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Evaluating Conflict between Employees: Exploring the Costs to an Organization

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Conflict negotiation is often focused on the relationships between individuals. Research in the area of conflict negotiation within organizations is typically centered on how conflicts occur in the workplace. To that end, characteristics of conflicts are evaluated to determine how these facets of conflict might be used as a means of successful negotiation (Sanchez-Burks, Neuman, Ybarra, Kopelman, Park, & Goh, 2008). Within the past decade, conflict negotiation experts have begun to focus more attention on the emotions elicited by individuals when conflicts arise, and how these emotions affect the way in which people attempt to resolve interpersonal issues. By focusing on interpersonal relationships as a basis for conflict negotiation, managers may reduce organizational conflict and reduce interpersonal battles that harm the productivity and safety of all employees (Steinel, Van Kleef, & Harinck, 2008).

Problem Statement

Over the past decade, the focus of conflict management research has shifted from an interest in the root causes of organizational clashes and resolution strategies, to a concern for bullying and traumatic events in the workplace. In some respects, the new focus on workplace bullying has coincided with the larger social concerns about bullying and the ways in which people respond to traumatic events perpetrated by others (Bulutlar & Oz, 2009; Heames & Harvey, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Recent research clearly indicates that workplace conflict results in lower productivity, absenteeism, and even additional sources of conflict between employees, which may escalate to violence (Hershcovis & Barling, 2009; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; LaVan, & Martin, 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). As a result, there is a need to revisit and renew research on conflict causes and strategies to better resolve conflict at its inception. Without this knowledge, organizational leaders will continue to struggle with unresolved safety and productivity issues within the workplace.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if scenario-based training using the Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) would provide airline employees strategies to mitigate conflict. By focusing on interpersonal relationships as a basis for conflict negotiation, employees can develop strategies to create better working relationships while minimizing interpersonal battles that harm productivity. These interpersonal conflicts can result in lower productivity and threaten the safety of the work environment.

A sample of 228 people within the aviation industry completed a pre-training survey, participated in scenario-based SDI training, and then completed a post-training survey regarding the effectiveness of the SDI to help them manage

conflict. Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was conducted to determine how conflict management training, based on the Strength Deployment Inventory assessment, affected cognitive improvement in handling and successfully managing conflict situations.

Research Question

There was one research question used in this study. The question required a quantitative analysis. The research question guiding this study was:

RQ1: How will conflict management training, based on the Strength Deployment Inventory assessment, affect cognitive improvement in handling and successfully managing conflict situations?

H_a1: Participants receiving conflict management training, based on the Strength Deployment Inventory assessment, will demonstrate cognitive improvement in handling and successfully managing conflict situations.

$H1_0$: Participants receiving conflict management training, based on the Strength Deployment Inventory assessment, will not demonstrate cognitive improvement in handling and successfully managing conflict situations.

Literature Review

Conflict is unavoidable in organizations, but it is important that leaders promote opportunities for employees to learn to manage conflict effectively. This is particularly important in the airline industry, where conflict can result in challenges to the safety of passengers and crew. Over the past 50 years, seminal research has been conducted on the subject of conflict management within organizations. Some of the research from the 1960s examined conflict management from the basic viewpoint that it involved incompatibilities between people who worked together in teams (Greer, Jehn, & Mannix, 2008). Another important development in conflict management research came in the late 1960s, when Pondy (1967) concluded that conflict in the workplace is episodic and comes in cycles as people interact with each other. Pondy also argued that conflict in the workplace was benign because of its episodic nature. There was no major harm that occurred to individuals within organizations or to the organizations because of the conflict that occurred. In later years; however, with changes in the research regarding conflict management, Pondy changed some of his conclusions regarding what he viewed as the benign nature of conflict (De Dreu, 2008). No longer was conflict believed to be benign. Instead, Pondy and other researchers

noted conflict could cause problems for organizations because of the interactions and changes in thinking that resulted.

