collaboration tools and face-to-face video conferencing has made the organization to embrace VT in a multitude of projects and initiatives. With global organizations, VT are especially useful when handling

team members from originating multiple nationalities, locating in different time zones, speaking different languages, and having diverse cultural backgrounds. By using VTs, companies have been able to overcome time and space barriers, enabling team members to work together seamlessly (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001).

When team members do not agree on ideas, on how to complete tasks, and on opinions, VT might suffer from conflicts. Conflict is inevitable, and the success of a team is predicated upon tactful handling of conflicts, not minimizing them (Paul et al., 2004). Rahim, Garrett, and Buntzman (1992) and Montoya-Weiss et al. (2001) proposed five strategies to manage conflict: (1) avoidance, (2) accommodation, (3) competition, (4) collaboration, and (5) compromise. Using avoidance, one evades conflicts and refuses to address conflicts directly. In accommodation, one sacrifices his/her own ends to the satisfaction of the other party. The competition strategy is the opposite of accommodation, where one negates other party's feelings and needs and continues to pursue his/her own agenda. A collaboration strategy seeks to resolve conflict by working together to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome. Finally, compromise is where both parties come to a final outcome by relinquishing some of the original goals and adapting some of the other parties' goals (Liu et al., 2008).

By leveraging a diverse population, organizations can facilitate creativity and problem solving at a higher degree. Trust is also an important aspect when team is no longer enjoy the benefit of face-to-face communication (Cheng, Fu & Druckenmiller 2016). Jehn and Mannix (2001) advocated to place conflict training in the early stages of the group formation process. Since group is bound to have conflicts, early development and understanding of conflict and how to resolve conflict will increase performance of the group. When studying VTs with asynchronous communication channel in two different countries, United and Japan, Montoya-Weiss et al., (2001) indicated that the success of the team hinged on how VT members handled their internal conflict.

## Emotional Intelligence Training in Conflict Resolution and Virtual Team

There is a recent surge in emotional intelligence (EI) research and interest in both academia and practice. Mayer and Salovey (1999) defined EI as "the ability to monitor one's own feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Feyerherm & Rice, 2002). EI has four distinctive characteristics, as delineated by Davies, Stankov, and Roberts (1998):

(1) appraisal and expression of emotion in the self (self-emotional appraisal [SEA]);
(2) appraisal and recognition of emotion in others (others' emotional appraisal [OEA]);
(3) regulation of emotion in the self; and
(4) use of emotion to facilitate performance (use of emotion [UOE]). (Zhang, Chen, & Sun, 2015)

In this paper, we follow the conventional definition of EI to inform our research by Mayer and Salovey (1999) as mentioned above. The importance of emotions in teams are highlighted in Ayoko et al. (2012)'s seminal work. In this research, the authors gleaned through VT members and their communication to reveal the importance of regulating emotions in events of conflict. In the EI, team performance, and conflict resolution study, Jordan and Troth (2004) provided mixed results in terms of linking EI and conflict resolution strategies. In a recent study, Zhang et al. (2015) attempted to find the linkages between EI in different conflict resolution strategies and the effect on innovation performance. Their study showed that EI is positively associated with compromise, collaboration, and competition.

Given the positive influence of EI in team, researchers have started to discuss and investigate the extent to which EI skillsets can be developed (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2004). When the nature communication becomes automatic, VT members need to be trained to be aware of the communication styles and how it affects performance (Bartelt & Dennis 2014). The importance of EI training have been established in the literature. For instance, Rentsch, Delise, Salas, and Letsky (2010) instituted an emotional intelligence training strategy within a collocated team environment and has found a positive effect on the team performance and team members communications. Not only team members, managers are also benefited from such training(Slaski & Cartwright, 2003).

Building on to Slaski & Cartwright, 2003, Clark (2010) provided a training for 53 English project managers to understand the effects of emotional intelligence training in the short-immediate- and long term. Clark (2010) found that the emotional intelligence has not contributed positively to conflict management

immediately after the training. However, after a period of 6 months, Clark (2010) observed that the project managers did develop a positive conflict management resolution, partially thanks to the emotional intelligence training. The long-term effect of emotional intelligence is also observed by Turner and Lloyd-Walker (2008), who provided training for a research team and measure the effects 6 months later. This research corroborates with the research by Clark.

While there are many studies that dealt with EI training, conflict resolution, and VT, there is no research that takes into consideration all three domains. Given the growing interest in the EI research and conflict resolution, the purpose of our research is to determine extent to which EI training plays in conflict resolution in a VT environment.

## Proposed Theoretical Model and Hypotheses

In carrying out our research, we develop a theoretical model, as shown in Figure 1. We posit that EI will have a positive effect on each conflict resolution strategy and EI training will have a moderating effect on between EI and conflict resolution. By enabling EI skillsets in VT members, conflict resolution will be reduced and handled more effectively. We intend to test the theoretical model using these following hypotheses.

