
WELL PREPARED FOR CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATIONS? A MANAGERS' SELF-ASSESSMENT OF THEIR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: Managers often assume third-party roles to help employees resolve their disputes. A prerequisite for effective managerial intervention in employees' conflict is the possession of substantial knowledge of conflict and its main characteristics in organizational context.

The purpose of the paper is to present the results from a study on managers' self-assessment of their conflict management knowledge. The survey was carried out in Bulgaria and it questioned 300 managers from different organizations. For the purpose of the survey ten key aspects of conflict knowledge are defined. We consider that the presence of substantial knowledge in these areas would provide qualified managerial intervention in conflicts between employees. Respondents were asked to assess their knowledge in each of the ten aspects on a five-point scale (1 – to a small extent or not at all, 2 – to some extent, 3 – to a moderate extent, 4 - to a great extent, 5 - to a very great extent). Additionally, the complex self-assessment of the possessed knowledge was calculated for each respondent. The value of the new variable in each case equaled the sum of the values of respondent's answers to each of the ten aspects of conflict knowledge. We assumed that a respondent has profound knowledge of conflict if the value of the complex self-assessment is greater than or equal to 40.

Findings show that managers evaluate their conflict knowledge above the average level in each of the ten key aspects. The highest self-assessments are related to the sources of conflict, the individual behaviour in conflict situations, the outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization, the analysis and the diagnosis of a conflict and the analysis of the post-conflict situation. Average assessments prevail in three aspects - the nature of conflict, the structure and the dynamics of conflict and the conflict management strategies. The greatest gaps in knowledge are associated with the types of conflicts and their forecasting and prevention. Significant differences were found across some personal characteristics of respondents and characteristics of organizations. The distribution of the self-assessments after the calculation of the complex variable is as follows: 87,7% of respondents have a low value of the complex self-assessment (<40) and 12,3% of them - a high value (≥ 40). Based on these results, we conclude that most managers questioned do not possess thorough knowledge of conflict in organizations. Although managers feel prepared from a moderate to a great extent in the ten key aspects, findings suggest that there are still some gaps in their knowledge.

The implication for organizations is to develop managers' conflict management competencies with special emphasis on the areas with the greatest insufficiency of knowledge and skills. The implication for managers is not to hesitate to find ways to acquire knowledge and develop their conflict management skills whenever they feel insecure or not at ease while dealing with conflict.

The present study contributes to the literature of conflict in organizations in two way. First, the study outlines the framework of conflict management knowledge by defining its key aspects. Second, the proposed scale for measuring the self-assessment of conflict knowledge can be used in further research in the field.

Keywords: knowledge of conflict in organizations, managers' self-assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

Managers often assume third-party roles to help employees resolve their disputes. Their interventions are crucial since their involvement can largely influence the conflict resolution process and the finding of a resolution (Dimitrov, 2004).

When intervening in a conflict between employees, managers can make several errors (Nugent & Broedling, 2002; Wall & Callister, 1995). First, they may intervene unnecessarily without giving the opportunity to participants to resolve the dispute on their own. Second, managers may choose an inappropriate intervention strategy that aggravates the conflict or involves them as active participants. On the other hand, they may not intervene when it is necessary, allowing the conflict to escalate. Third, managers may impose their own interests in resolving the conflict.

To avoid these pitfalls, managers must acquire substantial knowledge of conflict in organizations. Handling conflict in a constructive manner is only possible if managers know well conflict and its specific characteristics in organizational context. Otherwise their intervention could lead to even worse results than if they choose not to act (Antsupov & Shipilov, 2000). The significance of conflict management knowledge is widely discussed in literature

(Ageeva, 2010; Antsupov & Shipilov, 2000; Bankova, 2019; Deutsch, 2006; Dimitrov, 2004; Dimitrova, 2017; Georgieva, 2016; Kamenova, 2011; Nugent & Broedling, 2002; Tjosvold, 2008).

