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Organizational conflict beyond efficiency and productivity

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Abstract

The traditional emphasis of conflict theory and research has been on conflict management tactics and their impact on individual and team performance in the workplace. The "soft" outcomes of employee health, happiness, work satisfaction, and loyalty to the company have received far less research. It's regrettable that conflict theory and research have been siloed from other fields like organizational psychology and organizational behavior. Not knowing how treatments affect not just conflict and effectiveness but also satisfaction and well-being is a barrier to applied work. This introductory piece discusses these issues at length. Each article in this Special Issue delves further into one of these topics, illuminating how conflict theory and research might be applied to the field of organizational psychology as a whole.

Introduction

Although the relevance of conflict at work is difficult to underestimate, our understanding of the effects organizational conflict may have is very limited and restricted. Many research have been undertaken to grasp the complexities of conflict and negotiation processes, both in the social psychology laboratory and within work teams in companies, in an effort to understand the ways in which workers and supervisors handle conflict in the workplace. Conflict at work can even be functional and result in increased performance under certain circumstances (De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999; Thomas, 1992; Tjosvold, 1998). Over the past 20 years, an increasing number of studies have considered the possible consequences conflict in work teams has on individual and work-team effectiveness and productivity.

These developments have, however, also resulted in a rather one-sided understanding of the consequences organizational conflict can have. Although by now we have a fairly well-developed and researched understanding of conflict management and its effects on productivity, far less attention has been devoted to "soft" outcomes including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, and individual health and well-being. This state of affairs is unfortunate because it isolates conflict theory and research from broader issues in organizational psychology and organizational behaviour research. It is also unfortunate because it impedes applied work in that it remains uncertain how interventions influence not only conflict and effectiveness, but also satisfaction and well-being. Practitioners may feel uncomfortable with proposed interventions because raising performance through conflict stimulation (for examples, see Van de Vliert, 1997) could simultaneously lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and thus inadvertently stimulate absenteeism and involuntary turnover, and stimulate deviant workplace behaviours including sabotage and bullying (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

In this article we do three things. First, we briefly review the insights about conflict that conflict management research and theory have revealed thus far. Second, and more importantly, we provide an overview of the variables and processes that are key in organizational psychology yet isolated from conflict theory and research. Third, we briefly introduce the four articles that follow this introductory article and that each in their own way try to redress the problems noted above. Together, this set of studies provides a first step towards a more integrated theory about organizational conflict.

STATE OF THE ART: MANAGING CONFLICT TO SECURE EFFECTIVE WORK

Although a myriad of definitions have been suggested, organizational psychologists more and more agree that conflict is best viewed as a process that begins when an individual or group perceives differences and opposition between him- or herself and another individual or group about interests, beliefs, or values that matter to him or her (De Dreu et al., 1999; Wall & Callister, 1995). Perceived differences and opposition evolve around work- and task-related issues, or around socioemotional and relationship issues (e.g., Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). Task conflicts involve disputes about the distribution and allocation of resources, opposed views with regard to the procedures and policies that should be used or adhered to, or disagreeing judgements and interpretations of facts. Relationship conflicts involve irritation about personal taste and interpersonal style, disagreements about political preferences, or opposing values (De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997).

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The ways people manage their conflicts can be infinite. Research and theory converges on the taxonomy advanced in Blake and Mouton's (1964) Conflict Management Grid, and its close cousin Dual Concern Theory (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; see also Thomas, 1992). Although labelling differs across theories, four different ways of managing conflict are distinguished—contending (or forcing), conceding (or yielding), avoiding (comprising inaction and withdrawing), and collaborating (or problem solving). Contending—trying to impose one's will onto the other side—involves threats and bluffs, persuasive arguments, and positional commitments. Conceding, which is oriented towards accepting and incorporating the other's will, involves unilateral concessions, unconditional promises, and offering help. Avoiding, which involves a passive stance, is aimed at reducing and downplaying the importance of the conflict issues, and at suppressing thinking about them. Collaborating, finally, is oriented towards achieving an agreement that satisfies both one's own and the other's aspirations as much as possible, and involves an exchange of information about priorities and preferences, showing insights, and making tradeoffs between important and unimportant issues.

