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## THE MOST COMMON PROJECT MANAGERS AND TEAM MEMBERS' CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES – THE CASE OF SERBIA

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**Abstract:** An integral component of projects which is necessary for their realization are people. In that case interpersonal conflicts on projects are inevitable. In addition to process and task conflicts, interpersonal conflicts represent one of the important determinants of project success, and therefore it is important to determine which conflict management style is the most dominant. Since previous studies have confirmed the importance of conflict management, this research examined the conflict management style of 29 project managers and 97 project team members. All surveyed project managers and project team members are engaged in projects in Serbia. The results of this empirical research show that the most dominant project managers' styles are Compromising, Integrating and Dominating, while team members' are Compromising, Integrating and Avoiding.

**Keywords:** Project managers, Team members, Conflict management styles, Projects

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts can be observed differently, however what is evident is that conflicts on projects are inevitable (Mantel & Meredith, 2009; Wu et al., 2017; Khorsavi et al., 2020; Mu et al., 2021; Nunkoo & Sungkur, 2021). It is generally known that a project manager must have the skills of leadership, organization, motivation and conflict management in order to lead a project successfully (Mantel & Meredith, 2009; Prieto-Remón et al., 2015), and this confirms that conflicts are part of the project. In support of this, Tariq and Gardezi (2023) state that a project without conflict is an ideal idea unattainable in reality.

However, a successful PM does not avoid conflicts, on the contrary, he or she senses conflicts in the early stages and resolves the conflict before it escalates (Mantel & Meredith, 2009). Conflicts often lead to the need to be resolved through legal means, which incurs high costs. Therefore, Tang et al. (2020) state that one study found that dispute resolution costs in construction projects can reach a 15% of the contract value. However, conflicts do not always have a destructive impact on the projects. Thus, Vaaland (2004) states that conflicts can encourage improvements and creativity on the project as well as lead to new ways of organizing a work in order to achieve the goal of a project-oriented organization.

Recent research (Wu et al., 2017; Mu et al., 2021) found that relationship conflicts, i.e. interpersonal conflicts have a negative impact on project performance, and therefore project

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managers must develop an adequate model of conflict management, both with themselves and with team members (Vaaland & Hakansson, 2003; Mu et al., 2021).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the dominant styles of conflict management on projects in Serbia. The first part of this paper refers to the description of previous research in the field of project conflict management and provides an overview of conflict management styles. The second part of the paper is dedicated to the description of the methodology and the method of data collection, while the third part presents the results obtained based on the methodology used with additional discussion.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Figure 1 shows the number of works dealing with the topic of conflict management on projects in the period from 1970 to 2022. It can be seen that researchers are more and more occupied with this issue and that the number of papers is growing over time.

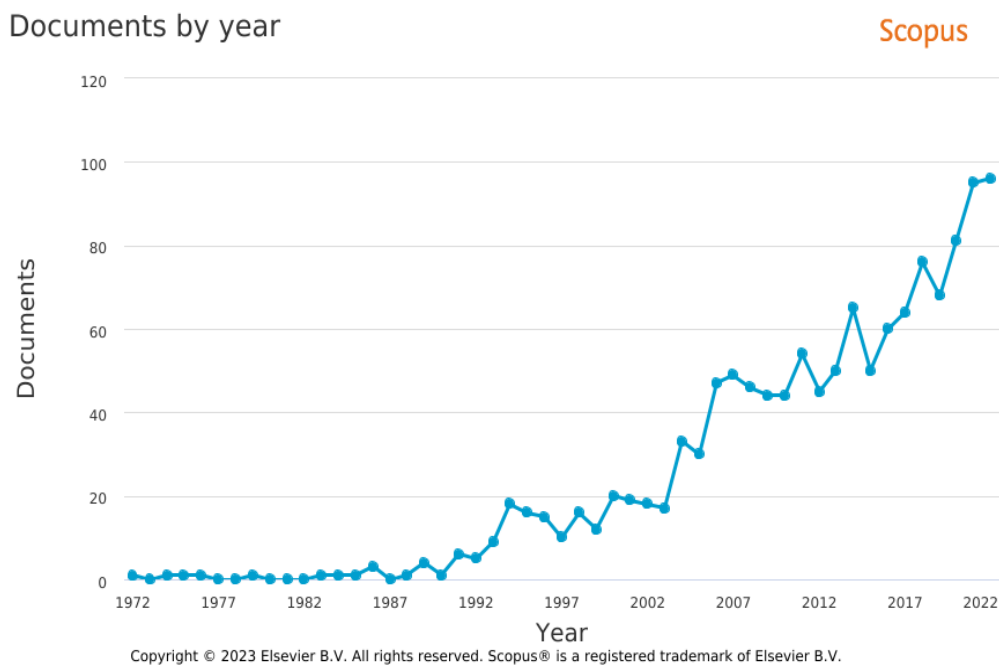


Figure 1. Number of published works on the topic of project conflict management in the period 1970-2022 (Scopus, 2023)