The literature review on conflict in organizations allows us to define ten key aspects of knowledge that we consider substantial for successful conflict management. These aspects are presented below:

- **Aspect 1: Nature of conflict in organizations.** This field of knowledge is associated with building an understanding of the inevitability of conflict as an organizational phenomenon, its nature, and its characteristics in organizational context.
- **Aspect 2: Types of conflicts.** Starting point for choosing an appropriate intervention strategy is a recognition of the type of the conflict. In this regard, the knowledge of different classification schemes of conflicts in organizations is essential for handling them well.
- **Aspect 3: Sources of conflict.** The issue of effective managerial intervention is closely related to the acquirement of knowledge of the sources of conflict in organizations. The analysis of a conflict begins with gathering information about the contradiction from which the conflict results (or the source of it) (Antsupov & Shipilov, 2000).
- **Aspect 4: Structure and dynamics of conflict.** The accurate diagnosis of a conflict requires knowledge of its structure and dynamics which will allow managers to correctly identify its structural elements and the stage of its development, respectively its intensity.
- **Aspect 5: Individual behaviour in conflict situations.** Kozan & Ilter (1994) found out a relationship between the used intervention strategies and the individual style of handling conflict. Therefore, the knowledge of the individual behavior related to one's own style and the styles of the participants in the conflict as well as the factors that determine this behaviour¹² would provide a qualified managerial intervention.
- **Aspect 6: Conflict management strategies.** As far as the manager is the instance that should handle the conflict, it is important that he is familiar with different approaches to intervene, their advantages and disadvantages and the possible consequences of their usage (for the participants and the unit).
- **Aspect 7: Outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization.** This field of knowledge requires acknowledgement of the dual nature of conflict and its outcomes (both positive and negative) for individuals, groups, and the organization. The categorization of a conflict as constructive or destructive is related to the type of its outcomes. Understanding the ambiguity of conflict as an organizational phenomenon is the basis for developing a constructive attitude towards conflict in organizations.
- **Aspect 8: Analysis and diagnosis of a conflict.** When intervening in a conflict between employees, the manager has to know what the diagnosis of a conflict includes - obtaining information about the conflict, doing its assessment, identifying the issue of the conflict and all the participants in it, forecasting conflict's dynamics, analyzing his own point of view, etc. (Ageeva, 2010; Antsupov & Shipilov, 2000).
- **Aspect 9: Analysis of the post-conflict situation.** Managers must also know how to diagnose the post-conflict situation. The analysis includes assessing the effectiveness of the chosen strategy, removing the post-conflict tensions in the relationships between the participants, determining the prospects for the further interactions between the participants, revising one's own experience (Ageeva, 2010; Antsupov & Shipilov, 2000; Dimitrov, 2004).
- **Aspect 10: Forecasting and prevention of conflict.** Preventing or reducing the destructive impact of conflict is relatively easier than constructively resolving already existing contradictions (Ageeva, 2010). Therefore, the knowledge of timely recognition, elimination or weakening of the sources of conflict as well as the creation of organizational environment that limits the possibility of its future emergence or destructive development are a necessary condition for successful conflict management (Ageeva, 2010).

We consider that the presence of substantial knowledge in the above areas would provide qualified managerial intervention in conflicts between employees.

The objective of this paper is to examine at what extent managers in Bulgarian organizations feel prepared to deal with conflict. We aim to investigate their self-assessment of the possessed conflict knowledge in the defined key aspects.

The proposition of the study is that most managers do not possess thorough knowledge of conflict that is necessary for effective conflict management. It is based on a pilot quantitative study (Mihaylova, 2016). The findings of the study revealed lacking in managers' knowledge of the main characteristics of conflict in organizational context.

¹² Detailed analysis of different types of individual behaviour could be found in Nedev (2018, 2019). The author discusses the underpinnings of rational behaviour and the behavioural biases, affecting individuals' decisions.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The questionnaire for the survey consisted of two sections. The first section measured managers' self-assessment of their knowledge of conflict. It included 10 items corresponding to the ten key aspects of conflict knowledge. The respondents were asked to evaluate on a five-point scale (1 – to a small extent or not at all, 2 – to some extent, 3 – to a moderate extent, 4 – to a great extent, 5 – to a very great extent) to what extent they feel prepared in each of the ten areas. The alpha-coefficient of reliability for the self-assessment scale was 0,94.