During the late 1970s, researchers placed more emphasis on the issue of conflict management with regards to communications and management styles. Researchers such as Rahim and Bonama analyzed conflict management styles (Holmes & Marra, 2004). These researchers were followed by many other researchers between the late 1970s through the new millennium, who examined the intersection between management styles and outcomes of conflict negotiations in the workplace. Some of these researchers examined the actual settings in which conflicts and conflict negotiations took place in order to determine how the setting affected outcomes (Holmes & Marra, 2004).

The 1970s and 1980s also brought about research on the rationality of conflict in the workplace and the decisions that organizational players, such as employees and managers, make in terms of how they handle conflict. Etzioni and Friedman were used as the basis for additional investigations regarding the actions of people in organizations and how they made decisions in relation to conflicts with others (as cited in Ridley-Duff, 2008). Today, much of the focus of conflict management research is on bullying and traumatic events in the workplace (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). The larger goal of the research; however, seems to be the same: to predict how conflict will impact relationships and performances within organizations (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix, & Trochim, 2008).

History of Conflict Negotiations

The history of conflict negotiations within the literature mirrors the progression of the seminal research regarding the larger issue concept of conflict management. Modern conflict negotiation began with a focus on attempting to create a theoretical basis and even a theoretical justification for the work of conflict negotiation and particularly mediation (Kressel, 2009). The development of theoretical perspectives and concepts was also viewed as an important part of making conflict negotiation a true part of the larger literature on conflict and conflict management. It was the development of theories about how to negotiate and mediate conflicts within organizations and between individuals that allow for a greater understanding of conflict negotiation (Donohue, 2007).

Research in the area of conflict negotiation in the workplace has focused on how conflicts occur, and how the characteristics of conflicts can be used as a means of successfully negotiating (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2008). Within the past decade, conflict negotiation researchers have placed increased emphasis on the emotions elicited by individuals when conflicts arise (Steinel et al., 2008). Another area of interest is the way in which companies can address the grievances

of both individuals, as well as groups of people such as union members, who may feel they are not treated fairly by corporate leaders. The focus of such research has been both about how these grievances begin in the first place and how negotiations can be carried out to end the grievances and the feelings of conflict with organizations to minimize loss of productivity (Budd & Colvin, 2008). Even more, the researchers noted specific ways in which organizational performance is impacted before, during, and after the negotiation process and how organization members feel about the outcome of the negotiation (Budd & Colvin, 2008).

The history of conflict negotiation has led to the current state of the literature in which there is a focus on inequalities - both real and perceived - within organizations and a connection to conflict negotiations with the larger ethical framework of the organization (Strum, 2009). From the standpoint of organizations, the focus is on maintaining higher ethical standards in the ways employees are treated by colleagues and managers. As conflicts arise, leaders must have the ability to negotiate conflicts so that productivity and other detriments to the organizational environment are avoided.

Response to Conflict

Research conducted by Somech, Desivilya, and Lidogoster (2009) demonstrated that a cooperative conflict management style as opposed to a competitive style promotes team performance within organizations. Other researchers have addressed the idea that companies can respond to conflict by either focusing on interpersonal relationships with employees or focusing solely on the economic benefits and consequences of taking specific actions to end the conflict (Lee, 2008). The conclusion that has been drawn from the research is that companies should focus on fairness with regards to a concern about interpersonal issues and economic issues in order to achieve a perception of credibility and fairness among employees and other stakeholders (Van Gramberg & Teicher, 2006).

Hoffmann (2009) argued in his research on conflict management that organizations should look beyond formal resolutions, such as taking an action to terminate an employee or informal resolution strategies, such as ignoring the conflict and hoping it will go away, and think about the larger issues of how employees might attempt to resolve problems. Resolution options such as talking to employees in an informal and friendly setting should be considered. In this way, organization leaders can determine the best response to conflict, particularly if that conflict is not necessarily with the organization, but rather an interpersonal conflict between employees. A leader should strive to resolve a conflict in a way

that is considered acceptable to all parties without taking formal actions against an employee whenever possible.

