



## Team conflict dynamics: Implications of a dyadic view of conflict for team performance



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### ABSTRACT

This paper endeavored to resolve some of the inconsistencies in the intrateam conflict literature by proposing both that conflict can be conceptualized as an expression of dyadic interactions and that the study of conflict requires a dynamic perspective. We propose that the presence of relationship conflict in even a single dyad within a team can hinder information exchange, whereas the level of information exchange in teams can unlock task conflict. We argue that task and relationship conflict, due to this unfolding process, shift from an initially significant positive relationship to a null relationship over time. We further propose that task conflict and dyadic task conflict asymmetry combine to produce high performance in the teams. Our study of 219 individuals organized in 458 dyads within 51 teams – studied over 8 weeks during the development of an entrepreneurial venture – provided support for our theoretical model. Our theory and findings demonstrate that the connection between task and relationship conflict is more complex than previously proposed, with task and relationship conflict differentiating over time.

### 1. Introduction

The growing recognition by researchers and organizational leaders that teamwork is a critical component of organizational success (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Marks, 2006) has resulted in the nearly ubiquitous presence of teams studies in the organizational sciences (Humphrey & Aime, 2014; Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2006; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008) and the pervasive utilization of teams within organizations themselves (Devine, Clayton, Philips, Dunford, & Melner, 1999; Ken Blanchard Companies., 2006). Because the leveraging of the disparate capabilities of the team members to produce innovative and/or successful outcomes is fundamental for teams to succeed (Bell, Villado, Lukasik, Belau, & Briggs, 2011; Joshi & Roh, 2009; Mathieu, Tannenbaum, Donsbach, & Alliger, 2014), recent research has focused on team member interactions and, within team interaction constructs, team conflict as a core predictor of team success (de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Team conflict – disagreements between team members – has most frequently been conceptualized in terms of task and relationship conflict (Weingart, Behfar, Bendersky, Todorova, & Jehn, 2015), where task conflict reflects disagreements about the content and outcomes of the

tasks being performed and relationship conflict is thought of as disagreements about interpersonal values. Given Jehn's (1994, 1995) initial findings that one form of conflict (relationship conflict) is detrimental to teams, whereas another form of conflict (task conflict) is beneficial to teams, both scholars and the popular press regarded the model as a potential source of solutions to leverage disparate member capabilities in teams.

Although this research stream has consistently theorized conflict as a multi-dimensional construct and organizational narratives seem to support this view, a pattern of seemingly contradictory results has emerged about the relationship between the dimensions of conflict and team outcomes (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit et al., 2012). For example, De Dreu and Weingart's (2003) review found that task and relationship conflict were both negatively related to team performance, whereas de Wit et al. (2012) found the same negative relationship for relationship conflict, but no significant relationship for task conflict (suggesting that task conflict may be good, bad, or unrelated depending upon situational contingencies). Despite the scholarly struggle to produce consistent cumulative insight, two possible shortcomings of this research may be the almost exclusive treatment in the literature of task and relationship conflict as team level properties, such that they

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represent the climate of the team (e.g., idea challenging, collective hostility, etc.), and also the view that both conflict dimensions appear immediately rather than potentially emerge through interactions within the team.

A solution to the confusion in the intragroup conflict literature may be to consider teamwork as a collection of organizing activities. Humphrey and Aime (2014) recently argued that teams are “assemblies of interdependent relations and activities organizing shifting sets or subsets of participants embedded in and relevant to wider resource and institutional environments” (p. 450), suggesting that teams are best thought of in terms of the organizing activities of its members, such that how team members structure the interactions amongst themselves define the success (or failure) of the team.

Applying an organizing lens to the intragroup conflict literature requires us to consider how conflict develops within a team. Consistent with an organizing approach to team conflict, we argue that two theoretically relevant findings could help resolve inconsistencies in intragroup conflict research: the dyadic nature of basic organizing interactions within teams and the importance of time for organizing processes in teams. We therefore first look at teams as a collection of relationships; more than a specific collection of members, it is the collection of dyadic relationships or interactions between members that brings teams into existence. As noted by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006), “the dyad is arguably the fundamental unit of interpersonal interaction and interpersonal relations” (p. 1) and therefore the locus of “organizing” in teams. In doing this, we provide a logic for the emergence of team level constructs rather than that relying on team level constructions at the onset of teams. Second, we present a model of team conflict that directly addresses the temporal nature of conflict within teams. As organizing in teams involves a series of ongoings or events rather than a single interaction, and because team level constructs emerge through these repeated ongoings and events (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999), it is imperative to apply a cross-temporal perspective to understand both the emergence of collective phenomena as well as their effect on team functioning.

