Conflict in Small Groups

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Abstract

This manuscript seeks to draw inferences from an amalgamation of research done regarding types of conflict and their effect on the performance of small groups. The effects of conflict and cohesion on mediating leadership are also examined, with the intention of illuminating conflict management strategies that can be used by leadership to maximize performance through productive conflict while minimizing dysfunctional conflict within groups.

Keywords: Groups, Conflict, Task, Process, Relationship, Cohesion, Leadership, Performance.

Introduction

"Teams can be found at all levels in organizations, engaged in a variety of tasks, ranging from operational to strategic"
(Cohen & Bailey, 1997)

Teams are now ubiquitous, established as the critical cellular component of any modern organization. They facilitate the cooperative coalescing of diversely distinct individual resources in order to effectively address the operational and strategic issues that challenge their organizations (Gupta, Huang, & Niranjan, 2010). Despite their potential for performance, team's work efficacy is often affected by the intragroup conflict that inevitably arises during the group's lifespan. It is vital for organizations to understand the nature of these conflicts, their effects, and the dynamically transactional relationship between leadership and team performance.

Jehn and Mannix (2001) categorized work group conflict into three types: task, relationship, and process conflict. Although groups will generally experience all three types, the researchers highlighted variables and a pattern of conflict that would increase group performance over the course of a group's interaction. Additionally, they sought to identify the unique dimensions of process conflict to more clearly distinguish it from task and relationship conflict. This research was expanded upon by (Behfar, Mannix, Peterson, & Trochim, 2010)who further differentiated between task and process conflict, and highlighted the aspects of process conflict and their distinct effects on group performance. Relationship conflict was researched in a study by (Kim, Choi, &Park,

2012) that explored the disparate effects of task versus relationship conflict to identify a group contextual factor that moderates the relationship between cognitive style and creativity.

This results of these studies clearly demonstrate the dynamic effect of conflict on group's performance and communication. The extent of this effect is detailed in a study by Benard (2012) that examined how intergroup conflict shapes individuals' tendencies to sacrifice for their groups, enforce norms by sanctioning their peers, and relinquish decision-making autonomy to a leader. The performance advantage gained by appointing a leader as well as the reciprocal impact of performance on determining future leadership is studied by Gupta, Huang, & Niranjan, (2010), who highlighted the role of cohesion and conflict with regards to mediating the relationship between performance and team leadership.

The dissonance that lies between cohesion and conflict is also addressed in a study conducted by Amason (1996) that focused on the strategic decisions made by top management,emphasizing the inherent consequent functional and dysfunctional group conflict that is manifested in the workplace.

The goal of this manuscript is to identify the means of achieving maximal team performance by examining the costs and gains associated with the effects of the respective conflict types and leadership strategies, with the ultimate aim of formulating suggested processes for facilitating productive conflict. This manuscript will begin with

a review of the relevant literature,followed by a discussion of the conclusions drawn from the literature. The review will conclude by providing suggested potential avenues for further research.

Literature Review

Conflict is defined as an awareness on the part of the parties involved of discrepancies, incompatible wishes, or irreconcilable desires (Boulding, 1963). The three types of conflict presented by Jehn and Mannix (2001) are task conflict, relationship conflict, and process conflict. Task conflict stems from a conscious dissension of perspectives with regards to identifying a group's task or goal. Relationship conflicts involve interpersonal incompatibilities and the consequent tension that is communicated between parties. Task conflicts can involve impassioned discord, but are generally devoid of the deeply seated negative emotions and personal attacks that are characteristic of relationship conflict. Process conflict is comprised of disagreements regarding the optimal course of action to complete the task, including aspects such as the delegation of resources and responsibilities.

Behfar et al. (2010)discussed the implications of three consecutive studies that focused on the aspects of process conflict and highlighted their effects on group performance. The researchers emphasized that developing a multifaceted approach to process conflict measurement was critical to understanding the effects of intragroup conflict on team processes and performance.