On a larger level, the suggestion has been made within the academic literature that the response to conflict in an organization should not be to merely stop conflict and try to prevent it from occurring again. Instead, organizations should approach conflict as a way to demonstrate both accountability, as well as effectiveness in the way in which conflict can be resolved (Rowe, 2009). Companies might consider implementing an ombudsman or other similar formalized position in which a conflict mediator is appointed. The benefit of creating an independent ombudsman position within an organization is the ability to have a system of checks and balances. The person in this position can examine all of the facts and concerns when conflicts arise and then make an unbiased decision that is based on ethical standards and practices (Rowe, 2009).

One of the reasons for the consideration of a formalized conflict resolution position in an organization, even when more informal resolution methods might be used, is because research indicates that emotion can play an important part in the response that occurs to conflict in the workplace. Specifically, researchers have found that negotiators actually make concessions to the other party in a conflict situation when there is a perception that the other person is experiencing disappointment or worry about the conflict. However, negotiators are likely to make fewer concessions if they perceive the other party is experiencing guilt or regret (Van Kleef, De Drew, & Manstead, 2006).

Relationship Awareness

It is normal human nature to attribute motive to others' behaviour. Relationship Awareness Theory is a model for accurately understanding and inferring the motive behind the one's own and other's behaviour. Understanding Relationship Awareness Theory gives people the ability to build more effective personal and professional relationships. It helps them to thoroughly understanding the underlying motives of themselves and others under two conditions:

1. When things are going well (the Motivational Value System)
2. During conflict (the Conflict Sequence)

Understanding Relationship Awareness theory allows people to recognize and choose their behaviors to protect their own values, while also taking into account the values of others. Relationship Awareness Theory is based on the premises that behaviour is driven by motivation to achieve self-worth, and that our motivation changes in conflict. Moreover, the theory looks at how we

establish and maintain relationships to ensure our own values while also protecting the values of others.

Relationship Awareness Theory identifies seven personality types known as Motivational Value Systems (MVS). These are presented as positive strivings for self-worth by adults in relationships, and include:

Altruistic–Nurturing: Concern for the protection, growth, and welfare of others

Assertive–Directing: Concern for task accomplishment and concern for organization of people, time, money and any other resources to achieve desired results

Analytic–Autonomizing: Concern for assurance that things have been properly thought out and concern for meaningful order being established and maintained

Flexible–Cohering: Concern for flexibility… concern for the welfare of the group…concern for the members of the group and for belonging in the group

Assertive–Nurturing: Concern for the protection, growth, and welfare of others through task accomplishment and leadership

Judicious–Competing: Concern for intelligent assertiveness, justice, leadership, order, and fairness in competition

Cautious–Supporting: Concern for affirming and developing self-sufficiency in self and others… concern for thoughtful helpfulness with regard for justice (Porter, 1996).

Conflict Sequences

When a person is in their MVS and free of conflict, their thoughts and actions tend to be constant. However, when in conflict, a person's thoughts and actions change but are predictable. Porter's 1973/1976 description of the Conflict Sequence suggests that people experience changes in their motivation predictably and sequentially in up to three stages.

The Impact of Personal Filters

Conflict can arise because people use personal filters to evaluate other's actions. Personal filters can influence perception; people tend to use their own motivational values as a standard when evaluating the behaviour of others. When people's motivational values differ significantly, the result may be admiration for

the difference, or each may perceive the other's behaviors as a threat to their own personal values (Scudder & LaCroix, 2013).

In Relationship Awareness Theory, behavior is viewed as:

- Behaviors are tools used to get some result or confirm our sense of self-worth. These tools are also used to ward off things we do not want.
- Motives come from our wish to feel a strong sense of self-worth or self-value.
- Our individual Motivational Value System is consistent throughout our life and underpins all of our behaviors.
- Traditional writing about motivation describes motives as the amount of energy devoted toward a task; something that can be inspired in others. In Relationship Awareness Theory, motives are thought of as the reasons innate in every person and readily available to be tapped (Scudder & LaCroix, 2013).

