International Journal of Innovations & Research Analysis (IJIRA)
ISSN :2583-0295(Online), Impact Factor: 7.662, Volume 05, No. 04(I), October- December, 2025, pp 245-248

Constructive Disagreement as Competitive Advantage: Reimagining Conflict in Indian Corporate Hierarchies

Dr. Vibha Batra*

Associate Professor, Department of Commerce, Sri Aurobindo College (Evening), University of Delhi, Delhi India.

*Corresponding Author: counselling.25@gmail.com

Citation: Batra, V. (2025). Constructive Disagreement as Competitive Advantage: Reimagining Conflict in Indian Corporate Hierarchies. International Journal of Innovations & Research Analysis, 05(04(I)), 245–248. https://doi.org/10.62823/IJIRA/05.04(I).8406

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the widespread avoidance of conflicts in hierarchical Indian organisations. The article's major premise is that this prevalent organisational behaviour is driven by two sociocultural factors: (i) high power distance and (ii) individuals placing far more value on social institutions like the family, community or organisation, than on their own ideas, goals and desires. These values are considered necessary for maintaining cohesion and harmony in groups. Unfortunately for Indian companies this state of affairs disables positive change and stifles growth in a number of important ways. Firstly, it ensures that intra-organisational conflicts that might have beneficial consequences by providing new ways of looking at problems are stifled by a covert agreement to maintain harmony. Secondly by preventing the airing of differences it helps to create an atmosphere of 'dysfunctional silence' where subordinate voices are not heard and debate does not take place. Alongside this cultural practice is an overwhelming tendency towards 'group think' which suppresses initiatives for change. Together, these factors create an unpropitious environment that undermines innovation and slows down growth. Rather than viewing conflict as something that is inherently unhelpful, this paper makes a distinction between interpersonal conflicts which can damage relationships and the task related conflicts that arise out of differences in opinions. Although not always popular hierarchical organisations have the potential to gain much from encouraging more 'constructive' kinds of conflicts. Drawing from two examples of Indian businesses as well as a review of relevant literature, the paper presents an integrative framework called hierarchically-sensitive engagement which outlines a culturally appropriate approach for better managing conflicts. To achieve this goal it brings together concepts derived from western integrative bargaining strategies with elements taken from local dispute resolution practices, such as the panchayat system. According to this model, conflict management requires a shift in the leader's role from an arbitrator to a facilitator. By creating depersonalised forums for discussion the aim is to encourage individuals to participate without fear of being accused of disloyalty or creating problems for superiors.

***Keywords**: Hierarchical Organizations, Organizational Culture, Constructive Debate, Power Distance, Cultural Dimensions, Indian Management Practices, Innovation, Leadership Facilitation, Collective Decision-Making.*

Introduction

Beyond the Absence of Conflict

The management practices in Indian organisations tend to focus on conflict avoidance in order to achieve harmony. But does this emphasis really work in their favour? Plenty of evidence suggests that while such an approach may create peace, it also inhibits creativity, stifles innovation and produces some very worrying 'silence gaps' as well as communication and understanding failures.

Given the complexity of doing business and operating at a global level this unpropitious state of affairs is something that organisations can ill afford. There are ways out however; all it takes is a slightly different approach towards managing conflicts as well as better use of existing cultural resources.

Power distance (Hofstede, 2001) refers to the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organisations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Geert Hofstede found India to have one of the highest scores he ever encountered on his scale (77), a figure well above the global average (56. 5).

In practical terms this means most Indians expect others to be very deferential towards people in positions of power and authority and readily accept commands given from on high without much questioning.

This cultural characteristic is further compounded by India's highly collectivist nature (Juhasz, 2014). In situations where a subordinate disagrees with their superior they are expected not to voice this disagreement; speaking out could be taken as a sign of disrespect or may cause embarrassment for a senior figure.

This kind of behaviour is often justified in Indian culture by using the concept of "saving face"—avoiding behaviour that could potentially damage an individual's reputation or cause them to lose credibility (Merkin, 2018). Such strategies do help maintain social cohesion. However, it cannot be denied that this also leads to subordinates not feeling free to voice their opinions. In the absence of an organization climate where people can't speak freely, it is almost impossible for companies to reach their full potential.

