

A Review of Theoretical Perspectives on Team Conflict Effects

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Preferred stream: Identities and Employee Relations

Introduction

The view of team conflicts has evolved from “destructive and should be avoided” to “can be beneficial in certain situations if managed well” (Mikkelsen and Clegg, 2019). Nevertheless, it is ‘notoriously difficult, both theoretically and empirically’ to clarify conflict’s negative and positive effects (Weingart et al., 2015: 235). While many meta-analyses have provided substantial evidence of the relationship between conflict and outcomes (e.g., De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; O’Neill et al., 2013; de Wit et al., 2012; DeChurch et al., 2013), there is not yet a review capturing the theoretical streams in the team conflict effect literature. This paper intends to fill in this gap by synthesizing the evolution and shift of the major theoretical perspectives.

Summary and critique of main theories

Conflict type paradigm

The paradigm is the study of conflict effects by types (e.g., task conflict, relationship conflict) (Jehn, 1994, 1995, 1997). Despite its wide acceptance, the paradigm is criticized for overly focusing on the perception of conflict content while ignoring the expressions and behavior during conflict events (Weingart et al., 2015). It also lacks insight into the origin and development of conflict due to its ‘bird’s eye view’ (e.g., Shah et al., 2021).

Conflict state-process framework

The framework suggests that exploring conflict states (e.g., task conflict) and conflict processes

(conflict management styles) together can better predict team outcomes (DeChurch et al., 2013).

DeChurch et al.'s (2013) meta-analytic regression results of 45 studies show that conflict processes explain up to 13% more variance in team performance and affective outcome when controlling for conflict states.

Team conflict profile

The theory describes team conflict as a combination of different levels of multiple conflict types (O'Neill et al., 2018). It represents a significant leap from studying the effects of individual conflicts to co-occurring conflicts (O'Neill and McLarnon, 2018). Task-dominated profiles mostly had positive outcomes, while relationship- and process-dominated profiles mostly had negative effects (Jehn and Chatman, 2000; O'Neill et al., 2017).

Conflict asymmetry

The theory suggests asymmetry among team members: People do not necessarily perceive or feel the same about conflict, or manage conflict the same way. People can also have different involvements, engagements, and infections by conflict (e.g., Jehn et al., 2012; Jehn et al., 2013).

The theory reduces biases from viewing the team as a whole. Empirically, individual-level asymmetries mostly have negative outcomes, while group-level asymmetries mostly have positive outcomes (Jehn et al., 2015; Rispens et al., 2021).

Conflict dynamics in time

Measuring conflict and impact at one point in time was considered to be from a static cross-sectional perspective (Okhuysen and Richardson, 2007). This theory addresses the dynamics and changing nature of conflict studies from several perspectives (Cronin and Bezrukova, 2019).

First, the *team life cycle* perspective is combined with the *team conflict profile* to unfold

how conflict profiles evolve over a team's life cycle (O'Neill et al., 2018). Second, the *conflict contagion* and *conflict concentration* concepts suggest that conflict scopes can become smaller or larger (Shah et al., 2021). Third, the *conflict history* and *conflict memory* concepts suggest that conflict at a point should not be isolated from past conflict events and people's memories of those events, since they can influence subsequent perceptions and behaviors towards conflict (Jehn et al., 2013). Fourth, the *three-time unit* explains the occurrence, change, and accumulation of conflict in time dimensions: *move*, *episode*, and *period* (Cronin and Bezrukova, 2019). It illustrates how conflict states and conflict processes are linked and function in time (Paletz et al., 2011).

Conflict expression theory

The theory illustrates a conflict spiral, in which person A's conflict expression will influence person B's perception, reaction, and expression. Person B's expression will in turn influence person A's perception, reaction, and expression (Weingart et al., 2015). The conflict spiral continues as the two persons keep interacting. The theory builds upon *conflict state-process theory*, *conflict asymmetry*, and *conflict dynamics in time* perspectives. It considers both the states and process of conflicts and goes beyond only considering conflict outcomes by types.

Conclusion

Team conflict effects theories are interrelated and mutually reinforcing (e.g., Humphrey et al., 2017). More precise theorizations and operationalizations of conflicts are expected (e.g., *system dynamics framework*, Cronin and Bezrukova, 2019).

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