### 2.1. Conflicts on projects

Conflict is a broad and multidimensional term (Basirati et al., 2020) and in many cases it is used interchangeably with terms such as dispute, disagreement or conflict.

From the perspective of construction projects, conflicts can be defined as mutual interaction between project teams due to different perceptions of project goals (quality, time, money, safety, etc.) as well as poor communication (Wu, 2013). Usually, conflict occurs when there are incompatible goals, thoughts, or emotions among individuals, leading to opposition and disagreement (Prieto-Remón et al., 2015). Analyzing definitions of conflict, Basirati et al. (2020) have concluded that there are three basic elements (two or more elements, connection between elements and differences, i.e. deviation from defined goals) and proposed defining conflict as unwanted variation between two or more related elements.

Contemporary literature and research are directed towards researching the most common causes of conflicts. Thus, Nunkoo & Sungkur (2021) have stated that the most common causes of conflicts are insufficient communication on projects, a source of power that influences subordinates, insufficiently developed organizational culture that does not encourage teamwork, lack of coordination and cohesion in the project team.

Conflicts can have different causes. In the field of construction projects, conflicts most often arise due to insufficiently specified contracts as well as numerous participants in these types of projects (Wu et al., 2017). Conflicts, caused by individuals' attitudes, project communication channels or personal interests, have a significant impact on project performance (Behfar et al., 2008; Khorsavi et al., 2020). Under positive effects, they state stimulated innovation and growth (Crawford et al., 2014), while on the other hand, negative effects are unnecessarily increased costs as well as reduced communication and loss of cohesion (Lee et al., 2020).

Conflicts can arise among the participants in the project, most often among the members of the project team, as well as between the client and the contractor due to the postponement of the project completion date (Tang et al., 2020; Tariq & Gardezi, 2023). Also, project conflicts include conflicts between the project sponsor and the community due to social or environmental issues (Wang et al., 2019; Hernández-Cedeño et al., 2021; Kowszyk et al., 2023). In this work, the emphasis is on interpersonal conflicts and styles of managing this type of conflict.

## 2.2. Conflict management styles

Conflict management is a tactic used in response to perceived disagreements in social circumstances (Antonini, 1998). Also, these styles can be characterized as established ways of behavior that people use in conflict (Wilmot & Hocker, 2017). This paper uses a classification of five conflict management styles based on the dual concern model (Rahim & Magner, 1995). The Dual Concern Model is based on the earlier work of Blake and Mouton from 1964 and includes two dimensions - concern for self and concern for others. Both dimensions can have the epithets of high and low concern (De Dreu et al., 2001).

The five conflict management styles are described in more detail in Table 1, while the advantages and disadvantages of each style are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Five conflict management styles according to Rahim and Magner (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020; Kowszyk et al., 2023)

	Avoiding	Compromising	Integrating	Obliging (Accommodation)	Dominating
Concern for self	Low	Medium	High	Low	High
Concern for other	Low	Medium	High	High	Low
Illustrative behavior	Withdraw, silent, absent, ignoring partner's concern	Each party gives up something	Meets needs of self and possibly other	Reduction of one's need	Selfish, aggressive and argumentative
Outcome	Lose-lose	Neither win/lose	Win-win	Lose-win	Win-lose
Other labels	Withdrawal; most disruptive approach	Smoothing	Most effective; confronting; collaborating; problem solving	subordinating	Forcing; competing; asserting

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of conflict management styles (Wilmot & Hocker, 2017)