Which strategy an individual adopts depends on his or her low or high concern for self combined with his or her high or low concern for other. Again, the labels for these two dimensions vary: Concern for self is sometimes labelled "resistance to concession making" (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992), "concern for the task" (Blake & Mouton, 1964), or "assertiveness" (Thomas, 1992). Sometimes, concern for other is labelled "concern for people" (Blake & Mouton, 1964), or "cooperativeness" (Thomas, 1992). The specific labels used, or the specific ways these dimensions are operationalized, does not seem to influence their effects (De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000). What remains is that the specific combination of concern for self, and for other, determines the conflict management strategies adopted. Thus, avoiding results from low dual concern whereas collaborating results from high dual concern. Contending results from high concern for self, and low concern for other, whereas conceding results from low concern for self combined with high concern for other.

Self-concern and other-concern are predicted by one's personality and the situation (De Dreu et al., 2000; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997). Traits influencing these dimensions include social value orientation, power motivation, and need for affiliation. States affecting self- and other-concern derive from incentives, instructional primes, time pressures, level of aspiration, and power preponderance. Reviewing these traits and states is beyond the scope of the current presentation (see De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003; Pruitt, 1998; Van de Vliert, 1997). What is important is that self-concern and other-concern derive from both the person and the situation, and that conflict management strategies thus derive from both the person and the situation. Conflict management, therefore, is not simply a personality characteristic.

INDIVIDUAL AND WORK GROUP EFFECTIVENESS

Apart from analysing the (origins of the) ways employees manage conflict at work, conflict researchers have examined the possible effects conflict has on individual and work-team effectiveness and productivity. Two perspectives surface in the literature—an information-processing perspective, and a conflict typology framework.

According to the *information-processing perspective*, conflict has an inverted U-shape relationship with cognitive flexibility, creative thinking, and problem-solving capacities. This perspective is based on Yerkes and Dodson's (1908) classic demonstration of an inverted U-shaped relation between need level and task achievement, and the idea that some stress is better for task performance than no stress or (too) high levels of stress (Broadbent, 1972). Walton (1969) likewise argued that at low tension levels, conflict leads to inactivity and avoidance, neglect of information, and low joint performance. At high tension levels, it reduces the capacity to perceive, process, and evaluate information. At moderate tension levels, however, conflict parties will seek and integrate information, consider more alternatives, and experience a strong impulse to improve the situation.

The information-processing perspective thus implies that the relationship between conflict and information processing is curvilinear so that performance benefits from moderate levels of conflict, but not from either low or high levels of conflict. Compared to low levels of conflict, moderate levels arouse employees to consider and scrutinize the problem at hand, to generate ideas, and to select and implement adequate problem solutions. At higher levels of conflict, however, the high amount of arousal and stress, and of interpersonal strain and mistrust, prohibits people from focusing on the problem, from open-mindedly generating ideas, and from jointly selecting and implementing adequate problem solutions. Walton (1969) has already provided some qualitative support for the curvilinear relationship between conflict and performance. Using quantitative methodologies, Jehn (1995) found support for such a curvilinear relationship between conflict and individual effectiveness as rated by supervisors. De Dreu (in press) observed

such a curvilinear relationship between conflict in work teams, and work-team innovations in two different studies involving a heterogeneous sample of teams from a variety of organizations. Thus, albeit fairly small, the evidence for the information-processing perspective is quite promising.

The *conflict typology framework* relies on the distinction between task conflict and relationship conflict. In essence, it argues that relationship conflict interferes with performing tasks, and thus lowers effectiveness and innovativeness. Task conflict, however, is thought to trigger information processing and to lead participants to consider multiple perspectives and various problem solutions. Task conflict prevents moving to premature consensus, and thus should enhance decision-making quality, individual creativity, and work-team effectiveness in general.

The hypothesis that relationship conflict reduces effectiveness of performance has received ample support (see, e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b; Jehn, 1995, 1997; Murnighan & Conlon, 1991). However, a recent meta-analysis of the conflict-performance literature provided little support for the hypothesis that task-conflict enhances performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b). This has spurred an interest in developing so-called contingency models, in which task conflict and relationship conflict have different effects on work-team effectiveness depending on specific circumstances, including team tasks, team climate, conflict norms, and conflict management strategies (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; see also Simons & Peterson, 2000; Tjosvold, 1998).

EXPANDING THE FIELD: SATISFACTION, WELL-BEING, AND OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Much of the work on conflict has, as mentioned, adapted a rather myopic perspective and focused on relatively short-term consequences for individual and work-team effectiveness. To take an example from nearby, consider the study by De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001). In that study relationship conflict in work teams was measured along with the ways these teams managed their relationship conflicts and their work-team effectiveness. The results from this cross-sectional study reveal that dealing with relationship conflict through collaborating and contending is related to much poorer effectiveness than avoiding as a way to manage relationship conflict at all. The authors concluded that avoiding and inaction in relationship conflict and a “let’s agree to disagree” strategy may be much more effective than researchers and practitioners tend to assume.