The question then becomes: can agreeing to disagree be nurtured as a form of respect in organisations? Said another way, can organizations create an environment where dissent is actually viewed as a strategic asset? This will help companies in reaching their full potential in spite of the challenge of employees' conflict-averse personalities. In this article, it is posited that this can be done by acknowledging leadership roles and implementing culturally-aligned structures for debate.

Enforced Consensus's Organizational Costs

Let us first identify how exactly the lack of conflict or dissent affects organizational performance.

- **Information Flow and the Problem of Silence**

Junior employees, in hierarchical organizations characterized by high power distance, find it hard to give observations, make suggestions, ask questions, or provide feedback that challenges the status quo. These junior employees have learned that in the organization, speaking out can be dangerous or can even damage their standing in the company. This gives rise to a sort of "dysfunctional silence", whereby employees keep quiet in a variety of circumstances. For example, they may not ask too many questions even when they do not understand instructions fully, they may not raise alarms about impending hazards, and they may withhold valuable information that could help improve things. All this because they are too afraid to speak their minds (or reveal their creative ideas) for fear of being punished. The net effect of this fear and silence is tangible: errors that could have been avoided occur in larger numbers; rework (due to errors) becomes the norm; and overall, organizational productivity goes down.

- **The Groupthink Trap**

The historical Indian cultural trait of respecting those at the top combined with deeply ingrained cultural values about group solidarity creates an environment highly susceptible to groupthink (Janis, 1982). People go along with what the group is doing because they are afraid of being isolated from it—that is, they don't want to stand out on their own and be seen as different. Under such circumstances, as Janis (1982) explained, groupthink sets in when "the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action". When this happens, leaders' viewpoints become assumed to be correct and peers fail to challenge each other in order to maintain their relationships.

What results is often described as "lazy, non-confrontational and often easy obeisance behaviour" where there is too much focus on reaching a consensus view and not enough on thoroughly testing ideas (Fortune India, 2025). Under these circumstances, assumptions go untested, alternative viewpoints are ignored, and organizations become open to strategic vulnerabilities. Those involved are often unaware of the trap they have fallen into; they are not deliberately making poor choices but following cultural scripts that run deep within their subconscious minds.

- **Innovation as a Casualty of Suppression**

Innovation requires the free exchange of ideas, as well as the ability to question, challenge and probe. Said another way, innovation needs the kind of intellectual jostling that is possible only when people can speak freely. If the organizational culture inadvertently discourages dissenting voices, creativity and innovation will suffer; there are no two ways about it. This has severe consequences. As an example, research examining technology startups in India has decisively identified unresolved and suppressed conflicts as a primary factor in organizational failure. To my mind, this finding clearly highlights the cost of conflict avoidance in knowledge-intensive (and other) industries (Ganesaraman & Subrahmanya, 2022).

Redefining Conflict: Task-Based vs. Relationship-Based

Indian culture and its organizational narrative view conflict as a threat to stability, something that can disrupt informal networks and generally upset the apple cart.

Of course, this is a warped vision: all organizations, after all, are informal networks, and it's hard to imagine anything breaking the apple cart more thoroughly than having nothing else but an apple cart.

In other words, the failure of a widespread cultural metaphor to grasp an essential analytic point about conflict has meant that the entirety of Indian management studies and practice has been unable to guide organizations out of their dysfunctional relationship to what they see as a problem (conflict).

And since it has been assumed that the best thing managers can do vis-à-vis conflict is to make sure that it never surfaces, then practitioners of the management arts in India have ended up wholly unequipped for how to deal with and harness this "problem" into an unexpected source of positive energy for their organizations.

The analytic literature on conflict, by contrast, distinguishes at least two kinds: task-related and interpersonal or relationship conflict. Interpersonal, sometimes known as "ego" conflict, can be about status, anxiety, power, and so on.

Rahim (2002) sums it up nicely, "The bases of interpersonal conflict among individuals or groups are their incompatibilities of personalities, ego, status, power and fear."

Given its roots, researchers and practitioners alike see task-related conflict as non-threatening to group cohesion, even as enhancing its performance, whereas interpersonal, all-too-familiar "ego," can disrupt and undermine that cohesion.

Hierarchically Sensitive Engagement: A Contextually Grounded Framework

In this paper, it is posited that the collectivist culture of respect can be integrated with the call for open dialogue necessary for innovation in today's business environment. The need is for a hybrid framework we are calling "*Hierarchically Sensitive Engagement"*. The framework does not seek to dilute hierarchy. Instead, it aims to legitimize constructive disagreement in a way that still resonates with the culture of hierarchy and respect.