Conflict management style	Advantages	Disadvantages
Avoiding	Can supply time to think of some other response to the conflict; It is a wise choice when relationship itself is unimportant; Keep one from harm if anything other than avoidance will bring a negative response from the other party.	May signal to others that you do not “care enough to confront”; It gives the impression that you cannot change; It allows conflict to keeps one from working through a conflict and reinforces
Compromising	Sometimes lets conflict parties accomplish important goals with less time expenditure; Requires reinforces a power balance that can be used to achieve temporary or expedient settlements in time-pressured situations; It has the advantage of external moral force	can become an easy way out—a solution not based on the demands of a particular situation; for some people, compromise always seems to be a form of “loss” rather than “win”; true compromise requires each side giving something in order to get an agreement.
Integrating	Works well to find a collaborative solution that will satisfy all parties; It is a high-energy style that fits people in long-term, committed relationships; Actively affirms the importance of relationship and content goals.	If integrating is the only style used, one can become imprisoned in it people who are more verbally skilled than others can use integrating in manipulative ways
Obliging (Accommodation)	When one finds that is wrong, it can be best to accommodate the other to demonstrate reasonableness; Obliging to a senior or seasoned person can be a way of managing conflict by betting on the most experienced person’s judgment.	Can foster an undertone of competitiveness if people develop a pattern of showing each other how nice they can be; People can one-up others by showing how eminently reasonable they are; It may signal to that person that the other is not invested enough in the conflict to struggle through
Dominating	Appropriate for emerging situation; it is useful if the external goal is more important than the relationship with the other person.	Can harm the relationship between the parties because of the focus on external goals; Can be harmful if one party is unable or unwilling to deal with conflict in a head-on manner

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the studies of Rahim and Magner (1995), and the data were collected using a survey methodology. The questionnaire has been taken over and adapted based on the available literature for analyzing conflict management styles (Rahim & Magner; 1995; Wilmot & Hocker, 2017). The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part is made up of demographic questions (Gender, Age, Project position, Educational level, Years of work experience, Company's existence in years, Company size and Type of project).

The second part of the questionnaire is made up of 25 questions corresponding to the five conflict management styles described in Table 2. For each conflict management style, 5 questions were asked.

As existing studies (Antonioni, 1998; Prieto-Remón et al., 2015; Kowszyk et al., 2023) confirmed the possibility of taking the concept of Rahim and Magner, (1995) from applied psychology into the sphere of project management, the questionnaire was used to reveal the dominant conflict management styles of project managers and project team members in project-oriented organizations in Serbia.

### 3.1. Data collection and sample

In order to collect data, an anonymous survey of project managers and members of the project team was conducted. Surveys were sent directly to organizations and through the LinkedIn network. The survey was conducted on a group of 150 employees in project-oriented organizations, with 128 filled out questionnaires correctly, which represents 85.33%.

To express agreement with the statements from the questionnaire, a five-point Likert scale was used, where 1 represents the least agreement and 5 represents the greatest agreement.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Variables	Category	N	Percentage %
Gender	Male	46	36.5
	Female	80	63.5
Age	Less than 25 years	12	9.5
	26 – 35 years	48	38.1
	36 – 45 years	40	31.7
	46 – 55 years	18	14.3
	Above 56 years	8	6.3
Project position	Manager	29	23.0
	Team member	97	77.0
Educational level	Elementary school	8	6.3
	High school	69	54.8
	Higher education	15	11.9
	University	34	27.0
Years of work experience	Less than 5 years	31	24.6
	6 – 10 years	46	36.5
	11 – 20 years	27	21.4
	21 – 30 years	16	12.7
	Above 31 years	6	4.8
Size of company	Less than 10 employees	2	1.6
	11 – 50 employees	16	12.7
	51 – 250 employees	102	81.0
	Above 251 employees	6	4.8
Company's existence (years)	Less than 6 years	43	34.1
	6 – 10 years	2	1.6
	11 – 20 years	3	2.4
	21 – 30 years	68	54.0
	Above 31 years	10	7.9
Type of project	Construction projects	17	13.5
	Industrial projects	94	74.6
	IT projects	10	7.9
	Event organizing projects	5	4.0

More detailed information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents is shown in Table 3. According to the results, women predominate in the examined sample. The largest number of respondents are aged between 26 - 35 years.

The largest number of respondents have high school education and work experience of 6-10 years. When it comes to companies, SMEs predominate and the largest number of companies exist between 21 and 30 years. The respondents come from organizations dealing with Construction, Industrial, Event organizing and IT projects.

