

PROOF

Conflict and Negotiation in Groups at Work

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Chapter outline

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Chapter objectives

The main objectives are to:

- analyse the conflict process by referring to its basis elements, that is perceptions/cognitions, emotions and responses;
- distinguish between task and relationship conflict, and describe the dimensions on which conflict can be assessed;
- understand the factors, as well as mechanisms, which lead to positive or negative effects of conflict;
- appreciate the significance of the cooperative and competitive elements comprising most conflict situations;
- identify and assess styles of conflict management;

(cont'd)

- describe types of third-party intervention;
- Explore and understand cognitive biases interfering with negotiations.

Introduction

In large as well as small organizations, conflict between organizational members is usually frequent and certainly inevitable at some time or another. Managers have reported that they spend about 20 per cent of their time dealing with some form of interpersonal conflict (Baron, 1989). It is important that managers realize that conflict can be an enemy but also an ally in their efforts to have their organization work efficiently. It can be both a constructive and a destructive force. Indeed some managers deliberately engineer conflict to bring about change. The management of conflict in organizations between individual employees, groups of employees or organizational departments can potentially contribute to an organization's ability to deliver goods and services to clients. Employees throughout the organization need, however, to collaborate and manage conflict if they are to provide high-quality services. In Chapter 2 we elaborated on group performance and put emphasis on the quality of the interactive processes that occur between members of work groups. The main concern is that putting together a group of competent people does not guarantee that a high-quality group output is produced. These highly competent people need to be well coordinated and keep their motivation high to deliver good decisions, products or services. One important aspect of group interaction is conflict and how it is handled within work groups. Dealing with conflict constructively contributes to the coordination necessary to achieve organizational objectives.

Individuals and groups in dispute frequently use negotiation to resolve their conflict. In negotiation, disputants hold different initial beliefs and preferences, which are considered as an obstacle to each other's attempts to gain or retain a desired state, and are interacting in order to settle their differences (Thompson, 1990). It is important that parties in conflict realize that various components of a settlement may be valued differently by each party and mutually beneficial trade-offs can be the outcome of a negotiation. A necessary condition for the occurrence of trade-offs is that the two parties interact and communicate with each other in an open and constructive way. The communication between the conflicting parties helps an understanding of each other's perspective, finding some common ground, creating a shared understanding of the situation, and detecting differences in the value placed on various negotiation outcomes. However, communication should be considered a means to achieve settlement and mutual satisfaction, which is a necessary rather than a sufficient factor. Communication seems to produce a number of positive negotiation outcomes because it can potentially be a factor promoting trust and positive feelings between

the disputants. On the other hand, the interaction and communication of the conflicting parties may also lead to the escalation of a destructive conflict when trust is not a product of the social interaction.

The conflict process

Traditionally, conflict has been assumed to be inevitably destructive: A win–lose dual. Conflict is something that causes pain and reduces cooperation and friendship. As people with opposing interests compete against each other, both sides can be seriously damaged in one way or another. The destructive consequences of conflict are thought to be especially pervasive in the case that conflicting parties belong to the same group, since cooperation and coordination of group members are essential prerequisites for group success. However, Deutsch (1973) argued against viewing conflict situations as necessarily reflecting opposing interests, suggesting that in every conflict there are both competitive and cooperative elements. Deutsch has defined conflict as ‘incompatible activities, where one person’s actions interfere, obstruct, or in some way make the behaviour of another less effective’. Thus, conflict is not the opposite of cooperation and there is cooperative potential inherent in almost every conflict.

It is interesting, however, to notice that the negotiation literature has shown that people in conflict usually assume their interests are strictly opposed to those of the other party, even when the two parties have compatible interests (Thompson & Hrebec, 1996). Imagine, for example, how an employee might be competitive towards other people in their department when working in work groups, because of assuming that they are as much motivated as he/she is to get promoted. However, this is not necessarily an accurate description of other people’s motives since individuals differ significantly in the priorities they set in their lives. It seems, therefore, that people have a tendency to disregard the cooperative potential inherent in conflict, which might be responsible for the fact that using conflict positively in organizations has proven difficult.

Conflict is a process that usually begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that they care about, leading to various thoughts, emotions and possible responses to the conflict situation (Thomas, 1992). De Dreu et al. (1999) define conflict as the tension an individual or group experiences because of perceived differences with another individual or group; conflict issues produce feelings such as pride, resentment, anger and fear, as well as cognitions that relate to the other side in the conflict and involve stereotypes. Moreover, Rahim (2001) suggests that conflict is inevitably an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities.

Consider a hypothetical scenario of an emerging conflict between two directors of a large financial organization to illustrate the theoretical points made above:

In a large financial organization the personnel department has received numerous requests from branch managers asking for the immediate recruitment of a substantial

number of personal financial advisors (PFAs). The job of a PFA is to inform customers about the various financial products that the organization offers to its customers and to give advice on which products seem to be more suitable to each individual client. Branch managers have reported to the personnel department that customers have to wait for an average of 30 min to be served by a PFA at the bank branches.

It has been a month now since the board of directors decided that the selection tools for the recruitment of the PFAs had to be improved. The research and development (R&D) manager argued that PFA performance evaluation during the last eight years showed that the way PFAs are selected should change. The selection tools that are used currently do not seem to pick the best people for the job, as the overall PFA performance is average. More importantly, the best PFAs working for the bank at the moment do not hold high scores on the selection tools. On these grounds all the directors agreed that the R&D people should work on a new battery of selection tools for PFA selection.

