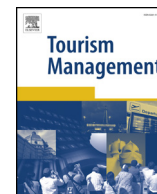




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Improving frontline service employees' innovative behavior using conflict management in the hospitality industry: The mediating role of engagement

Hyo Sun Jung^a, Hye Hyun Yoon^{b,*}^a Center for Converging Humanities, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyungheedaero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul, 02447, Republic of Korea^b College of Hotel & Tourism Management, Kyung Hee University, 26, Kyungheedaero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul, 02447, Republic of Korea

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ABSTRACT

Conflict within an organization is inescapable. However when frontline hotel employees can overcome conflicts their levels of engagement can increase and innovative behavior may emerge. The purpose of this study was to verify that the conflict management, as perceived by frontline employees, significantly affects their levels of engagement and innovative behavior. The results support this notion. Further, in the sample of 383, those employees expressing a high level of engagement were more likely to engage in innovative behavior. Also, employee engagement fully mediated the relationship between conflict management climate and innovative behavior. These findings have important implications for managing conflict management in the hospitality industry. Finally, limitations and future research directions are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Conflict is inevitable in human interaction, and it results in functional or dysfunctional outcomes based on how it is dealt with (Yirik, Yildirim, & Cetinkaya, 2015). Conflict within an organization is inescapable; it occurs frequently because members have different goals, even though they should interact in performing their individual tasks with the goal of achieving the purposes of the organization (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). However, some earlier studies reported positive aspects of conflict within an organization (Coser, 1957; Dahrendorf, 1959), and De Dreu (1997) argued that if conflict in an organization is removed, a situation of “no conflict” could be a more serious problem. Conflict management in any organization is needed not only to minimize the negative results of conflict but also to promote positive results, such as improvement in learning in an organization, as a goal (Rahim, 2002). In human relations, conflict in an organization is considered a matter of course, a mechanism that contributes to developing the creativity and persuasion skills of members (Corvette, 2007; Reade & Lee, 2016). Creativity and innovative behaviors of members are essential to the survival and growth of an organization. Given that the innovative behaviors of members is the most fundamental precondition of triggering organizational innovation (Kanter, 1988; Scott & Bruce, 1994), the causal relationship between conflict management and innovative behaviors can be markedly significant in an organization (Chen, Zhao, & Liu, 2012).

Robbins (1978) reported that it is not conflict itself but how it is

settled in an organization that gives climate its significance in that it determines the consequences after conflict. Thus, the conflict management climate is a comprehensive conception with regard to organizational conflict management that is formed by a combination of organizational situation elements and the personal perception of each member of an organization. Further, it serves as an index that shows the fairness and predictability in organizational conflict management of the evaluation of members and the patterns of interaction between managers and employees (Rivlin, 2001). Climate is particularly important in the hospitality industry; if employees of an organization perceive a service-oriented climate, customers who use the organization will receive superior service. This demonstrates the significance of the climate of hospitality companies and the perceptions of their employees (Schneider, 1980). Einarsen, Skogstad, Rorvik, Lande, and Nielsen (2016) argued that employee engagement increases when they perceive that their organizational climate includes a proper process to manage conflict. Cupach and Canary (1995) reported that those who could manage conflict through effective communication experienced productive and positive results from conflict management.

Hotel frontline employees experience high-level conflict while working because they are overburdened for long hours under irregular schedules with low salaries (Karatepe, Babakus, & Yavas, 2012; Min, Kim, & Lee, 2015), a working environment that has characteristics causing diversified types of conflict (Karatepe & Uludag, 2007). In this process, interdependent relationship among employees becomes strong. In addition, they may experience interpersonal conflict with

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: chefcook@khu.ac.kr (H.S. Jung), hhyun@khu.ac.kr (H.H. Yoon).

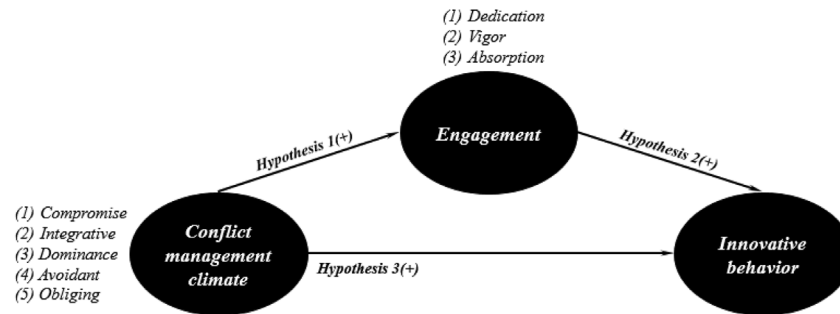


Fig. 1. A proposed model of conflict management climate, engagement, and innovative behavior.

supervisors, colleagues, and customers when they engage in a service placement. It is not possible for them to work without conflict, which can have a considerable cost with regard to the time it takes to be resolved. For this reason, settling conflicts through certain solutions may be markedly significant in the success or failure of a hotel. Despite its importance, such research has been scarce. We decided to investigate whether employee engagement and innovative behavior is or is not effectively controlled, depending on the perceptions of employees regarding the conflict management climate of the organization (Fig. 1).