The Strength Deployment Inventory

The SDI is a personality assessment based on discovering people's motivations and self-worth. Use of the SDI allows someone to increase self-awareness, personal effectiveness, and interpersonal effectiveness. The SDI is about relationships; developing better relationships with the people we come into contact with every day (Scudder & LaCroix, 2013).

The SDI honors differences in people by emphasizing the value of different strengths and thoughts shown by a variety of people. It promotes interpersonal insights that are crucial to improving any situation where people interact. Most important, the SDI is a non-threatening way to deal with the interpersonal conflict that is too often avoided.

Interpersonal relationship skills help us understand that the way we see things may differ from how other people see things. Recognizing what "motivational language" someone is speaking can greatly enhance our ability to communicate more effectively AND handle conflict more productively. It becomes easier to "relate" to a person's actions when we understand what drives them from within (Personal Strengths Publishing, 2010).

The Inventory

The SDI is a 60-item personality assessment. Participants respond to two question sets, one for (a) when things are going well, and (b) when one is experiencing conflict. Each question set has three choices and 10 points must be

allocated between the three choices indicating the percentage of time that choice applies to them.

The scale scores from the *when things are going well* portion of the SDI are used to identify one of seven personality types called motivational value systems. The scale scores from the *conflict portion* of the SDI are used to identify one of 13 types called conflict sequences (CS). A set of three sample items (to which 10 points must be allocated by the subject) is presented as follows: "When I meet people for the first time, I am most likely to be: (a) concerned with whether or not they find me a likable person; (b) actively curious about them to learn if there is something in it for me; and (c) politely curious until I learn what they might want from me" (Porter, 1973, p. 4).

As a personality assessment, the *Strength Deployment Inventory* goes far beyond simply observing outward behavior to identify the internal motivation behind the behaviour we see. When you understand why a person acts in a particular way (motivation), it becomes easier to accept a person's behaviour (Scudder & La Croix, 2013).

Validity and Reliability of the SDI

In considering the matter of validity, there is one very important matter to take into account. The Strength Deployment Inventory was not designed to be a test, even though it is in the traditional format of a test. These inventories were designed to be educational instruments and must be judged by that standard. As such, the internal reliability of the SDI scales was evaluated using the Chronbach's Alpha, with the internal reliability of the scales ranging from .710 to .846. Cunningham's (2004) test-retest study reported alpha values on average approximately 0.9 across all MVS's for the SDI (Cunningham, 2004; Scudder, 2013).

Method

A sample of 228 people participated in 1 of 6 sessions, where they were introduced to the Strength Deployment Inventory assessment and provided scenario-based training regarding affect cognitive improvement in handling and successfully managing conflict situations. This sample population included aviation professionals to determine strategies to resolve conflict.

Participants arrived and greeted by the facilitators. The intent of the training was explained and each participant agreed to and signed a consent form, which allowed them the opportunity to drop out of training at any point with no negative consequences. Next the participants completed a pre-survey survey

indicating perceptions of their abilities and comfort with recognizing and handling various types and intensities of conflict. After the pre-survey, participants learned the theory behind the SDI and then completed the SDI. Once complete, individual results were collected and combined to show the various scores for the class in an aggregate display.

The class then discussed the aggregate scores, which led to realization that there is "no accurate stereotype that people in a profession all think the same or have the same goals." At this point began a discussion of why conflict occurs and how to recognize that conflict has started. Exercises are conducted to allow everyone to move through their individual conflict sequences while discussing what led them into conflict and how the situations continues to worsen. Once in the conflict sequences, discussion are conducted and actions taken to allow people to recognize their needs and the needs of others to imitate the move out of the conflict sequence. Once out of the conflict sequence, participants discuss the process of recognizing that they are in conflict and real-world techniques to mitigate or solve the conflict. Once this has occurred, numerous action plans are designed for each individual to customize their preferred methods for recognizing and handling conflict. Finally, a post-test survey was given to each participant. The post-test questions were the same as the pre-test questions. This survey was designed to allow participants to recognize any change in perception of their ability to recognize and handle conflict after the SDI training.