To calculate the total (complex) self-assessment of the possessed knowledge by a single respondent we computed a new variable in SPSS. The value of the variable in each case equaled the sum of the values of respondent's answers to each of the ten variables (the ten aspects of conflict knowledge). The complex self-assessment of a respondent rated his knowledge in each of the aspects with 1 (to a small extent or not at all) equaled 10, respectively the complex self-assessment of a respondent rated his knowledge in each of the ten aspects with 5 (to a very great extent) equaled 50. We assumed that a respondent had profound knowledge of conflict if the value of the complex self-assessment was greater than or equal to 40. The interpretation of the results of the new variable was in the following manner: 1) a result from 10 to 39 was considered as a low value of the managers' self-assessment of their knowledge; and 2) a result greater than or equal to 40 was considered as a high value of the managers' self-assessment of their knowledge.

In the second section respondents provided demographic information including their gender, age, educational background, years of working experience, and years of managerial experience as well as information about the organization (type of settlement, sector, and size).

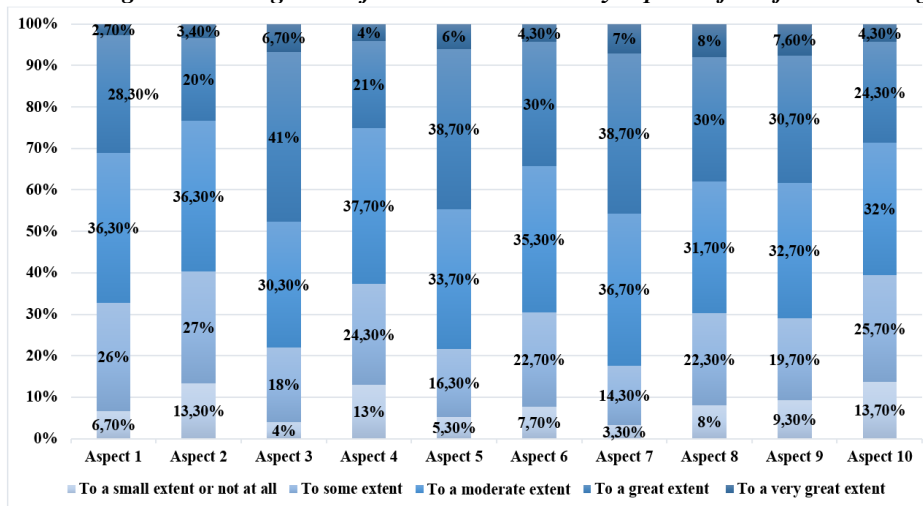
The questionnaire was given personally in a printed form or sent via e-mail to 592 managers from various Bulgarian organizations. Usable responses were received from 300 managers. The number of respondents equaled the number of organizations. Of these, 53,3% were female and 46,7% are male. Two thirds of employees were between 31 and 40 years old (33,3%) or between 41 and 50 years old (31,3%), 19% were up to 30 years old and 16,4% were older than 51 years old. The majority of respondents had master's degree (71,3%), 16,7% - bachelor's degree, 7,3% - doctoral degree and 4,7% - secondary level of education. Depending on the work experience, four out of ten managers (40,3%) had worked from 11 to 20 years, 34,3% - from 21 and more years, 17% - from 6 to 10 years and 8,4% - from 1 to 5 years. The managerial experience of respondents was as follows: from 1 to 5 years – 39,3%, from 6 to 10 years - 27,3%, from 11 to 20 years - 25% and from 21 and more years - 8,4%. Managers had an average of 18 years of work experience and an average of 9 years of managerial experience. Respondents from large organizations represented the biggest group of the sample (34%), followed by respondents from medium organizations (24,4%), from small organizations (23,3%) and from micro organizations (18,3%). Most managers worked in the service industry (61,3%), 15% - in the manufacturing industry, 14,3% - in the commercial sector and 9,4% - in the public sector. Most respondents' organizations were located in the capital of Bulgaria (72,7%), 21,7% - in district cities, 4,6% - in small cities and 1% - in villages.