1.1. Literature review and conceptual model

1.1.1. Conflict management climate in the hospitality sector

On a systematic basis, an organization is an organic body having unique characteristics that are different from those of a group, which can be described as ambience or climate (Schneider, 1980). Climate can be defined as the “relatively enduring quality of the internal environment of the organization that (a) is experienced by its members; (b) influences their behavior, and (c) can be described in term of values of a particular set of characteristics (or attributes) of the environment” (Tagiuri & Litwin, 1968, p. 27). Climate is significant and should be addressed because it is closely related to an organization’s performance and the satisfaction of its members (Pritchard & Karasick, 1973). While there is a lack of scholarly research on the conflict management climate in the hospitality sector, this issue has been a topic of interest to scholar-practitioners in this industry. Satyam, Sharma, and Arora (2012) observed that appropriate conflict management by hotel management showed positive effects on various performance indicators, such as productivity, interpersonal relationships, absence from work, and effective use of organizational resources. Yusuf and Anuar (2014) looked at the effects of conflict responses on teams in hotels and identified that the better the conflict coping ability, the better the overall team performance. In addition, they noted that conflicts occurring in the hotel industry were due to differences in opinions resulting from long-term impersonal relationship with coworkers or superiors, oral attacks, or dissatisfaction. Afful-Broni (2015) studied hotel employees in Ghana and reported that the employees experienced conflict in the workplace because of rumors, anxiety that they might lose their jobs, and feeling that they were being excluded from promotion, and that organizational performance could be achieved only when such conflict was effectively managed. Sepehri, Batman, Kingir, and Arpacı (2014) performed interviews with hotel executives that showed the most serious conflict arose from inconsistent goals and lack of communication among employees, and suggested that organizational efforts are required in order to achieve positive results from conflict. In particular, in hotels, services are provided by human resources. Also, the hotel business has many customers as well as many employees. Therefore, high level of conflicts exists compared with other companies because of the labor-intensive character of the business, person-to-

person relationship among employees, and interdependent tasks. Yirik et al. (2015) investigated conflict management among Turkey’s high-class hoteliers and reported that an effective conflict management system played an important role in developing good relations between employers and employees, taking precautions with regard to conflict, and seeking appropriate solutions.

1.2. Model development and hypotheses

1.2.1. Conflict management climate, engagement, and innovative behavior

According to the traditional approach, conflicts are destructive and should be avoided in an organization. However, from the behavioral approach, they are part of organizational life and should be accepted and are even essential in an organization. From an interactional approach, conflicts occurring in an organization are inevitable (Yirik et al., 2015). Accordingly, the present study attempted to examine conflicts from behavioral and interactional perspectives. Conflict is a type of social phenomenon that inevitably occurs when people form relationships and interact with each other. Because thoughts, values, attitudes, and behaviors of members of an organization cannot be reconciled unanimously, conflict is inescapable and natural in interpersonal interactions (Thomas, 1976). Conflict is a natural phenomenon caused by being different; it is not a problem of right or wrong. Conflict in an organization, consequently, can be described as a situation in which there is interference with individuals and groups doing activities in an organization because of clashes resulting from incompatible desires, distribution of tasks and resources, or hostile behaviors (Stoner, 1978). Conflict is “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals” (Miller, 2006, p. 194). Effective conflict management can be defined as an activity of coping with and alleviating tension between people in a certain situation (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Michael, 2001). According to Caldas, Broaddus, and Winch (2016), effective conflict management is an activity or intention responding to a conflict situation with constructive communication and proper solutions. In this study, Thomas and Kilmann (1975)’s MODE scale has been adapted, and the traits of conflict management climate have been divided into the categories of compromise, integrative, dominance, avoidant, and obliging, which can be defined as follows: (1) Compromise: a way of negotiating interests with the other party in order to keep the balance between the organization and the individual; (2) Integrative: a way of developing a combined method by both parties to solve the relevant problem by correctly grasping the gut issue within the organization; (3) Dominance: a way of forcing the obedience of the other party by using official authority for his or her own interest; (4) Avoidant: a way that is selected when sidestepping the relevant conflict is advantageous by keeping a dis-obliging manner toward meeting the interests of both himself or herself and the other party; and (5) Obliging: a way of conceding or giving up

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