Hierarchically sensitive engagement would be based on principles of integrative bargaining. Integrative, or "win–win," bargaining provides a useful conceptual starting point within collectivist contexts (Fisher et al., 2011). The main idea is that negotiators should focus on underlying interests rather than fixed demands; when negotiators defend fixed demands, it tends to harden differences and intensify status anxieties. The simple but powerful question of *why* a particular outcome is sought often reveals shared concerns that may otherwise have not come into the discussion. This shift is more than a negotiation technique; in fact, it can be thought of as a cultural bridge. In essence, all employees across levels need to be asked to focus on collective value creation over individual victory; this aligns closely with social norms that emphasize group welfare and relational continuity. If adopted well, negotiations and conflict will become viewed more and more in the organization as a contribution to the collective good.

In addition, a hierarchically sensitive engagement approach can be developed by learning from indigenous traditions of conflict resolution. Consider the Panchayat system. Under the guidance of a respected and neutral elder, the Sarpanch, disputes are addressed with the explicit goal of restoring harmony rather than determining winners and losers. Authority here is exercised through moral legitimacy and social trust. The emphasis remains on relationship preservation, shared responsibility, and pragmatic resolution. For organizations embedded in similar cultures, the Panchayat system offers an important insight: effective conflict management need not be adversarial.

There are three pathways needed to build a hierarchically sensitive engagement culture in organizations.

First, the leader's role needs to be reframed. We must not forget that in high power-distance countries like India, leadership behavior carries a lot of symbolic weight. People look to leaders and consciously and unconsciously model their behavior after their leaders. So first and foremost, we need leaders at our organization to move from acting primarily as final arbiters to functioning as skilled facilitators of dialogue. The role envisaged of leaders perhaps resembles that of the Sarpanch. After all, our corporate leaders too need to build an atmosphere where diverse and varying perspectives can be voiced without fear. And then they need to gently guide the discussion towards mutually beneficial outcomes. When leaders demonstrate these qualities consistently, they create the psychological safety that enables subordinates to speak candidly without apprehension of subtle retaliation.

Second, dissent has to be depersonalized through the creation of structures. It might sound counter-intuitive, but dissent needs to be embedded within formal organizational processes. Once this is accomplished, it will no longer be associated with interpersonal confrontation. Some ideas for this are as follows:

- Anonymous idea submissions before meetings
- Rotating “devil’s advocate” roles
- Explicitly articulated ground rules that separate idea evaluation from personal evaluation

Third, Collective Benefit has to be emphasized as the guiding logic and principle. The maxim for employees should be that discussion should return, repeatedly and deliberately, to a central question: *what best serves the collective?*

Framing it in this manner is very useful as it resonates strongly within collectivist cultures, where legitimacy is often derived from alignment with shared goals.

Illustrations from Indian Corporate Practice

Many leading Indian organizations have implemented elements of hierarchically sensitive engagement with notable success. Two examples follow:

- Hindustan Unilever has long emphasized open communication through multiple formal channels, explicitly encouraging employees at different levels to contribute insights and challenge assumptions
- N. R. Narayana Murthy’s leadership at Infosys was anchored in transparency, famously captured in the dictum, *“When in doubt, disclose.”* This principle fostered a climate of psychological security in which employees could raise concerns and dissent with respect

Overall, as we have already started doing, we need to move as employees of organizations in India from the limited objective of "saving face" toward the more ambitious goal of building world-class innovative organizations.

References

1. Fisher, R., Ury, W. L., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. Penguin Books.
2. Fortune India. (2025). *Companies must think as a group, not groupthink*. Retrieved from Fortune India website.
3. Ganesaraman, K., & Subrahmanya, M. H. (2022). How conflicts cause technology startups to fail in India? An empirical analysis. *Journal of Global Business and Competitiveness*, *17*(1), 1–15.
4. Janis, I. L. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes* (2nd ed.). Houghton Mifflin.
5. Juhasz, I. (2014). The workforce in Indian organizations: An analysis based upon the dimensions of Hofstede's model. *Irisro*.
6. Merkin, R. S. (2018). Individualism-Collectivism and Saving Face. In *Saving Face in Business: Managing Cross-cultural Interactions* (pp. 81-117). Palgrave Macmillan.
7. Rahim, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of managing organizational conflict. *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, *13*(3), 206–235.

❑❑❑