However, the launching of a new marketing campaign by the bank has attracted new customers visiting the bank's branches, which has caused further delays in service. As the marketing campaign is particularly successful the problem is not expected to be a temporary one sorting out itself in a few weeks.

The personnel manager decided to go to the R&D manager's office to gather information about the time schedule of the project and to make sure that his colleague knew about the pressure put on the branches because of PFA shortage. During the one hour that the meeting lasted the R&D manager said that they needed another two months to finish the project, but under the circumstances he was going to put a lot of pressure on his people to have the selection tools ready within a month. The personnel manager argued back that the branches could not possibly wait for another month as customers were making complaints on a daily basis for delays in service. Both men felt particularly frustrated by the situation, and there was a lot of tension while they continued trying to find some way to resolve the issue.

The personnel manager believed that he was unreasonably obstructed by the R&D people to go ahead with the recruitment of new PFAs, who were so badly needed by the bank branches. He thought that the people at the R&D unit were more like researchers than business people, and they weren't willing to understand that for a corporation to be successful the realities of the business world were more important over some academic rigour. On the other hand, the R&D director believed that personnel people were bureaucrats primarily interested in carrying through the procedure and completing the task at hand rather than making sure that what they did was effective and functional.

The meeting between the two directors ended without finding a common ground on how the problem could be handled, and the two men agreed on taking the issue to the board of directors to resolve it.

The scenario presented above shows the possible incompatible activities of the R&D and personnel people. The conflicting elements of the situation are

apparent, whereas the directors do not seem to have found the cooperative elements that can potentially lead to conflict resolution. The personnel manager focuses on the recruitment of new personnel to staff the bank branches, while the R & D director believes that the organization's priority should be to develop a valid instrument to select the best people for the job. There is also tension, feelings of frustration and lack of trust, and the two parties seem to experience a state of dissonance. Finally, it is interesting to notice the role that stereotypical beliefs play in the evolution of conflict as the parties in dispute believe that the image of 'researcher' or 'bureaucrat' can explain a lot in the behaviour of their opponents.

The interaction of the disputing parties is not usually limited to one conflict episode. According to Thomas (1992), a conflict episode begins with the party's awareness of the conflict. This awareness may be triggered by a threat to the party's self-interest but may also involve a variety of other types of concerns (such as differences in values or judgment). Awareness leads to various thoughts and emotions of the party regarding the conflict situation and possible responses to it. The thoughts and emotions result in the formulation of intentions with respect to coping with the conflict, which are then enacted in the form of observable behaviour. The other party then reacts to this behaviour initiating a more or less prolonged interaction with the other. During the course of this interaction, the party's thoughts and emotions may change, altering intentions and behaviour accordingly. When the interaction on a given issue stops, some set of outcomes has occurred. The outcomes of a given episode set the stage for subsequent episodes on the same issue.

As sequences of conflict behaviour unfold it is important to examine whether people have a tendency to reciprocate each other or to react in a complementary fashion. Weingart et al. (1990) found that negotiators mostly engage in reciprocation irrespective of their opponent's behaviour. However, De Dreu et al. (1999) argue that in many disputes conflicting parties may be tempted to take advantage of each other's cooperative behaviour and to respond with dominating behaviour. They also suggest that parties in dispute may suspect ulterior motives behind each other's yielding or problem-solving behaviour and attempt to defend themselves with dominating responses. De Dreu et al. conclude that there is a general tendency in conflict behaviour to reciprocate, but with constructive behaviour sometimes being 'undermatched'. In explaining the circle of action and reaction of conflicting parties De Reuver (2006) suggested that the concept of 'power' could play an important role. In fact De Reuver found that line managers reacted in a complementary fashion to their superiors by avoiding confrontations with dominant superiors, while they dominated more with submissive subordinates than with dominant subordinates.

Conflict most often occurs in 'mixed-motive' situations where persons have both competitive (win-lose) and cooperative (win-win) interests; the competitive elements produce the conflict (eye-for-an-eye), whereas the cooperative elements create the incentives to negotiate for an agreement (Tjosvold, 1998). The disputing parties tend to behave in a reciprocal way irrespective of the

distributive or integrative behaviour of the other party. There is also, however, a tendency to take advantage of others by acting in a competitive way when they behave cooperatively.

Box 3.1 Conflict scenario between sales and production managers of a manufacturing firm

The sales department has promised a major customer an early delivery date on a given item. When informed of this during a meeting, the production supervisor feels frustrated because that delivery date would throw off his whole production schedule. He has carefully planned his schedule to maximize the productive capacity of his resources. Therefore, since the production manager believes that covering the sales department's promise is incompatible with the efficiency of his own department he tries to make the sales manager change the promised delivery date. Annoyed at this response, and disturbed by the idea of disappointing the customer, the sales manager resists this influence attempt and tries to convince the production manager to meet the delivery date. The discussion of this issue took an hour of the meeting during which both parties become more hostile and argumentative. By the end they did not reach any decision.

Negotiations between the department heads are largely taking place during biweekly meetings chaired by the vice-president of operations. This procedure shapes the behaviour of both parties as complaints accumulate until meeting time. Social pressures from other department heads help to keep the competition from escalating uncontrollably, but the prevailing organizational norms do not encourage problem solving. The production manager tends to be somewhat more competitive than the sales manager. This difference is partly due to the production manager's personality: he is an older up-from-the-ranks manager who fought his way out of poverty. Both managers are greatly encouraged by their departmental colleagues to behave competitively, and the members of the two departments have come to view the other department as an enemy. Underlying many of the issues that arise between the two department heads is some very real conflict of interest resulting from tight performance measures and tightening organizational resources. Both parties have high stakes in these issues, since their departmental performance evaluations depend heavily on production cost efficiency (for production) and meeting delivery dates (for sales).