### Research Hypothesis

*Hypothesis 1a: EI is negatively related to avoidance of the conflict resolution in a virtual team.*

*Hypothesis 1b: EI is positively related to competition of the conflict resolution in a virtual team.*

*Hypothesis 1c: EI is positively related to compromise of the conflict resolution in a virtual team.*

*Hypothesis 1d: EI is positively related to collaborative of the conflict resolution in a virtual team.*

*Hypothesis 1e: EI is positively related to accommodation of the conflict resolution in a virtual team.*

*Hypothesis 2: EI training will moderate the link between emotional intelligence and conflict resolution.*
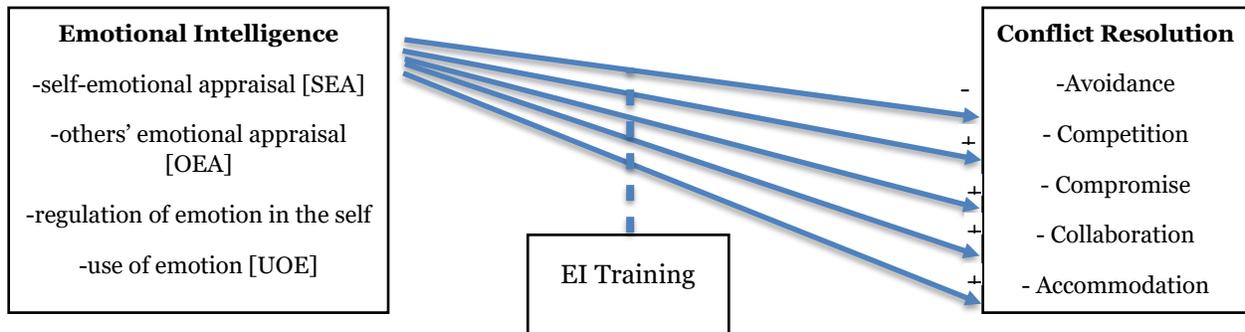


**Figure 1: Theoretical Model**

From past research, emotional intelligence has been linked positively to compromising and competition while other conflict resolution has little to no effect. (Zhang et al, 2015). In another research, collaborative and accommodation have positive effects while competition and avoidance have negative effects in the team environment (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2004). Therefore, for collaborative and accommodation conflict management styles, we form the positive relationship between them and emotional intelligence, as depicted in hypotheses 1d and 1e. In contrast, emotional intelligence will negatively have related to avoidance and competition, as shown in hypotheses 1a and 1b.

Compromising is the most preferable conflict resolution style. Sometimes regarded as integrating style, this conflict resolution has been studied extensively. Thanks to openness to new ideas and constant communication, team members often employ this conflict resolution styles to achieve understanding and accomplish work at a high level (Zhang et al, 2015). With the introduction of emotional intelligence, team members will be able to provide better communication and have a better understanding of each other's

needs and wants. As a result, we posit the emotional intelligence is positively related to the compromising conflict resolution style (hypothesis 1c).

As for the moderating effect of EI training to conflict resolution, we want to confirm past research that is rooted in EI training could be extended to the VT environment. In addition to research by Rentsch, Delise, Salas, and Letsky (2010) and Slaski & Cartwright, (2003), Turner and Lloyd-Walker (2008), and Clark (2010) as mentioned in the previous section, there are several other research pertaining to EI training such as Groves et al. (2008), Boyatzis, Stubbs, & Taylor (2002), Rhee (2008), and Beigi and Shirmohammadi (2011). Overall, we foresee that with EI training, conflict resolution will result in a speedy and with less frustration endeavor in a VT.

## Proposed Research Design

We design this research to be a randomized experiment with treatment-control groups. Each participant will complete the self-reporting section of the Workgroup Emotional Intelligence Profile–Version 6 (WEIP6; Jordan, 2000) to determine their EI levels. Then, participants will be randomly separated to ensure the treatment group and the control group have similar EI levels. Then, the treatment group will undergo EI training program described from Beigi and Shirmohammadi (2011). All teams in both groups will collaborate virtually, and we will reassess the conflict resolution interactions using the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) questionnaire (Rahim, 1983). We anticipate to conduct the analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical tests to examine the variance between two groups in order to test our hypotheses. As for the EI training and its moderating effect, we will use multiple regression analysis.

We will design this research to be a randomized experiment with treatment-control groups, guided by the CONSORT group (Schulz, Altman, & Moher, 2010). Each participant will complete the self-reporting section of the Workgroup Emotional Intelligence Profile–Version 6 (WEIPP6; Jordan, 2000) to determine his/her emotional intelligence levels prior to the randomization process. Then, participants will be split into two groups: one will undergo emotional intelligence training (the treatment group) and the other will not (the control group). The treatment group will undergo an emotional intelligence training program developed under the guidance of Cherniss and Adler (2000). All participants in both groups will collaborate virtually throughout the semester. At the end of the course, researchers will reassess the conflict resolution interactions in both groups using the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) questionnaire (Rahim, 1983). The questionnaire will be modified to fit with the virtual team environment in a university setting. Statistical tests such as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be used to test our hypotheses. As for the EI training and its moderating effects, we will use multiple regression analysis to test whether the training has a statistically significant effect on conflict resolution.

## Anticipated Contributions

The importance of EI in a team environment has been crucial in resolving conflicts positively. This research attempts to bring the notion of EI and examine the role of EI in conflict resolution in the virtual team environment. It also adds into the literature the mediating effect of EI training, if any, into the VT conflict resolution literature. Future researchers could build on this research and expand on the effects of different types of EI training to conflict resolution, and whether EI training should be instituted in all types of teams.

In organization, EI is no longer a nice-to-have but a must-have characteristic in the ever-increasing diversity in the workplace, especially when companies are going global. In addition of time and space difference, VT members do not have the contextual understanding and the cultural appropriateness to assess other's emotional states. As a result, EI is one of the primary tools for VT members to resolve conflict. With our research, we hope to put forth EI and EI training and solicit a call for managers to consider training members with EI skillsets. Even with an understanding of EI at a novice level, members will be able to relate, appreciate, and collaborate to resolve conflicts in the most effective way, thus advancing work and fostering long-lasting relationships along the way.

## Conclusion

In this emergent Research Forum paper, we delineate the role of EI training within the conflict resolution in the VT environment context. To test our hypotheses, we propose a randomized experiment research

project to test the role of EI in conflict resolution in VT and whether EI training moderates EI and conflict resolution. We anticipate that the research will shed light on understanding the role of EI in helping VT members to resolve conflicts.

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