Optimizing team conflict dynamics for high performance teamwork

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ABSTRACT

In the current review we consider theory and research involving task, relationship, and process conflict. We examine relationships with team performance and innovation with an eye toward recent meta-analytic findings. We then review recent research investigating the interplay of team conflict types in the form of team conflict profiles. We advance the Team Conflict Dynamics Model to connect conflict profiles with key variables in the nomological net: psychological safety, conflict management, and team performance. This model considers dynamics by examining conflict transformations over time, reciprocal effects of conflict management processes, and negative feedback loops. Moreover, the model incorporates contextual features involving team design and the organizational environment. This review is needed in order to integrate recent meta-analytic findings, conflict profiles, conflict dynamics, and contextual factors into a parsimonious model useful for guiding future research and practice.

1. Introduction

Organizational work teams are by definition comprised of members that work interdependently and count on one another to make task-, goal-, and outcome-related progress (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Given that conflict is inevitable wherever interdependencies occur (Deutsch, 1949), conflict in teamwork is a regular occurrence. Because these conflicts have powerful implications for team functioning and effectiveness (DeChurch, Mesmer-Magnus, & Doty, 2013), it is not surprising that there is a long history of research and ongoing work on this topic (see reviews by Korsgaard, Jeong, Mahony, & Pitariu, 2008; Loughry & Amason, 2014).

The current work moves beyond the existing narrative reviews and is needed for several reasons. First, although Korsgaard et al. (2008) provided a review on the multilevel dynamics of team conflict, there have been a number of important recent developments. These largely involve new meta-analyses that shed important light on the benefits, detriments, and contingencies of conflict. Second, Korsgaard et al.'s focus was restricted to antecedents of conflict in teams whereas our focus is on new meta-analytic evidence of conflict's consequences, namely, conflict's implications for performance and innovation. Third, reviews by Loughry and Amason (2014) and Bradley, Anderson, Baur, and Klotz (2015) focused on identifying conditions in which task conflict is most effective. We build on this by drawing from recent empirical work examining team conflict profiles, which describe more clearly the patterns of conflict that occur in teams (O'Neill, McLarnon, Hoffart, Woodley & Allen, in press). Fourth, we theoretically examine the dynamics of team conflict in order to advance research on how conflict profiles are related to other key variables over time. In this way, we further build upon existing reviews, which have called for development of theoretical models that incorporate the role of conflict dynamics given that conflict occurs across multiple episodes of interaction (e.g., Korsgaard et al., 2008). Fifth, the previous reviews do not consider team design or organizational environment factors that represent contextual features with implications for team

effectiveness (Hackman, 1987). Ignoring such factors would lead to an incomplete understanding of conflict in teams (Todorova, Bear, & Weingart, 2014). Thus, this review is needed to advance a model of team conflict that captures recent scientific developments, identifies priorities for future research, and provides implications for practice.

2. "Marketing and Communications Team"

We will refer to a hypothetical team throughout the current review in order to emphasize the practical implications of the material. The "Marketing and Communications Team" is an 11-member team responsible for various marketing and communication initiatives within a large enterprise organization in the financial services industry. The team has been fortunate as membership has been stable for several years and the team has a mix of experience levels across members. The team has struggled, however, to find time for exploring constructive conflicts involving task-related issues and the team members are finding themselves on a "meeting treadmill." Specifically, endless meetings within and external to the team are scheduled to deal with day-to-day decision-making as well as to consult to other units in the organization on marketing and communications matters. This has led to back-to-back meetings on most days. Further, members have noted that meetings are scheduled with too little time to prepare and reflect beforehand, and therefore the viewpoints expressed during meetings are not always well informed. Nevertheless, the meetings are highly task-focused, resulting in a considerable degree of task conflict as team members debate proposed solutions to the decisions facing the team. However, because of the emphasis on the task, the development of interpersonal relationships is rarely prioritized. This has given rise to a few miscommunications or misinterpretations that have led to awkward and uncomfortable interpersonal interactions. The team members also indicated that they needed to revisit roles and responsibilities to gain insight into each member's unique skill set. In addition, as other organizational units seek support from the Marketing and Communications Team, the team members are sometimes unsure of how to prioritize or determine clearly who on the team should be involved and in what capacity. This could be partly attributed to the lack of formal strategic planning or strategic discussions during the past several years. This Marketing and Communications Team will be referred to throughout the review in order to emphasize the practical issues as they could apply to teams in organizations.

3. Background of conflict states

3.1. Early conflict research

Early research in organizations emphasized two themes with respect to intragroup conflict. Guetzkow and Gyr (1954) considered the extent to which people's interactions involved differences of opinion that were either substantive (i.e., intellectual) or personal (i.e., affective) in nature. Pondy (1967) noted that conflict can be functional or dysfunctional, as it can take the form of both affective (e.g., anxiety) and cognitive states (e.g., incompatible ideas). Cosier and Rose (1977) examined the potential advantages of cognitive conflict (e.g., probing cognitive differences), which was based on seminal work by Brehmer (1976), who treated cognitive conflict as "differences of *policy*" (p. 986, emphasis in original). Elsewhere, Argyris (1962) and Rapoport (1960) argued for the harmful effects of personal conflicts within organizations. A reading of this early research suggests themes involving potential detriments of person-based conflict and potential benefits of task-driven conflict. Indeed, several studies revealed that teams employing decision-making techniques that stimulated debate involving diverse and opposing perspectives, as in task conflict, chose the most effective decisions and solutions (e.g., Churchman, 1971; Cosier, 1978; Deutsch, 1973; Mason, 1969; Tjosvold, 1982).

The early examinations of team conflict were followed by many studies that used a variety of different designs and conceptualizations of team conflict (e.g., Nemeth, 1986; Pinkley, 1990; Ross, 1989; Schmidt & Kochan, 1972; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Ragan, 1986; Schwenk & Cosier, 1980; Tjosvold, 1991). Work on developing a common conceptualization of conflict was undertaken independently by two research groups who came to similar conclusions regarding two of the dimensions involved. Amason and colleagues (Amason, 1996; Amason & Schweiger, 1994; Amason et al., 1995) referred to cognitive and affective conflict, whereas Jehn (1992, 1995) used the terms task and relationship conflict, respectively. Task, or cognitive, conflict involves perceived incompatibilities with respect to the ideas and proposed solutions to the issue at hand. Relationship, or affective, conflict involves perceived incompatibilities with respect to personalities and interpersonal interactions.

Ultimately Jehn's (1995) terms were generally preferred, as evidenced by adoption of the task and relationship conflict labels in subsequent meta-analyses (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a; Hulsheger, Anderson, & Salgado, 2009) and recently by Amason (e.g., Loughry & Amason, 2014). There are two potential reasons for this. First, Jehn (1997) expanded on the two-dimensional model of conflict by adding a third dimension she called process conflict (see also Shah & Jehn, 1993). Process conflict involves perceived incompatibilities regarding roles, responsibilities, timelines, duties, and resource allocation. Second, Jehn (1995, 1997) advanced psychometrically-sound measures of task, relationship, and process conflict, which were adopted in most subsequent research, including studies conducted by Amason's group (e.g., Amason, 1996). Accordingly, researchers have predominantly used the terms task, relationship, and process conflict when considering conflict types, which has become known as the tripartite model of team conflict (e.g., Behfar, Perterson, Mannix, & Trochim, 2008).

3.2. Benefits and detriments of conflict

3.2.1. Rationale

Theory and conventional thought suggests that task conflict can be beneficial for team effectiveness because it promotes