The conflict between the sales and production managers has consumed an hour of the meeting, preventing the department heads from addressing a number of important agenda items. As the production and the sales manager could not come to an agreement, it appears that the sales department will be unable to keep its promise to one of the organization's important customers. Moreover, relations between the two department heads have become even more antagonistic, and the sales manager seems to be even more frustrated and disenchanted with how the organization operates.

Box 3.1 (cont'd)

The vice-president of the operations, the immediate supervisor of the two managers, is chairing the meeting in question. The vice-president suppresses the conflict for the remainder of the meeting to move on to other topics. He schedules a meeting with both department heads for later in the day, when he attempts to help the two clear the air and reach an agreement that will be acceptable to both departments and will not alienate the customer in question.

The vice-president mandates regular meetings between the sales and production departments, requiring the sales and production managers, along with their immediate subordinates, to meet jointly at a fixed time each week to discuss the scheduling of major upcoming orders. He also calls in a staff specialist to re-examine the performance evaluation systems for the two department heads.

- (1) Analyse the conflict situation with reference to:
 - (a) conflicting parties' perceptions/cognitions, emotions and behaviour,
 - (b) styles of conflict management,
 - (c) organizational norms and
 - (d) vice-president interventions.
- (2) Identify the conflicting elements of the situation and the potential cooperative elements.

Source: Adapted from Thomas (1992).

Conflict and work group effectiveness

According to a traditional viewpoint, as already mentioned, conflict is something destructive (even irrational) that needs to be avoided if groups and individuals are to perform effectively. The traditional perspective suggests that conflict interferes with information processing capacity and impedes task performance, while at the same time conflict leads group members to dislike each other, feel rather dissatisfied and intent to leave the group. Later on the human relations school argued that conflict is inevitable and that under specific circumstances it can prove to be beneficial to team performance. Finally, the interactionist view considers conflict as potentially desirable so that groups can accomplish higher levels of performance, and it proposes that conflict should be encouraged since building a superficial consensus leads to poor results.

Most research on organizational conflict during the last 20 years has attempted to identify the situations in which conflict is mostly beneficial and those in which conflict is destructive to organizational functioning. Conflict may, for example, enhance understanding of decisions, improve decision quality (Amason, 1996) and stimulate group innovation (De Dreu & West, 2001; Lovelace et al., 2001), while, on the other hand, it can damage quality of

working life by causing organizational stress and feelings of burnout (De Dreu et al., 2002; Dijkstra et al., 2005). There has been a lot of effort put on the investigation of the specific and interacting factors that lead to the positive or negative effects of conflict on groups.

Task conflict, relationship conflict and group performance

In some of the earlier and most important work on groups Bales (1950) argued that social interaction taking place in small groups could be broadly categorized into two types: socio-emotional and task-oriented. In other words, group members contribute to group functioning through social and task inputs. On the same line of thinking, it has been suggested that there are two basic types of conflict in work teams, that is task conflict and relationship conflict. It is quite possible that the former leads to the latter. Task conflicts pertain to controversy over the job the group focuses on, whereas relationship conflicts are based on animosity surrounding interpersonal relationships among co-workers (Jehn, 1995). Task conflict involves disagreements among group members about the content of their decisions and includes differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions. Relationship conflict entails problems members have with others' personalities, dispositions and value priorities. Besides task and relationship conflict some other types of conflict have been suggested such as conflict over resources and process conflict over the means to accomplish tasks, however most research on the association between types of conflict and performance deals with these forms of conflict as parts of task conflict.

There is empirical evidence showing that task conflict can, under certain conditions, be beneficial to group performance (Amason, 1996; De Dreu et al., 1999; Jehn, 1995, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001), whereas relationship conflict is systematically related to low levels of group effectiveness (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Jehn, 1997; Rau, 2005). Task conflict, a realistic questioning of members' opinions and ideas, seems often to be beneficial to group performance by increasing the cognitive understanding of group tasks, the careful evaluation of alternatives, as well as constructive criticism of processes. When group members engage in task conflict the information processing capacity of the group is reinforced leading to a high quality of decision-making and task accomplishment. On the other hand, the main reason why relationship conflict negatively influences team performance is because it results in less helping behaviour: sharing of information, resources etc. In other words, relationship conflict tends to undermine performance because it hinders prosocial behaviour including helping (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001).

It is important, however, to note that the link between task conflict and group performance is far from clear (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Research suggests that task conflict has a positive effect on group performance given that:

- team members believe that their goals are cooperative rather than competitive (Alper et al., 2000);
- intensity of conflict is moderate (Jehn & Mannix, 2001);

- team members trust each other and feel psychologically safe in their team (Edmondson, 1999);
- there are norms promoting openness and tolerance of diverse viewpoints (Jehn, 1997; see Box 3.2);
- emotionality – that is, the amount of negative affect exhibited and felt during the conflict, is kept low (Jehn, 1997; see Box 3.2);
- the conflict issue is important (Jehn, 1997; see Box 3.2);
- resolution potential of the conflict is high (Jehn, 1997; see Box 3.2).

Box 3.2 Episodes of conflict types and dimensions based on interview data

Conflict types

Task conflict: 'We usually fight about work things – interpreting our reports, disagreeing about government regulations.'