We start by theoretically separating task and relationship conflict based on their logic of emergence. Whereas relationship conflict represents an expressed dyadic disagreement on relational issues, task conflict emerges from task interactions. That is, a relational disagreement occurs as a function of value differences, and can be cued in any interpersonal interaction. Task conflict, however, is dependent upon the emergence of differences during the performance of specific tasks, and thus is reliant upon the timing of team activities. As such, we argue that the team conflict literature may benefit from theoretically conceptualizing relationship conflict as an expression of specific instantaneous dyadic interactions within the team, whereas team conflict could be better conceptualized as an emergent group perception constructed through a multilevel longitudinal lens.

Although many of the early models of intragroup conflict were process-oriented (and thus built time into their models as substantive constructs; see Habib, 1987; Pondy, 1967; Thomas, 1992), the majority of recent research has focused more on structural models of conflict (Korsgaard, Jeong, Mahony, & Pitariu, 2008). Yet, this is theoretically inconsistent (Choi & Cho, 2011). One would expect that a team dealing with relationship conflict early will organize the team in response to that conflict, framing the future interactions between team members and perhaps even fracturing the team (Carton & Cummings, 2012). In contrast, a team that does not encounter relationship conflict until late in its lifespan will have already established norms and expectations that do not include the expectation for and handling of relationship conflict.

With this in mind, we present a model of team conflict that directly addresses the temporal nature of conflict within teams. We begin by theorizing that the exhibition of *any* relational-oriented conflict early in the lifespan of a team is sufficient to inhibit information exchange (a process critical for team success; Hinsz, Tindale, & Vollrath, 1997). We further theorize that task conflict emerges from the task- and socially-

relevant knowledge embedded within information exchange. In short, we suggest that relationship conflict is an instantaneously perceived construct that affects the organizing of a team, whereas task conflict is the result of the organizing activities.

Applying this organizing lens to the team conflict literature requires that we consider the relational dimensions of teamwork. Historically, scholars have operationalized team conflict as a collective construct, asking about the collective conflict experienced by the team (e.g., how frequently is there conflict in your team). Yet, the *in vivo* experience of team conflict describes the relationships between team members – a team does not fight with itself, but rather the team members argue with each other. We follow this argument by studying the dyadic interactions between team members within a team, marrying the dyadic interactions to the collective representation of conflict through an explicit consideration of the emergence of team conflict.<sup>1</sup>

We accomplish this in two ways. First, we draw from Korsgaard and colleagues (Korsgaard, Ployhart, & Ulrich, 2014; Korsgaard et al., 2008) and Kozlowski and Klein (2000) to present a model of team conflict that captures both compositional and compilational components. Composition (drawn from the principles of isomorphism) characterizes phenomena as having the same form as they emerge at higher levels. Compilation (drawn from the principles of discontinuity) characterizes phenomena as being related across levels, but taking on different forms as they emerge at higher levels. For relationship conflict, we take a compilational approach, where we argue that the mere presence of relationship conflict in any dyad within a team affects information exchange – that is, *any* relationship conflict within a team is given meaning. In contrast, we argue that task conflict has both compositional and compilational aspects. We propose that task conflict is compositional in nature, such that the *level* of task conflict across the dyads of teams has meaning due to its relationship with information exchange. Yet, we also expect that task conflict has a compilational component, where the asymmetry of expressed task conflict between team members (which we label dyadic task conflict asymmetry) signifies differences in capability to address tasks (Aime, Humphrey, De Rue, & Paul, 2014).

Second, we also draw from the organizing perspective to argue that intragroup conflict differentially develops within teams over time. Doing this helps us partially solve a problem rampant within the intragroup conflict literature, wherein task and relationship conflict are highly related in the minds of team members (de Wit et al., 2012). We propose a more process-oriented model of conflict where task conflict becomes differentiated in the minds of team members through repeated interactions and information exchange. In our study, we show that task and relationship conflict are initially positively correlated, but as the team develops over time, the relationship between these constructs changes – they exhibit no relationship later in the life of the team.

We tested our theory with a longitudinal study of team development, testing a path model of the emergence and effect of team conflict. In this study of 51 teams over eight time periods, we specifically demonstrate that relationship conflict constrains information exchange, whereas information exchange unlocks task conflict. Finally, we find that the combination of task conflict and dyadic task conflict asymmetry affect team performance.

This study has several notable contributions. First, by utilizing the organizing approach to teamwork, we present a theoretical model for the emergence and separation of relationship and task conflict over time. Despite the popularity and intuitively appealing nature of functional and dysfunctional conflict (which is reflected in the task and relationship conflict constructs), the lack of a clear theoretical process for their emergence and differentiation resulted in De Dreu (2008)

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the purpose of this study is not to examine the predictive validity of dyadic versus team operationalizations of intrateam conflict, but instead to align conflict theory with the measurement and operationalization of conflict. As such, we do not measure, compare, or test team-referent operationalizations of conflict within our study.

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