Online work: Managing conflict and emotions for performance in virtual teams

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Summary   This qualitative study captures the development of conflicts and emotions in virtual teams (VTs) and identifies strategies for preventing escalation of affective conflict to enhance VT performance. Participants were 45 university students organized into eight VTs for a class project. All communication regarding the project was virtual, and the primary data for the study consisted of the verbatim transcripts of 100% of the VT communications. Thematic analysis not only revealed the triggers of conflicts and its associated emotionality in a virtual environment but also the use of emotional regulation and feedback seeking behaviors to manage conflict and negative emotions. Integrating insights from this research with affective events theory, emotional regulation theory and theories of workplace conflict, we create a model for future research regarding the management of emotional reactions to conflict in virtual teams.

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a tremendous increase in studies focused on virtual teams (VTs). However, these studies have ignored the link between conflict and the emotional behaviors of VT members. Yet, Zaccaro and Bader (2002) identified the management of conflicts and emotionality as one of the most critical and difficult tasks facing VTs. The main objective of this study is to advance research on interactional processes in VTs by extending theory on conflict, emotions and virtuality (Jehn, 1997; Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004).

To achieve this goal, we qualitatively explored the conflict and emotional behavioral patterns of VT members. This study provides a rare in-depth look at detailed data on the group processes experienced by the members of eight VTs. The teams communicated exclusively through an internet-based IT platform, and the full transcripts of all of the team interactions were available for analysis. This level of access to the processes undergone by VTs was made possible by using students as study participants, with the inevitable trade-offs in external validity. Despite this limitation, the ability to observe 100% of team interaction to analyze the

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development of conflicts, emotions, and the deployment of strategies for managing emotions and conflicts is rarely, if ever, possible in workplace settings.

Due to the richness of the dataset available to us, we are able to trace sources of and changes in conflict and emotionality over time, which is a critical factor because processes are known to change across the team life cycle (Gersick, 1988, 1989). VT research has identified conflict as a critical process that must be managed for effective goal achievement (Aubert & Kesley, 2003; Baba, Gluesing, Ratner, & Wagner, 2004; Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001). Prior studies have not combined a focus on conflict with the articulation and management of emotion, a gap that Nair (2008) identified across multiple research domains. By tracing the eruption of conflicts and emotions together across time, we are able to identify strategies for effective management of these critical issues in VTs at a fine-grained level that prior studies using survey measures of generalized conflict management types could not achieve. We use the insights gained from this analysis to integrate affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and emotional regulation theory (Gross & John, 2003), with theories of workplace conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Mannix, 2001) to create a new model for managing emotional reactions to conflict in VTs.

Conceptual background

Virtual teams (VTs) are variously defined as dynamic teams whose members are geographically and temporally dispersed and work remotely, often dependent on electronic technology (Hambley, O'Neill, & Kline, 2007b; Martins et al., 2004). Although VTs may increase the potential for productivity, organizations often fail to harness this potential (Aubert & Kesley, 2003; Kayworth & Leidner, 2002). The difficulty in harnessing the potential of VTs may be connected with an inability to effectively manage the conflict and emotional behaviors of VT members. In the next section, we provide a theoretical background and a review of prior research on team interpersonal processes and virtual work.

Affective events and emotional signaling effect theories

We use affective events theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and the theory of emotional signaling effect (ESE) (Frijda, 1986; Keltner & Haidt, 1999) as theoretical frameworks to conceptualize the affective events and emotional responses that are triggered in virtual environments. Especially, AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) proposes that factors in the work environment are the immediate cause of people's affective reactions (joy, anger), which then affect their work attitudes and behaviors. AET's proposition that workplace circumstances stimulate distinctive ''affective events'' (e.g. conflict in team members interactions) which, in turn, may trigger emotional reactions with subsequent outcomes has been supported by research (Wegge, van Dick, Fisher, West, & Dawson, 2006; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Additionally, AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) emphasizes the importance of emotions to workplace processes. For

example, studies show that conflicts are intertwined with emotions (Jehn, 1997; Nair, 2008) that impact team functioning and processes of trust and cooperation (Tanghe, Wisse, & van der Flier, 2010). Given that interactions in VTs lack social cues available to traditional FTFTs (Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001), we expect that VT members will experience conflicts as affective events in the course of their interactions and that these conflicts will elicit differing emotions.

Related to the above, we know that emotions are elicited by significant events (Frijda, 1986) (e.g. conflict) and that the triggered emotions are usually conveyed through facial emotional expressions (Pollak & Sinha, 2002). However, Heberlein and Atkinson (2009) suggest that the vocal prosody and whole body cues also convey emotional information. We extend the notion of emotional expression to VT environment where emotions can be expressed using text. Of particular importance to emotions in the interactions of virtual teams is the notion of interactive expressions of emotions (Frijda, 1986) which refer to behaviors that are triggered by emotional situations to modify others' behaviors and remove some discomfort or annoyance. Specifically, prior research suggests that emotions serve some crucial social functions (e.g. Keltner & Haidt, 1999). In this case, emotions may evoke reciprocal or complementary emotions in others that may, in turn, help individuals respond to significant social events (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). For example, in a field study of anger and happiness in a computer-mediated negotiation simulation, Van Kleef et al. (2004) showed that negotiators confronted with an angry opponent tend to become angry themselves. Similarly, negotiators confronted with an angry opponent estimated the opponent's limit as high while negotiators with a happy opponent judged their opponent's limit as low. This research suggests that the expression of anger may motivate competitive behavior in observers (Van Kleef, 2010). Altogether, we expect that by expression or signaling their emotions, team members will regulate each other's emotional behaviors to shape the development of their conflict interactions in a virtual environment.

Conflict and emotion in virtual teams

Table 1 presents a quick summary of the key differences and potential variations on emotions, regulation and conflict occurrences in both VTs and Face-To-Face Teams (FTFTs) in the last ten years. Processes in both VTs and FTFTs are characterized by conflict and emotions. In particular, both types of teams have task, relationship and process conflict and different outcomes on performance and team cohesion. Among many other sources of conflict, one major difference in the conflict in FTFTs and VTs is that technology and the lack of opportunity for face-to-face cues while interacting are major sources of conflict in VTs. In this case, there is a possibility for members of VTs to hide their emotional reactions by resisting the impulse to express them on-line. Nevertheless, the articulation of emotions online, in particular, is limited to the use of text or symbols (e.g., emoticons). Additionally, extant research suggests that there is a need for more research in the nature of discrete emotions and moods and their effects on interactions and