Whereas the conclusions reached by De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) may be valid and useful, it should be emphasized that their cross-sectional study spanned a time period of only 6 months (the time frame participants had to adopt when answering questions). The study was not prospective in nature, and we cannot know whether avoiding and inaction in the face of relationship conflict might, in fact, have relatively positive effects on team effectiveness in the short run, but highly detrimental consequences in the long run. The detrimental consequences may be in terms of team effectiveness, but they may also be in terms of reduced job satisfaction, lowered identification with the team, reduced commitment to contribute, and ill-health. Ample research in organizational psychology, as well as common sense, tells us that such outcomes easily offset the positive effects one may witness in the short run.

The above example is a rule rather than an exception in the domain of conflict and negotiation research. As mentioned, this and the following articles consider both theoretically and empirically what other consequences conflict at work can have, besides its well-documented effects on individual and work-team effectiveness. We first take a look at satisfaction. We then move on and review recent work on conflict and individual health and well-being.

JOB SATISFACTION

In a recent meta-analysis, De Dreu and Weingart (2003a) summarized 15 studies of work teams in which conflict as well as job satisfaction was measured. Their results showed a strong and negative correlation between relationship conflict and satisfaction, and a moderate and negative correlation between task conflict and satisfaction. From this meta-analysis it thus follows that there are relations between conflict and satisfaction. What we do not know is how these relations come about—does conflict impact job satisfaction, or does job satisfaction lead to conflict? Perhaps there is a recursive cycle, with satisfaction influencing conflict and conflict subsequently influencing job satisfaction. Finally, it may well be that there are third variables involved. Perhaps conflict and job satisfaction are to some degree the product of one and the same stable individual difference.

Locke (1976) defined job satisfaction as a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences. Judge and Hulin (1993) have identified three different approaches to job satisfaction. The first views job satisfaction as resulting from *stable individual differences* that could even have their roots in the individual’s genetic inheritance (e.g., Griffin & Bateman, 1986). The second approach sees job satisfaction as the result of *social information processing*—job satisfaction is construed and developed out of experiences and information provided by others at work (e.g., Salancik & Pfeffer,

1977). The third approach is a *job-as-information perspective*. It argues that a person's job satisfaction is influenced directly by the characteristics of his or her job, and the extent to which those characteristics match what that person wants in a job (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

The three perspectives on job satisfaction each suggest a different prediction with regard to the causal relationship between conflict and job satisfaction. The individual differences perspective suggests the possibility that some people more easily feel happy in their jobs, and less easily get into conflict and disputes with others. Take as an example individual differences in positive versus negative affectivity. Whereas some people have high chronic levels of positive affectivity, others have relatively high chronic levels of negative affectivity. Whereas the former feel calm, happy, patient, and optimistic, the latter tend to feel down, depressed, sad, nervous, and unhappy. An important hypothesis to test is that those with high levels of chronic positive affectivity are (a) less likely to get into conflicts with others and, if they do, to manage these in rather constructive ways, and entirely independently, and (b) more likely to feel happy about their jobs, and life in general.

The social information-processing perspective on job satisfaction suggests conflict may directly influence job satisfaction (e.g., Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). Interestingly, it is not so much the focal individual's conflicts that matter, but instead the conflicts he or she witnesses in the workplace. Employees working in groups or departments with relatively high levels of conflict around them may come to conclude that there is a lot wrong with the department, the people in it, and the jobs they are performing. This in turn lowers their positive feelings about their own job.

The job-as-information perspective, finally, suggests that job satisfaction acts as a precursor to conflict in the work place. Within this framework, it is the features of the job itself that produce more or less satisfaction with that job. Low job satisfaction thus is a result of the job, and not so much of conflicts at work. However, as we will see in the next section, low job satisfaction, and low levels of well-being in general, may very well trigger task as well as relationship conflicts between oneself and one's colleagues or supervisor.

Conclusion

The collection of articles in the Special Issue expands conflict theory in a number of ways. Besides the specific conclusions that derive from each of the articles separately, we also see emerging support for the general contention that the traditional focus on conflict, conflict management, and individual and work-team effectiveness incorrectly and unnecessarily narrows the width and breadth of conflict theory. We hope the articles in this Special Issue serve as a first solid step towards a theory of conflict at work that is not only internally consistent and empirically supported, but also well-connected to other relevant processes and phenomena in organizational psychology and organizational behaviour.

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