'We constantly fight about accounts and which numbers to use and how to interpret them. We really only fight about this work stuff.'

Relationship conflict: 'Like any situation, there are some of us that don't get along, and so we don't talk at all.'

'Her attitude just stinks. It's a personality conflict in the first place. I'd rather be working for anyone else but her. I just can't stand her attitude and her voice. We just clash.'

Process conflict: 'I don't think we have a lot of interpersonal problems, but we do have disagreements, like right now on this reorganization about how some of these teams are set up. There's some conflict on the composite of the team and who should do what.'

Conflict Dimensions

Acceptability: 'Any kind of negative attitude is frowned upon and that means bringing up problems and fighting all the time. Bad attitude, uncooperative, general bad attitude is very bad, difficult and is discouraged. Otherwise people would be fighting like cats and dogs.'

Emotionality: 'We've gone at it a couple of times over things. There is a lot of yelling and frustration. Emotions run high; people don't use their heads.'

Importance: 'and I think it is going to have severe consequences so I'll voice my opinion. It's a very big disagreement and the conflict is a very important one.'

Resolution potential: 'But they don't manage each other well, they don't want to attack a problem so it never goes away. When they should speak up to resolve this, they don't. They don't want to be bothered with it.'

Source: Interview data adapted from Jehn (1997).

Task complexity has also been suggested as an important variable that determines whether task conflict is beneficial to group life. Jehn (1995) originally found that in groups performing routine tasks, disagreements about the task were detrimental to group functioning, while in groups performing nonroutine tasks, task conflicts were in some cases beneficial. However, De Dreu and Weingart (2003), in a meta-analysis of studies that examine the relationship between task conflict, relationship conflict and team performance, found that both task and relationship conflict were negatively related to team performance, and that task conflict interfered less with the execution of simple, well-learned tasks than with more complex, nonroutine tasks. Therefore, there are inconsistent results in the literature concerning the moderating role of task complexity in the relationship between task conflict and team performance. These inconsistent results can possibly be explained by investigating the relation between task conflict and group performance under various levels of task complexity, as well as goal interdependence, psychological safety and within-team trust, emotionality, conflict acceptability and conflict issue importance. Conflict is a complex, multi-determined problem. Many factors determine when, why and how it occurs or is solved.

The conflict literature distinguishes between task and relationship conflict partly on the ground that the two types of conflict were demonstrated to have different performance consequences. However, the empirical data show that the two types of conflict are often positively correlated (Amason, 1996; Janssen et al., 1999; Jehn et al., 1999; Pelled et al., 1999). Since moderate task conflict is beneficial to group performance while relationship conflict is detrimental, one has to be careful not to trigger relationship conflict by increasing task conflict (Gebert et al., 2006).

Simons and Peterson (2000) studied the transformation of one type of conflict into another by interviewing top management groups in the hotel and motel industry. They found that task conflict is misattributed as being personal in nature or motive and thus leads to relationship conflict if there are low levels of intragroup trust. They identified intragroup trust as the psychological mechanism that links task and relationship conflict. On a practical level, managers and group leaders can prevent task disagreements from being misinterpreted as personal attacks by enhancing trust between group members and creating a climate of psychological safety. When group members trust each other and feel safe in their group, task conflict does not escalate into relationship conflict and the group performs effectively.

Thus, task conflict has been shown to have positive effects on group effectiveness given that certain factors are seriously taken into account, whereas relationship conflict has consistently generated a negative effect on group performance. However, one has to be careful when offering practical advice to managers because a strategy of stimulating task conflict may backfire by transforming disagreements over tasks to personal attacks. Consequently, groups should be encouraged to focus on confronting problems rather than avoiding or smoothing over the issues so that they can benefit from the diverse ideas of group members. But, for example, expressing different viewpoints and various

alternatives may have a negative impact on group effectiveness if group members do not feel respected and psychologically safe in their work group.

Constructive controversy

In search of the conditions that enable conflict to have a positive effect on group performance Tjosvold and his colleagues (Tjosvold, 1990, 1997, 1998; Tjosvold et al., 1992, 1999) have argued that conflict is beneficial to group functioning when group members believe that their ultimate, salient work goals are cooperative. Departing from Deutsch's (1973) theory of cooperation and competition Tjosvold proposed that conflict can have positive effects on organizational functioning when organizational members deal with their disputes by engaging in 'constructive controversy'. Constructive controversy is stimulated when group members in dispute believe that their goals are ultimately cooperative so that the attainment of a goal by one member facilitates other members to achieve their own goals, that is, win-win. Despite the fact that group members disagree, they perceive their objectives to be common, discuss their opposing views openly, try to cope with their incompatible activities and resolve their conflicts constructively. Opposing positions do hinder, temporarily, the group from making a decision, but constructive controversy helps people combine their ideas to resolve conflicts in a positive way (for a review, see Tjosvold, 1997).

Constructive controversy is conceptually based on Deutsch's theory of cooperation and competition. The theory argues that how people interact depends on their beliefs about how the attainment of desired goals is related to other people achieving their own goals (goal interdependence). When people cooperate they perceive their goals to be positively linked, so that as one person moves towards goal attainment the other person is also getting closer to achieving a desired goal. On the other hand, when people compete with each other, they believe their goals are negatively related, so that one's successful goal attainment makes others less likely to reach a desired goal. Finally, independence occurs when people believe that their goals are not related either in a positive or negative way. In cooperation group members are open to influence, they mutually support each other and group performance is high. On the other hand, in competition, people are often closed-minded because they aim to outperform each other, and groups are ineffective. Independence reflects indifference to the actions of others and group performance is the product of individual work rather than the combination of group members' inputs.