The data from the survey have been processed in IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings for managers' self-assessment in the ten aspects of conflict knowledge are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Managers' self-assessment in the key aspects of conflict knowledge



In most of the answers there are no significant differences across personal characteristics of respondents as well as across characteristics of organizations. Presenting the results, we discuss only the identified significant differences. The results are as follows:

• **Aspect 1: Nature of conflict in organizations.** Managers with a low self-assessment in this aspect (“to a small extent or not at all” + “to some extent” – 32,7%) slightly exceeded these with a high self-assessment (“to a great extent” + “to a very great extent” - 31%). Over one third of respondents (36,3%) evaluated their knowledge of the *nature of conflict* to an average level. Managers with doctoral degree (59,1%) and with bachelor’s degree (36%) are more likely to feel prepared in this aspect than high-school graduates (14,3%) and managers with master’s degree (28%): χ^2 (6, N=300) = 14,344, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,155¹³. Respondents from large organizations (39,2%) and from medium organizations (31,5%) are more likely to feel confident in their knowledge of the nature of conflict at a great extent than respondents from micro organizations (18,2%) and from small organizations (28,6%): χ^2 (6, N=300) = 16,951, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,168.

• **Aspect 2: Types of conflicts.** Less than a quarter of managers (23,4%) stated that they had knowledge of the *types of conflicts*. A third of respondents (36,3%) gave an average assessment of their knowledge, and 40,3% - a low assessment. Managers who felt unprepared were almost twice more than those with confidence in their knowledge. Most significant differences were found in this aspect. Older managers (between 31 and 40 years old - 26%, between 41 and 50 years old – 24,5% and older than 51 years old – 24,5%) are more likely to give a high assessment of their knowledge of the types of conflicts than their younger colleagues (up to 30 years old – 15,8%): χ^2 (6, N=300) = 13,910, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,152. Respondents with doctoral degree (54,5%) and with bachelor’s degree (24%) are more likely to declare profound knowledge in this aspect than high-school graduates (7,1%) and respondents with master’s degree (21%): χ^2 (6, N=300) = 16,279, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,165. Managers with the greatest working experience (from 21 and more years - 28,2%) are more likely to feel confident in their knowledge of the types of conflicts than the less experienced managers (who worked from 1 to 5 years (12%), from 6 to 10 years (21,6%) and from 11 to 20 years (22,3%)): χ^2 (6, N=300) = 15,284, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,160. Respondents with managerial experience from 11 to 20 years (34,7%) are more likely to feel prepared in this aspect than respondents with managerial experience from 1 to 5 years (18,6%), from 6 to 10 years (20,7%) and from 21 and more years (20%): χ^2 (6, N=300) = 15,366, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,160. Managers from large organizations (26,5%), from medium organizations (24,7%) and from small organizations (25,7%) are more likely to give a high assessment of their knowledge of the types of conflicts than managers from micro organizations (12,7%): χ^2 (6, N=300) = 12,923, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,147.

• **Aspect 3: Sources of conflict.** Almost half of respondents (47,7%) were confident in their knowledge of the *sources of conflict* at a great or a very great extent, 30,3% - at a moderate extent, and 22% had a low self-assessment. Unlike the previous two aspects, the tendency here is reversed – managers with profound knowledge exceeded (almost twice) those with insufficient knowledge. Respondents from the capital (50,9%) are more likely to feel confident in their knowledge of the sources of conflict than respondents from district cities (43,1%) and from small cities and villages¹⁴ (23,5%): χ^2 (4, N=300) = 14,277, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,154.

• **Aspect 4: Structure and dynamics of conflict.** Only a quarter of respondents were familiar with the *structure and the dynamics of conflict* (25%). The remaining self-assessments are distributed almost evenly between managers who were insecure about their knowledge (37,7%) and managers with insufficient knowledge (37,3%). Men (27,1%) are more likely to feel prepared in this aspect than women (23,1%): χ^2 (2, N=300) = 6,141, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,143. Respondents from large organizations (29,4%), from medium organizations (30,1%) and from small organizations (25,7%) are more likely to feel confident in their knowledge of the structure and the dynamics of conflict than respondents from micro organizations (9,1%): χ^2 (6, N=300) = 17,026, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,168. Managers from the capital (28,4%) are more likely to give a high assessment of their knowledge in this aspect than managers from district cities (18,5%) and from small cities and villages (5,9%): χ^2 (4, N=300) = 10,181, $p < 0,05$, Cramer’s V = 0,130.