Behfar et al. (2010) proposed that the primary aspects of process conflict, logistical and contribution, affected team performance in different ways. Logistical conflict generally stems from disagreements regarding the effective organization and utilization of the group's resources in order to accomplish a task, and is negatively associated with a group's ability to effectively coordinate work between its interdependent members, thus inhibiting group performance. Contribution conflict is a result of inconsistent member contributions, and is negatively associated with member satisfaction and group commitment. Their findings particularly revealed high correlations between relationship and process conflict, stating that "relationship conflict could potentially be a consequence of process conflict" (Behfar et al., 2010, p. 165).

Explicating the meaning of relationship conflict is crucial for distinguishing between it being a consequence rather than a cause of other types of conflict (Behfar et al., 2010).For example, when group members cause work performance disruptions due to a lack of preparedness or involvement, the ensuing conflict regarding the effective distribution of resources and individual group commitment would reveal the extent to which members respected and valued one another's respective resources and priorities. A recurrence of such conflict can very likely lead to the formation of negative interpersonal attributions, an increase in interpersonal tensions, and the fragmentation of the group's cohesion(Behfar et al., 2010).

Kim et al. (2012) indicated that individual cognitive styles have a significant impact on deciding the effects of different types of group conflict with regards to group performance. For example, groups comprised of intuitive individuals can potentially increase group performance by promoting creatively divergent thinking as a reaction to task conflict. However, intuitive groups are susceptible to distractions and a loss of performance when experiencing relationship conflict(Kim et al., 2012).

On the other hand, groups that are comprised of systematic individuals would actually experience a loss of performance when confronted with task conflict, finding the increased cognitive load distracting and taxing. Nonetheless, systematic individuals are less vulnerable to relationship conflict due to their tendency to simply disregard relationship issues and remain focused on the task at hand(Kim et al., 2012).

These idiosyncratic differences would be even more apparent and impactful within the context of a small group, since the role and behavior of each interdependent individual is impactful and relevant. These findings indicate the need for the development of a more expansive and dynamic theoretical perspective regarding the relationship between conflict types when predicting the consequences of conflict on team viability outcomes.

Jehn and Mannix's (2001) research examined conflict as a dynamic process rather than as a static standalone event and focused on time as a key element in the encouragement of productive conflict styles, thus the study was necessarily longitudinal

in its scope. The researchers' ultimate goal was to identify long-term patterns of group

conflict and establish links between specific patterns and group performance. Jehn &

Mannix (2001) ultimately discovered a broader pattern for promoting productive

conflict, finding that:

> Teams performing well were characterized by low but increasing levels of
>
> process conflict, low levels of relationship conflict, with a rise near project
>
> deadlines, and moderate levels of task conflict at the midpoint of group
>
> interaction. The members of teams with this ideal conflict profile had similar pre-
>
> established value systems, high levels of trust and respect, and open discussion
>
> norms around conflict during the middle stages of their interaction.(p. 238)

This pattern was related to the paradox created by the issue of group value

consensus in the absence of diversity. The homogeneity that it promotes seems to be

beneficial to work groups in that it is likely to reduce relationship and process conflict.

This however might be detrimental to performance by causing a decrease in task

conflict or an increase in "groupthink" (Janis, 1971).

Conflict is thus the crux of this paradox. Amason (1996) reiterated the different

effects of each type of conflict, and argued that by promoting positive conflict and

minimizing negative conflict that "this paradox need not exist" (p. 141). Pragmatically

applying the optimum pattern of conflict proposed by Jehn and Mannix (2001) could be a key means of helping top management teams "gain the benefits of conflict without the costs" (Amason, 1996, pg. 143).The question then, is how to promote diversity so that task conflict levels can be maintained at moderately high levels to promote performance, while ensuring that the dysfunctional relationship conflict is diminished?