Considerable evidence points to the positive effect of constructive controversy on group functioning. For example, Tjosvold et al. (1992) found that employees in different departments of a large telecommunications company discussed their differences openly and used their conflicts to serve customers when they believed that their business goals were cooperative. More specifically, organizational members who developed cooperative goals while still in dispute were able to interact open-mindedly and effectively, make progress on their task, work efficiently and serve customers. They also strengthened their

work relationship as they felt confident they could collaborate in the future. In contrast, competitive and independent conflicts were characterized by closed-minded interaction, little task progress, inefficiency and reduced confidence in future conflict management. Various specific conditions lead to the perception of goals as cooperative, competitive and independent. Common tasks and compatible objectives, shared vision and aspirations, tasks requiring coordination and teamwork, feelings of understanding, and complementary roles are reasons for cooperative goals. Incompatible objectives and insisting on doing it one's own way are antecedents for competitive and independent goals. Individual tasks and objectives also lead to independent goals (see Box 3.3).

Box 3.3 Conditions leading to the perception of goals as cooperative, competitive and independent (Tjosvold et al., 1992)

Cooperative goals

- Shared vision and aspirations
- Common tasks and compatible objectives
- Tasks requiring coordination and teamwork
- Complementary roles
- Feelings of understanding

Competitive goals

- Incompatible objectives
- Insisting on doing it one's own way

Independent goals

- Individual tasks and objectives
- Incompatible objectives
- Insisting on doing it one's own way

Cooperative goal interdependence has been shown to facilitate the adoption of new technological innovations, as well as the effective handling of informal grievances. When new technological innovations are implemented employees often confront considerable problems and need to discuss solutions with each other to make the technology work. For example, in a study of how new technology is implemented, employees of a retail chain in cooperative interdependence were able to use new scanning technology efficiently because they exchanged information and hammered out ideas about how to solve the many problems the technology created (Tjosvold, 1990). Regarding the handling of grievances, Tjosvold et al. (1999) studied how supervisors and employees in a large forest

products company dealt with complaints. The findings showed that employees and supervisors who emphasized their cooperative interdependence were able to negotiate open-mindedly to develop integrated solutions and successfully handled their informal grievances. On a practical level, supervisors who are trained to demonstrate clearly to employees that they have common objectives and want to discuss issues for mutual benefit are apt to develop cooperative goals with employees.

The construct of 'conflict efficacy' has been suggested to be the psychological mechanism that mediates the impact of a cooperative/competitive approach to conflict on team performance (Alper et al., 2000). In a study of self-managing teams in the production department of an electronic manufacturer Alper et al. found that when team members manage their conflicts in a cooperative way they feel confident in dealing with conflicts in the future, which leads to long-term effective group performance. Therefore, groups that rely on cooperative approaches to conflict management develop efficacy that they can deal with their conflicts; this efficacy in turn results in effective team performance.

A cooperative approach to conflict management might be an essential aspect of an organizational culture that promotes cooperation rather than competition among organizational members. Since an organizational culture of cooperation is associated with effective organizational functioning (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988; Petty et al., 1995; Smart & John, 1996), future research can possibly examine whether:

- a cooperative approach to conflict management characterises an organizational culture of cooperation and
- such an organizational culture is related to organizational performance via the mechanism of conflict efficacy.

In an attempt to combine the two separately developed research literatures of task/relationship conflict and constructive controversy, Janssen et al. (1999) examined how task and relationship conflict shape the role of positive interdependence in management teams. The findings showed that cooperative interdependence fosters effective group decision-making only if relationship conflict interferes with task conflict, but not in the case of one-sided task conflict, one-sided relationship conflict or no conflict at all. In other words, whether or not group members believe that their goals are positively interdependent has an impact on group performance given that task conflict escalates into relationship conflict or relationship conflict is reflected in task conflict. In positive interdependence because team members move toward their goals as a consequence of actions of others, they develop positive attitudes toward each other and become receptive to information, suggestions and ideas provided by other persons.

When task conflict and relationship conflict coexist, which has been shown empirically to be the rule rather than the exception, positive interdependence facilitates the resolution of conflict by the development of positive attitudes among group members and the cognitive receptivity to other members'

suggestions. For example, think of a project group commissioned to design the spring collection of a corporation in the fashion industry having a dispute over the quality of the textiles to be used. If group members believe that the success of the collection depends on the input of every member of the group then interaction among members is intense and individuals are receptive to others suggestions.

Constructive controversy is, therefore, based on the perception of a positive interdependence among team members. This cooperative approach to conflict management involves open discussion, understanding others, integrating views and reaching agreements. Research has shown that customer service, handling of employee grievances, new technology adoption and production of goods are effectively carried out when organizational members believe that they share common objectives. A cooperative approach to conflict seems to be especially conducive to effective group performance in the case that task and relationship conflict are simultaneously unfolding their dynamics within a team.

Conflict management and negotiation in the workplace

Conflict management is the behaviour primarily oriented towards the reduction and resolution of conflict. The literature on conflict management and negotiation has suggested that there are a number of distinct strategies or styles that characterize the behaviour of disputing parties. For example, when core departments in organizations such as marketing and production pursue different goals they can choose either to collaborate by finding some common ground and integrating their different perspectives or to dominate by enforcing one's position. Negotiation is often the process through which organizational departments and individual employees try to settle their differences and, eventually, coordinate their efforts.