¹³ To meet the requirements for the use of chi-square test for independence (the expected frequencies for each cell should be at least 1 and the expected frequencies should be at least 5 in 80% of the cells) the ten variables for the key aspects of conflict knowledge were recoded in a three-point scale (1 - to a small extent or not at all + to some extent, 2 - to a moderate extent, 3 - to a great extent + to a very great extent).

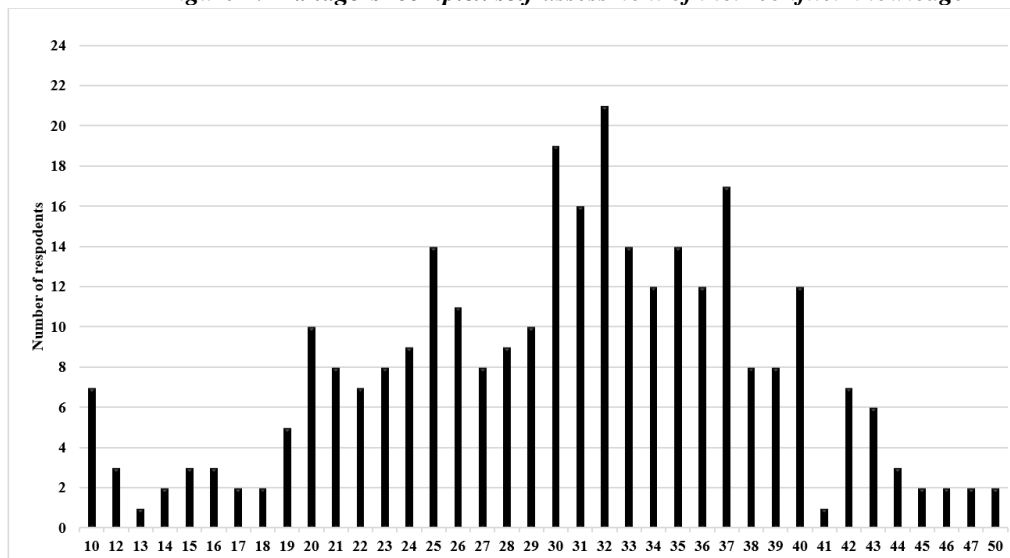
¹⁴ To meet the requirements for the use of chi-square test for independence the variable for the type of settlement of the organization was recoded in the following manner: 1 – capital of Bulgaria, 2 – district city, 3 - small city and village.

- **Aspect 5: Individual behaviour in conflict situations.** The *individual behaviour in conflict situations* is familiar to managers – 44,7% of them claimed to have knowledge in this aspect. A third of respondents (33,7%) assessed their knowledge at an average level, and 21,6% reported lack of it.
- **Aspect 6: Conflict management strategies.** While a third of managers (34,3%) evaluated their knowledge of *conflict management strategies* as thorough, another third of them (35,3%) gave an average assessment, and 30,4% felt unprepared in this aspect.
- **Aspect 7: Outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization.** Significant part of the participants in the survey (45,7%) had a high self-assessment of their knowledge of the *outcomes of conflict*, followed by those with an average assessment - 36,7%, followed by those with a low assessment - 17,6%.
- **Aspect 8: Analysis and diagnosis of a conflict.** Regarding the *analysis* and the *diagnosis of a conflict*, 38% of the respondents felt prepared at a great or a very great extent, 31,7% assessed their knowledge at an average level, and 30,3% considered themselves unprepared in this field. Significant difference was found according to the to the educational background – managers with bachelor’s degree (56%), with doctoral degree (54,5%) and high-school graduates (42,9%) are more likely to give a high assessment to their knowledge of the analysis and the diagnosis of a conflict than managers with master’s degree (31,8%): $\chi^2 (6, N=300) = 16,237, p<0,05, \text{Cramer's } V = 0,165$.
- **Aspect 9: Analysis of the post-conflict situation.** More than a third of respondents (38,3%) claimed they knew how to *analyze the post-conflict situation*, 32,7% were less confident in their knowledge, and 29% had a low self-assessment.
- **Aspect 10: Forecasting and prevention of conflict.** In this aspect there is a predominance of managers with a low self-assessment (39,4%) over those with a high self-assessment (28,6%). Three out of ten of respondents (32%) stated they felt prepared about the *forecasting and prevention of conflict* at a moderate extent. Managers with doctoral degree (59,1%) and with bachelor’s degree (36%) are more likely to feel prepared in this aspect than high-school graduates (21,4%) and respondents with master’s degree (24,3%): $\chi^2 (6, N=300) = 14,226, p<0,05, \text{Cramer's } V = 0,154$.