The answer, according to Jehn and Mannix (2001), lies in the development of intragroup respect and cohesiveness to minimize relationship and process conflict, while simultaneously fostering the development of group norms that embrace open discussion of issues to enhance task conflict. As productive as task conflict can be, group members will find it difficult to channel its benefits without first ensuring that members do not take such conflict personally and succumb to relationship conflict.

According to (Amason, 1996), leadership is instrumental in shaping this process. A successful team's leadership is responsible for encouraging and facilitating the aforementioned norm of open and respectful constructive discussions of the group's task, particularly at the midpoint of group interaction. These discussions would help foster a cohesive and supportive team environment that curtails relationship and process conflict,thus enhancing member attitudes as well as the group's overall performance. Such norms must be instilled within the group culture during the early stages of group formation as suggested by Jehn and Mannix (2001), who observed that

group processes formed during the early stages of group development continue to influence performance for the duration of the group's existence.

Leadership is a key element of facilitating group performance, but what motivates individuals within a group to cede their full autonomy to a leader? Benard (2012) conducted a study that found that "conflict can lead participants to support creating centralized leadership positions" particularly if the group is perceived to be in decline, and that individuals were likely to "enforce costly norms at greater rates when their group's interests conflict with those of an outgroup and the outgroup actively pursues the conflict" (p. 125).

Benard (2012) also confirmed that intergroup conflict directly increases member's contributions to the ingroup regardless of outgroup contribution. The presence of conflicting goals can actually influence a form of cohesion that promotes members willingness to contribute to the group by making costly personal sacrifices for its welfare. The threat of outgroup competition is a powerful motivator for individuals to enforce costly personal sacrifices from others (Benard, 2012).

An alternative to centralized leadership, where an individual leader directly sets and supervises roles and responsibilities for members, is team leadership, a participative leadership style that involve mutual sharing of responsibility. A study by Gupta et al. (2010)examined the relationship between team leadership and performance, particularly emphasizing the effects of cohesion and conflict.

The researchers' data indicated that conflict is the primary mediator with regards to the relationship between leadership and performance, with team performance playing a significant role with regards to influencing subsequent team leadership. They found that "team leadership was strongly negatively related to conflict but not to cohesion" and discovered a "positive relationship between cohesion and performance and a negative relationship between conflict and performance" (Gupta, Huang, & Niranjan, 2010, p. 343). These results indicate that for groups opting for team management, intragroup relationship conflict is a pivotal element that must be addressed to maximize performance.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

Small groups, in the form of teams, are contemporarily globally prevalent throughout organizations. Teams facilitate the coalescing of individual resources for the purpose of collaboratively accomplishing a greater task. The most influential element affecting team performance is intragroup conflict. Conflict is defined as an awareness on the part of the parties involved of discrepancies, incompatible wishes, or irreconcilable desires (Boulding, 1963). Researchers have emphasized that developing a multifaceted approach to studying conflict was critical to understanding the effects of intragroup conflict on team processes and performance. Group conflict falls into three primary categories: task, relationship, and process conflict. Various research has

examined the primary variables of these conflict types and investigated the nature of their relationship to one another.

Studies have shown that the effects of conflict types are intricately intertwined and are affected by idiosyncratic traits. According to Kim et al. (2012), the impact of different conflict types on group performance is significantly impacted by individual cognitive styles. Intuitive groups' performance tends to increase in the presence of task conflict as a result of divergent thinking, but they are prone to distractions and consequent decline in performance when confronted with relationship conflict. Systematic groups' exhibit inverse effects, experiencing a loss of performance due to the distractions caused by task conflict, yet tend to disregard relationship conflict and are thus marginally affected by it.

Behfar et al. (2010) found a high correlation between relationship and process conflict, arguing that relationship conflict can potentially occur as a result of recurrent process conflict, thus reinforcing negative interpersonal attributions and potentially leading to the fragmentation of group cohesion. These findings indicate that the theoretical perspective of the relationship between conflict types and performance requires dynamic development in order to identify a pattern of conflict that maximizes performance over the duration of group interaction.