Conflict management strategies

Conflict is a process, as already noted, that begins when a party becomes aware that another party has negatively affected something that the party cares about. A family of theories called dual concern models (Pruitt, 1983) have argued against the idea that cooperation and competition are the only conflict management strategies, as suggested by Deutsch's theory (1973). These models propose that when two parties are in a dispute one party's intentions to satisfy (a) its own concerns and (b) the other party's concerns affect the conflict management strategies that the party chooses to adopt.

Blake and Mouton (1964) were among the first to suggest that when managers deal with conflict they adopt five different styles of conflict management: forcing, confronting, withdrawing, smoothing over and compromising. These six styles of conflict management reflect the dimensions of concern for people and concern for production. For example, a finance manager may choose to

settle his or her differences with the personnel manager on the necessity of hiring new employees by using a strategy of compromise or even avoidance. Pruitt (1983) proposed that when two parties are in a negotiation the strategic choice of each party is determined by each party's 'concerns about its own outcomes as well as about the other's outcomes'. Parties in negotiation can adopt one (or more) of the following four strategic choices: contending, yielding, problem solving and inaction.

Thomas (1992) presenting a classification of the conflict management strategies that can be adopted by a party in an organizational conflict situation focused on two orthogonal dimensions of intent: cooperativeness and assertiveness. Cooperativeness is the extent to which the party attempts to satisfy the other party's concerns, whereas assertiveness is the extent to which a party attempts to satisfy its own concerns. Various combinations of assertiveness and cooperativeness produce five strategic intentions, which are as follows: competing, accommodating, compromising, collaborating and avoiding (Thomas, 1976; see Box 3.4).

Box 3.4 Various conflict management strategies/styles as presented in the relevant literature

Blake & Mouton (1964)	Smoothing over Compromising Confronting Forcing Withdrawing
Deutch (1973)	Cooperation Competition
Pruitt (1983)	Problem Solving Yielding Contending Inaction
Thomas (1992)	Collaborating Compromising Accommodating Competing Avoiding

A 'competing' intention (uncooperative, assertive) is an attempt to win one's position. In goal conflicts the intention is to achieve one's goal at the sacrifice of the other's goal, while in judgement conflicts one tries to convince the other that one's conclusion is correct. The opposite of competing is an 'accommodating' intention (cooperative, unassertive), which is an attempt to satisfy the other's

concern at the expense of one's own. This intent may represent an attempt to help the other attain their goals at the expense of one's own or to support the other's opinion despite any reservations. A 'compromising' intention (intermediate in both cooperativeness and assertiveness) is considered by Thomas (1992) to be midway between competing and accommodating. Compromising aims at achieving moderate but incomplete satisfaction of both parties' concerns, in other words giving up something but also holding out for something. In contrast, 'collaborating' represents an attempt to fully satisfy the concerns of the two parties to achieve an integrative solution. In goal conflicts, parties try to find a win-win solution that allows both parties to achieve their goals, and in judgement conflicts the aim is to generate a new idea that incorporates the valid insights of both parties. The final intention, 'avoiding' (uncooperative, unassertive), reflects a desire to neglect the concerns of both parties in the conflict situation. This strategic intention reflects a party's desire to avoid any involvement and to allow events to take their own course.

Thomas (1992) suggested that collaboration produces more effective conflict outcomes for the organization in the long term since it enhances a sense of justice, decision quality and satisfaction of parties involved in a dispute. However, in the short term the choice of strategic intentions needs to be based on various situational conditions such as the importance of the conflict issue, power dynamics or facing an emergency. Each of the strategic intentions is likely to be appropriate in some circumstances. For example, collaboration may not be feasible when there is insufficient time, the conflict issue does not allow integrative solutions and the parties do not trust each other. It is actually a useful managerial skill to know which strategic intention to implement under different circumstances. Thomas (1977) presented a list of situations in which to adopt the five strategic intentions as reported by a group of chief executive officers (see Table 3.1). For example, competing is considered as appropriate to adopt when quick, decisive action is vital (i.e., emergencies) or on issues vital to company welfare when you know you are right. On the other hand, accommodating is more appropriate when issues are more important to others than yourself or harmony and stability are especially important.

Even though most conflict management strategies can be constructive depending on the importance of the relationship, the complexity of the issue and time pressure, the literature on the effectiveness of conflict management suggests that collaboration or problem solving is a key to effective organizations (Alper et al., 2000; Nauta & Sanders, 2000; Rubin et al., 1994; Tjosvold, 1997; Thomas, 1992). More recently, the effectiveness of conflict management strategies has been examined in relation to the type of conflict that occurs. In a meta-analysis of the association between relationship conflict and team performance De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) found that collaborating and contending (competing) responses to relationship conflict were negatively related to team functioning and effectiveness, while avoiding responses to relationship conflict were positively related to team functioning and performance. They, however, agree with Thomas (1977) that the time frame of the conflict can be

Table 3.1 Situations in which to adopt the five strategic intentions, as reported by 28 chief executives.

<i>Competing</i>
When quick, decisive action is vital (i.e., emergencies)
On issues vital to company welfare when you know you're right
Against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behaviour
<i>Collaborating</i>
To find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised
To merge insights from people with different perspectives
To work through feelings that have interfered with a relationship
<i>Compromising</i>
When opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals
To achieve temporary settlements to complex issues
As a backup when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful
<i>Avoiding</i>
When potential disruption outweighs the benefits of resolution
To let people cool down and regain perspective
When others can resolve the conflict more effectively
<i>Accommodating</i>
When issues are more important to others than yourself – to satisfy others and maintain cooperation
When harmony and stability are especially important
To allow subordinates to develop by learning from mistakes

Source: Adapted from Thomas (1977).

an important factor in our attempt to examine conflict management effectiveness. They postulate that avoiding responses to relationship conflict fosters team effectiveness in the next couple of months (in the short term), but leads to intensely escalated relationship conflicts several months later.