Pilot Test

This conflict training was given as a full-day program. It modified for aviation employees and delivered in a manner consistent with the half-day course offered by the Personal Strengths Publishing Corporation (Scudder, 2009). The survey assessment was developed by the authors and reviewed for validity by a panel of experts from Personal Strengths Publishing, and Northcentral University. A pilot study was conducted with the first group of participants for feedback (N=52). After reviewing the feedback, and in consultation with the panel, one new question was added and slight modifications to terminology were incorporated.

Participant Group

Participants were all employees of U.S. major airlines. All were over 18 years of age. This training opportunity was advertised in the Denver, CO area. Each participant was a volunteer (this was not required training for any participant). Training was accomplished during a participants' non-scheduled

work time. No monetary compensation was given. Participant's motivation to complete the training was the ability to learn more, as an individual, about recognizing conflict and better techniques for mitigating conflict in their work and home environments.

Results

Three questions were analyzed for this research:

1. I understand the ways in which I respond to conflict

2. I understand ways to engage others during conflict situations

3. I have specific strategies I use to avoid conflict

A Repeated Measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether participants receiving conflict management training, based on the Strength Deployment Inventory assessment, demonstrated cognitive improvement in handling and successfully managing conflict situations.

Question 1. I understand the ways in which I recognize and respond to conflict.

Table 1.

Question 1 Descriptive Statistics

	N	*Mean*	*SD*
Ways to Respond Pre	228	1.9344	0.6115
Ways to Respond Post	228	3.1373	0.3448

For question 1, there was a significant effect on participant's reported ability to understand ways in which to a participant recognizes and respond to conflict [$F(1, 227) = 2205.3$, $p < 0.001$]

Question 2. I understand ways to engage others during conflict situations

Table 2.

Question 2 Descriptive Statistics

	N	*Mean*	*SD*
Ways to Engage Pre	228	1.896	0.5876
Ways to Engage Post	228	4.392	0.2846

For question 2, there was a significant effect on participant's reported ability to understand ways to engage others during conflict [$F(1, 227) = 2156.1$, $p < 0.001$].

Question 3. I have specific strategies I use to avoid conflict.

Table 3.

Question 3 Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	SD
Obtaining Strategies Pre	228	3.816	0.8124
Obtaining Strategies Post	228	4.627	0.4896

For question 3, there was a significant effect on participant's reported understanding of specific strategies to avoid conflict [$F(1,227) = 832.1$, *p* <0.001].

For the three questions analyzed, these results suggest that participation in the training results in substantive improvement in cognitive handling and management of conflict.

In this study, one research question was used to evaluate how conflict management training using the SDI affected cognitive improvement in handling and successfully managing conflict situations. Based on the findings, the null hypothesis must be rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis: Participants receiving conflict management training, based on the Strength Deployment Inventory assessment, demonstrated cognitive improvement in handling and successfully managing conflict situations. The findings seem to indicate that exposure to the theory of conflict management followed by a training program using the SDI resulted in statistical significant increases in cognitive improvement in the management and handling of conflict.

Conclusion

While the ways in which workplace conflict is handled may not need to be addressed solely based on the economic concerns of the organization, the reality is that workplace conflict can have a high costs to organizations. When conflict arises between employees, it can result in decreases in job satisfaction, negative relationships with co-workers, and a loss in commitment to both the organization and to the specific job or function that is performed.

Because collegial interactions, collaboration, and shared decision-making are an important part of the aviation industry, conflict can be especially costly. It is important that organizations develop strategies to address workplace conflict. In this research, the SDI was an appropriate and effective strategy to help increase cognitive improvement in the management and handling of conflict for aviation employees. While additional studies should be conducted to determine if the

findings of this study are replicable across other career fields, the results are encouraging for airline leaders wishing to reduce workplace conflict. By introducing a conflict training program like the SDI, stakeholders can expect less time spent on conflict resolution and more time spent on building the productivity and efficiencies of the organization.

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