Jehn and Mannix (2011) ultimately discovered such a pattern, "characterized by low but increasing levels of process conflict, low levels of relationship conflict, with a

rise near project deadlines, and moderate levels of task conflict at the midpoint of group interaction" (p. 238). This pattern is pertinent to the paradoxical issue of balancing the need to increase group diversity in order to facilitate functional conflict, and the need to increase cohesion to minimize dysfunctional conflict. The pragmatic application of the conflict pattern found to be optimal by Jehn and Mannix (2001) could potentially prove to be a solution to this paradox.

Implementation of this conflict pattern within a group is dependent on the development of intragroup norms that foster respect and cooperative communication, embracing the open discussion of issues to help prevent productive conflict from becoming negatively internalized by members. Research has shown that the instilling such norms into a group during its early stages aids in ensuring their perpetuation throughout the duration of the group's interaction (Jehn&Mannix, 2001). Leadership plays a critical role in facilitating the timely and effective adoption of these norms, enhancing member attitudes and maximizing the group's overall performance.

Researchers have found that conflict is the primary mediator between group leadership and performance. "Conflict can lead participants to support creating centralized leadership positions" (Benard, 2012, p. 125) particularly if the group is perceived to be in decline. Centralized leadership is defined by an individual leader who establishes and supervises member's roles and responsibilities. Team leadership is an alternate leadership style that involves mutual sharing of responsibility. Gupta et al.

(2010) examined the effects of cohesion and conflict in terms of their impact on team leadership's performance, finding that "team leadership was strongly negatively related to conflict but not to cohesion" and discovered a "positive relationship between cohesion and performance and a negative relationship between conflict and performance" (p. 343).

Deeply rooted relationship conflict between team members leads to dysfunctional team dynamics that can be devastating to team performance. Cohesion can thus have a significant impact on performance by reducing relationship conflict. Gupta et al. (2010) reported that they "did not find any evidence that team leadership affected cohesion or that cohesion mediated the relationship between leadership and performance" (p. 344). This is likely a result of the collective nature of team leadership, since the absence of unilateral direction provided by an explicit leader can leave team members engendered with ambiguity regarding their respective roles and responsibilities.

Conclusion

This manuscript has served to highlight the powerful impact of conflict types on group performance, and the ideal leadership strategies for implementing a productive pattern of conflict. What is still required is further research regarding the effects of hierarchical distances in leadership on group performance. Anderson and Brown (2010) critically examined the functionalist perspective's premise that steeper hierarchies are

more conducive to maximizing group performance than flatter hierarchical structures and, finding the results to be mixed, proposed conditions to moderate the effects of hierarchical steepness.

Future studies could discuss the implications of this research with regards to the performance of hierarchical small groups involved in high-risk situations. Task conflict may be minimal, since the group would inherently have a unified task in the mission they were ordered to do… and the need to survive it! Relationship conflict could be significantly curtailed due to the discipline instilled in members through training and whatever enforceable protocols are a norm to the group. In addition, having a singular process for accomplishing that task could minimize process conflict due to the established command structure that grants the leader that power and responsibility.

A study could compare and contrast a United States Marine unit vs. a typical guerrilla or militia unit. This study could examine the correlation between the presence/absence of hierarchical ranking and the functionality of the group under high-risk combat conditions. A firefighting team could serve as an example of a compromise between the anarchical dynamic of an armed militia and the heavily stratified hierarchy of a marine.

The pragmatic applicability of this manuscript and further research on the effect of hierarchical rank on maximizing a group's functional efficiency and efficacy is comprehensive. With teams becoming a globally pervasive tool for maximizing

productivity, it is crucial that researchers evaluate the elements that impact the

performance of small groups. I encourage scholars and practitioners to help teams

reduce intragroup conflict so that the full benefits of teams can be actualized. This

research could prove to be literally lifesaving by facilitating the capacity of a small

group's communication to manage and resolve conflict under duress.

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