Theories on conflict management strategies have been criticized on the ground that they deal with conflict taking primarily a cognitive perspective, while neglecting the central role of affective (emotional) reactions to conflict episodes. The intensity and type of emotions aroused in the sequence of events that unfold during conflict episodes are expected to be important factors in the process of managing conflict effectively.

In sum, apart from cooperation and competition there are a number of other conflict management strategies that one can adopt when in a conflict situation. Disputing parties may choose to avoid dealing with the conflict issue and postpone taking any action towards the resolution of conflict or accommodate to the desires of the other party while neglecting their own interests. In general, problem solving (collaborating/integrating) has been shown to be the most effective strategy for confronting conflicts that arise within organizational settings. However, one should keep in mind that other conflict management strategies may prove to be beneficial depending on the importance of the relation, the conflict type and the dynamics of conflict in terms of time frame. For example, avoidance

can be an effective strategy when dealing with a relationship conflict in the short term to allow the disputing parties to cool down and gain a different perspective on the issues at hand.

Third-party intervention

A rather common way to manage conflict within organizations is to make use of third-party intervention, which can indeed prove useful in resolving organizational conflicts. Giebels and Janssen (2005) argue that third-party help can be regarded as another conflict management style since conflicting employees can take the initiative to ask a third party to help them derive structure and meaning in the conflict situation. When people are engaged in a conflict they need to derive meaning in a complex, ambiguous and stressful situation, and therefore discussions with third parties is an important dynamic in the conflict management process (Volkema et al., 1996). Imagine, for example, a situation where two employees taking part in a project group are involved in a task dispute that transforms into a relationship conflict primarily because they are both very suitable candidates for filling up a highly prestigious supervisor position, which has recently become available. Seeking third-party intervention, such as the mediation of a conflict resolution expert, may help both parties re-evaluate the situation and allow them to cooperate to accomplish the group's objectives.

There are various roles that third parties can adopt when intervening in conflict between organizational parties, and a distinction is made between third parties with process control (i.e., mediator) and decision control (i.e., arbiter). In mediation the third party controls the interaction between the disputing parties, as well as the negotiation process, but allows them to make their own decisions. Although mediators often make their recommendations for resolving the conflict, they typically lack the authority to impose a settlement on the disputants. On the other hand, an arbiter acts more autocratically by making and enforcing a decision for settling the dispute between the conflicting parties.

Managers as well as consultants usually play the role of third parties in a conflict between organizational members or departments. Even though managers have the power to play the role of the third party in organizational conflicts, they do not necessarily have the specialized skills to deal with conflicts effectively. For this reason, many organizations employ specially trained consultants to act as mediators in organizational conflicts. These mediators are often known as 'ombudspersons' and their objective is to help the disputants, either individuals or groups, to settle their differences by themselves. Ombudspersons are usually experts in conflict resolution who also offer assistance to managers in their efforts to deal with work-related conflicts. The role of ombudspersons can be especially effective in mediating organizational conflicts as findings show that experts acting as third parties in a conflict resolution intervention were more influential than colleagues of the disputing parties (Arnold & O'Connor, 1999).

Window on the workplace

The ACAS Arbitration Scheme

Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (ACAS) is a body largely funded by the British Department for Business, Enterprise, and Regulation Reform (BERR) and governed by an independent council appointed by the Secretary of the State for BERR. ACAS was given powers to draw up the ACAS Arbitration Scheme, which has been approved by the British Parliament, in the Employment Rights (Dispute Resolution) Act 1998. The ACAS Arbitration Scheme can be used as an alternative to going to an Employment Tribunal hearing to resolve disputes about alleged unfair dismissal or requests to work flexibly.

The scheme was introduced because it was felt that there was a need for a speedy, informal, private, and generally less legalistic alternative to an Employment Tribunal hearing. The scheme is also designed to provide a final outcome to cases more quickly as there are very few grounds for challenging the arbitrator's decision and appeals can only be made in limited circumstances.

In ACAS arbitration the arguments put by both parties are heard by an arbitrator who, by using their knowledge, skills, and experience, will come to a decision on the case. The arbitrator's decision is issued in the form of an award and is a binding judgement of the parties' dispute. As arbitration is a method for deciding between two conflicting claims in which the arbitrator's decision is binding upon the parties, there has to be agreement by both parties that they wish the complaint to be heard by an arbitrator.

Negotiation behaviour and cognitive biases

For all parties involved in conflict management, either disputing or third parties, it is particularly useful to know the way people usually think when they act as negotiators. When organizational members, either as individuals or groups, deal with conflict situations they normally engage in a negotiation or bargaining process to resolve the conflict. All conflict management strategies involve interaction and communication between the parties in dispute aiming at dealing with the parties' differences in one way or another. Even in the case of avoidance, the communication breakdown that occurs is usually a temporal withdrawal from the conflict issue.