Findings showed that most managers gave an average or a high self-assessment of their knowledge of conflict in each of the aspects. They were most familiar with the *sources of conflict*, the *individual behaviour in conflict situations*, the *outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization*, the *analysis and the diagnosis of a conflict* and the *analysis of the post-conflict situation*. Average assessments prevail in three aspects - the *nature of conflict*, the *structure and the dynamics of conflict* and the *conflict management strategies*. The biggest gaps in knowledge that managers identified are in the aspects related to the *types of conflicts* and their *forecasting and prevention*.

The results of managers’ complex self-assessment are shown in Figure 2. The distribution of the self-assessments after the calculation of the new variable is as follows: 87,7% of respondents (n = 263) had a low value of the complex self-assessment and only 12,3% of them (n = 37) had a high value (i.e. they possess thorough knowledge of conflict).

Figure 2. Managers’ complex self-assessment of their conflict knowledge



Based on these results, the proposition of the study can be confirmed as the value of the complex variable of majority of the respondents is low (<40, at n = 300). Most managers questioned do not possess thorough knowledge of conflict in organizations. Although managers feel prepared from a moderate to a great extent in the ten key aspects, findings suggest that there are still some gaps in their knowledge.

Our evidence also suggest that organizations may not pay enough attention to the significance of conflict management competencies. Lack of knowledge may become obstacle for managers to successfully intervene in employees' conflict. The results are indicative for organizations to develop managers' capacities for dealing with conflict. When handled with the right expertise, conflict can lead to positive outcomes. Appropriate interventions in employees' conflict may improve their working relationships, find new approaches of doing things in the organization, generate new ideas and solutions to existing problems.

A limitation of the study is that the assessment of conflict knowledge is based on the opinion of respondents - the questions do not test the actual level of knowledge of managers in the defined aspects. The survey is also weak on the use of convenience sample that included managers who were easy to contact. Thus, the sample is not representative, and we cannot provide generalizable results.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The paper underlines the need for acquirement of substantial knowledge of conflict for skillfully dealing with employees' conflicts in organizations. Conflict management requires from managers to possess a minimum of conflict knowledge that will help them to identify conflict, to understand its sources and dynamics as well as to use rational approaches to handle it (Dimitrov, 2004).

Findings reveal that managers possess knowledge of conflict in organizations but there are still some gaps in it that must be filled. The highest self-assessments of conflict knowledge are related to the sources of conflict, the individual behaviour in conflict situations, the outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization, the analysis and the diagnosis of a conflict and the analysis of the post-conflict situation. The greatest gaps in knowledge are associated with the types of conflicts and their forecasting and prevention.

The implication for the organizations is to develop managers' conflict management competencies¹⁵ with special emphasis on the areas with the greatest insufficiency of knowledge and skills. The implication for managers is not to hesitate to find ways to acquire knowledge and develop their conflict management skills whenever they feel insecure or not at ease while dealing with conflict.

The present study contributes to the literature of conflict in organizations in two way. First, the study outlines the framework of conflict management knowledge by defining its key aspects. Second, the proposed scale for measuring the self-assessment of conflict knowledge can be used in further research in the field.

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¹⁵ Previous research has proved the need to develop managers' conflict management competencies through training and coaching (Petkova-Gurbalova, 2019a). Particular attention should be paid to the development of communication competencies as they are considered a major factor for effective management (Petkova-Gurbalova, 2019b).

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