#### 4.2. Conflict management styles and type of project

Figures 2-5 show the dominant conflict management styles of managers (a) and project team members (b) for four types of projects. The conflict management styles matrix (Rahim & Magner, 1995) was used to visualize the display, whereby the circles were positioned in the corresponding fields of this matrix. The numbering and size of the circle correspond proportionally to the number of project managers and the number of project team members who have the appropriate conflict management style. In some cases, the respondents had two dominant conflict management styles. Such is the case with the Integrating style and the Compromising style, which indicates that there is an overlap of these two styles in some respondents.

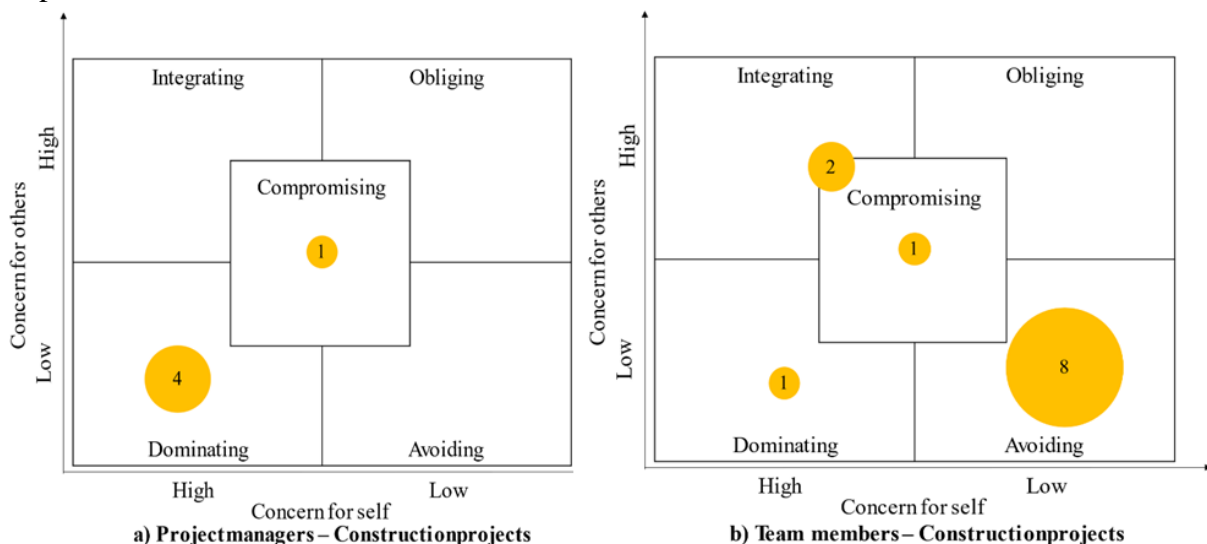


Figure 2. Matrix of dominant styles of project managers (a) and project team members (b) on construction projects

Figure 2 shows a matrix of dominant styles of project managers and project team members on construction projects.

As can be seen from Figure 2, the most prevalent conflict management style among four project managers of construction projects is Dominating, while one project manager has a Compromising style. The dominating style is recognized as the predominant style of conflict management when it is necessary to exercise authority. Given that construction projects are complex projects, Dominating style is desirable in conditions of complex and numerous relationships and lines of communication that exist (Rauzana, 2016). When it comes to project team members on construction projects, eight respondents have an Avoiding style, two respondents have an Integrating style, and one respondent has a Compromising style. Dominating conflict management style.

Figure 3 shows a matrix of dominant styles of project managers and project team members on industrial projects.