In order to be able to understand the negotiation process and help the parties work together effectively one has to take into account the structure of the bargaining situation. The degree of conflict between parties' interests determines the structure of the bargaining situation (Thompson, 1990). If parties' interests are mutually exclusive the negotiation is called fixed-sum or purely distributive. In fixed-sum or purely distributive negotiations parties goals, values, preferences or priorities are incompatible, and therefore is it very much unlikely that both

parties can be satisfied with the negotiation outcome. In contrast, when parties' interests are perfectly compatible the situation is a pure negotiation. Pure negotiation offers ample opportunities for mutually beneficial trade-offs and possibly enables negotiators to grow a larger pie. Most of the times parties' interests are neither completely opposed nor purely compatible, in which case the situation is an integrative or variable-sum negotiation.

Although conflict normally occurs in mixed-motive situations and negotiators often have very different priorities and valuation of resources, research in negotiation has shown that negotiators tend to assume that the other party places the same importance on the negotiation issues as they do. This tendency has been termed the 'fixed-pie error' (Bazerman & Neale, 1983; Thompson & Hastie, 1990). In a review paper on negotiation Bazerman et al. (2000) summarizes research on the systematic ways in which negotiators as decision-makers deviate from rationality and suggests that negotiators tend to:

- falsely assume that the negotiation 'pie' is fixed and miss opportunities for mutually beneficial trade-offs between the parties;
- falsely assume that their preferences on issues are incompatible with those of their opponent;
- be more concessionary to a positively framed specification of the negotiation than to a negatively framed specification;
- be inappropriately affected by anchors in negotiation;
- be inappropriately affected by readily available information;
- be overconfident and overly optimistic about the likelihood of attaining outcomes that favour themselves;
- escalate conflict even when a rational analysis would dictate change in strategy;
- ignore the perspective of other parties;
- reactively devalue any concession made by the opponent.

Bazerman and his colleagues (Bazerman et al., 2000) have outlined a psychological understanding of negotiation designed to prescribe strategies that can help the negotiators carry out integrative trade-offs and grow a larger pie to be divided by the parties in dispute. If negotiators are aware of the systematic ways that individuals as decision-makers tend to deviate from rationality when in a negotiation, and especially if they are trained to deal with these biases, then conflicts can be rather positively settled to everyone's interest. Moreover, Bazerman proposes that it is important to study how players define and create the negotiation game to help them negotiate constructively. More specifically, one needs to examine negotiator relationships, attributions about the other, knowledge of the bargaining structure and understanding of the self, as well as the personality, intelligence and biography of all parties involved. For example, as already

mentioned, the negotiators' perception of whether the structure of the situation allows for integrative trade-offs can have a significant effect on the way they behave in the negotiation.

From a practical standpoint, managers and their subordinates can attend training programmes in negotiation and conflict resolution in order to manage conflicts at work more effectively. As negotiators or third parties in organizational negotiations they can learn how to:

- expand the pie by introducing new issues or by splitting existing issues into smaller ones;
- give in on less important issues and remain firm on the more valuable ones;
- create a positive relationship with the other party to get their way on the key issue;
- minimize the risks and costs associated with concessions demanded from the other side;
- invent a solution that meets both sides' relative priorities and interests (Rubin et al., 1994).

Summary

Organizational conflicts are often assumed by managers to have negative effects on the functioning of work groups, organizational departments, as well as the whole organization. However, conflict can be an ally as well as an enemy in managers' efforts to run an effective organization. Disagreements among group members about the content of their decisions, debates over the job or project the group has to carry out, differences in perspectives, ideas and opinions, that is task conflicts, do have a positive effect on group performance, such as decision-making and innovation (see Chapter 4) under certain circumstances. Relationship conflicts, on the other hand, reflecting problems members have with others' personalities and value priorities, are destructive to group problem solving and task accomplishment. As task and relationship conflicts are closely related, one type of conflict can be transformed into another type. Therefore, one has to be careful not to trigger relationship conflict by stimulating task conflict. Group performance is also enhanced when organizational members have a cooperative approach to conflict and therefore engage in constructive controversy. Constructive controversy seems to have an especially positive impact on group performance when task and relationship conflict are simultaneously taking place within a group.

The literature on conflict management and negotiation suggests that there are various strategies or styles that characterize the behaviour of conflicting parties. In general, problem-solving or collaboration has emerged as the most effective strategy for handling organizational conflicts. Other conflict management strategies may also be effective depending on the importance of the relationship, type

of conflict, as well as time frame. For example, avoidance is a useful way to deal with relationship conflicts in the short term so that conflicting parties can cool down and gain some perspective on the issues at hand. Organizations quite often use third-party intervention to manage conflicts, which is actually regarded by some researchers as another conflict management style. If negotiators and third parties have a sound knowledge of the systematic ways in which negotiators, as decision-makers, deviate from rationality, they can be in a better position to achieve mutually beneficial settlements. Training programmes on the psychology of negotiating can help organizational members limit the negative effects of such systematic biases on resolving conflicts at work.

Questions

1. Under which conditions and via which mechanisms does conflict have a positive effect on organizational functioning? Describe situations where it would be to the advantage of a manager to stimulate conflict.
2. Which factors lead to the negative effects of conflict? In practical terms, describe steps that an organization can take to manage conflict effectively.
3. Does the type of task the group performs affect whether task conflict is beneficial? Use knowledge presented in Chapter 2 on types of group task to explain your answer.
4. Is there a possibility that task conflict changes into relationship conflict and vice versa?
5. Which are the conflict management strategies or styles proposed by dual concern models? Critically evaluate the dual concern models to conflict resolution.
6. What is the role of ombudspersons in organizational conflicts?
7. In which ways can we use the knowledge of how people think as negotiators to improve resolving conflicts at work?

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