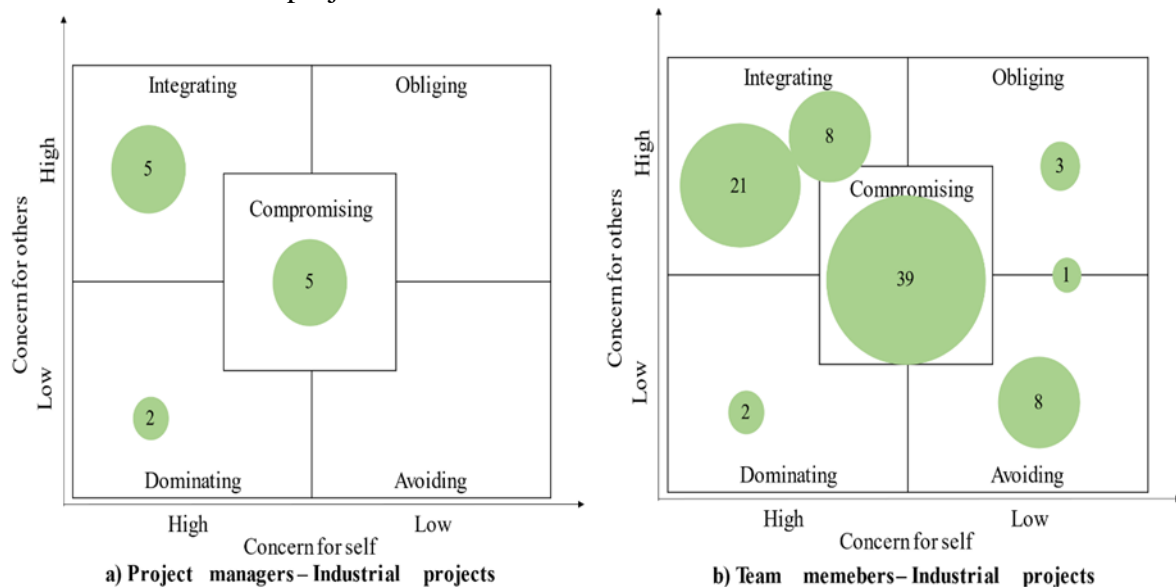


Figure 3. Matrix of dominant styles of project managers (a) and project team members (b) on industrial projects

As can be seen from Figure 3, the most represented conflict management style among five project managers is Compromising and among five project managers it is Integrating, while two project managers have a Dominating style. It can be said that project managers of industrial projects lean more towards a win-win position when it comes to conflicts with the exception of a certain number of project managers who lean more towards a win-lose approach which may be appropriate when quick, decisive action must be taken, such as for example emergencies (Wilmot & Hocker, 2017).

When it comes to project team members on industrial projects, 39 respondents have Compromising, 21 have Integrating, 8 have Avoiding, 3 have Obliging and 2 have Dominating. This indicates that all styles of conflict management are present in industrial projects, which was confirmed by other studies (Kowszyk et al., 2023). Also, with this type of project, in the observed sample, there was an overlap between the Integrating and Compromising style in 8 respondents and Avoiding and Obliging in 1 member of the project team.

Figure 4 shows a matrix of dominant styles of project managers and project team members on event organization projects.

As can be seen from Figure 4, the most prevalent conflict management style among the 2 project managers is Dominating. One project manager has the Avoiding style, while the Integrating style is represented by another project manager. When it comes to members of the project team on Event organizing projects, 1 respondent has the Compromising style.

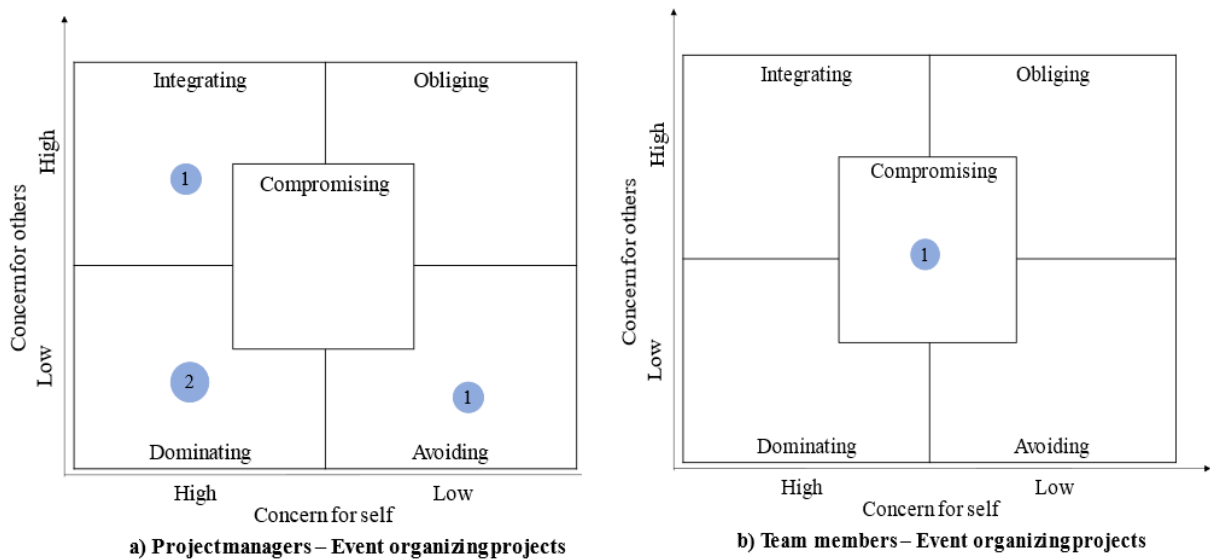


Figure 4. Matrix of dominant styles of project managers (a) and project team members (b) on Event organizing projects

Figure 5 shows a matrix of dominant styles of project managers and project team members on IT.

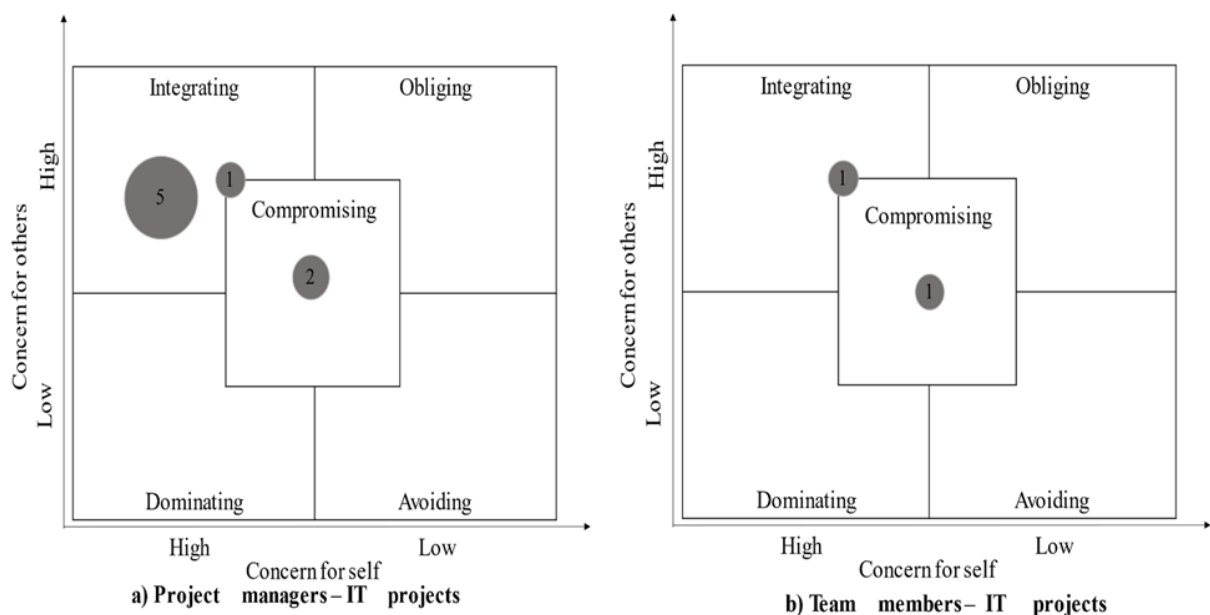


Figure 5. Matrix of dominant styles of project managers (a) and project team members (b) on IT projects

As can be seen from Figure 5, the most prevalent conflict management style among 5 project managers is Integrating, 2 project managers have Compromising, while one project manager has Compromising and Integrating as overlapping styles. When it comes to project team members, one team member has a mixture of Integrating and Compromising styles, while another team member has a Compromising conflict management style. Having on mind that IT projects implement agile concept, adequacy of applied conflict management style depends the most of IT project life cycle stage (Crawford et al., 2014).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper presents the results of empirical research on conflict management styles of project managers and project team members on projects in Serbia. This research generates several conclusions.

Project managers usually have a Compromising, Integrating and Dominating style as the most prevalent conflict management style. Compromising and Integrating styles, which by their nature are win-win conflict management strategies, are desirable and thus contribute to better project performance. Dominating style, although it belongs to win-lose strategies, is a very effective strategy when dealing with complex projects like event organizing projects and construction projects.

Team members have Compromising, Integrating and Avoiding as the most dominant conflict management style. Compromising and Integrating style are favorable and most desirable styles of conflict management and as such have a positive influence on the course of the project, while Avoiding style according to its theoretical concept represents low concern for self and can cause dissatisfaction among project team members. In this regard, the implication that arose from this research is that in construction and industrial projects, more attention should be paid to the development of constructive win-win conflict resolution strategies.

This work also has its own limiting factors such as sample size and disproportionate sampling of project managers and team members for different types of projects. Future research on interpersonal conflicts will be focused on combining Conflict management styles and Big Five Personality types in the field of project management

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