Chapter 12
Conflict-Positive Organizations: Applying Mediation and Conflict Management Research

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Managers and employees regularly confront conflict with each other as well as with customers and suppliers. They disagree as they propose various ideas to make decisions and as they express their frustrations as they coordinate their work, they use conflicts to reflect upon and update their products and methods. Industrial relations professionals and researchers have emphasized that conflict is inevitable in organizations and that managers, employees, and industrial relations and other human resource professionals should be prepared to manage them openly and fairly (Burgess et al. 2014; Buttigieg et al. 2014; Macneil and and Bray 2014). Employees, for example, inevitably have grievances that should not be ignored but dealt with by established procedures in order to restore relationships and coordination (Kougiannou et al. 2015; Whalen 2008). Managing conflict is thought to be the effective, fair way for owners, managers, and employees to develop resolutions that share the benefits and the burdens of their joint work (Premalatha 2012). Conflicts dealt with constructively help organizations meet the diverse needs for efficiency and profitability while at the same time promoting employee well-being (Boxall 2014; Greer et al. 2013).

Mediation has a long history in conflict management research and practice as it identifies various activities designed to support disputants in resolving their conflicts by developing mutually beneficial solutions (Poitras et al. 2015). Union and company representatives mediate as they handle grievances (Budd and Colvin 2008;

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Dhiaulhaq et al. 2014; Lounsbery and Cook 2011) and managers and employees mediate as they discuss formal and informal complaints (Elizabeth 2013; Harris et al. 2012; Latreille et al. 2012). The aim of this chapter is to help organizations prepare and empower members so that they can mediate and manage their conflicts constructively even without outside intervention.

Managing conflict constructively is often challenging (Bradley et al. 2013). The most common and available mediation activity is to assist disputants to discuss and deal with their conflicts directly and constructively. This chapter argues that organizations can be developed in such a way that managers and employees understand the value of conflict management and practice the skills of constructive dialogue. It shows how managers, employees, IR and HRM professionals can use theory and research on conflict management and mediation to develop conflict-positive organizations that support constructive conflict management between managers and employees as well as within and between teams, departments and organizations (Poitras et al. 2015; Tjosvold and Wang 2013). Within conflict-positive organizations, managers and employees recognize that conflicts need to be managed directly and fairly and that employees are encouraged to voice their opinions and express their frustrations (Tjosvold 1991). As they expect each other to respond openly, they find initiating as well as resolving conflicts much easier.

Developing these conflict–positive organizations requires considerable investment. Managers and employees should understand the nature of productive discussions and develop open-minded skills; they should also strengthen their relationships because high quality relationships are foundations for constructive discussion (Tjosvold et al. 2014b).

This chapter has five sections. The first one argues that employees need leadership so that they know that they and their colleagues understand and are jointly committed to managing conflict cooperatively. The second part argues that conflict management theory can provide teams and organizations with a common understanding of conflict and the major approaches they have to deal with their conflicts. The third section reviews research documenting that managing conflict cooperatively for mutual benefit very much supports organizations and teams. The fourth section identifies important ways for managers and leaders to develop cooperative goals and open-mindedness discussion for cooperative conflict management. The last part uses a case study of an organization applying theory and research to become more conflict-positive.

Leadership for Motivation

Managers, team members, and employees confront many conflicts, including how to consider and deal with their conflicts (Tjosvold et al. 2014a). They have different opinions about the nature of conflict and how these conflicts should be dealt with. Is it better to forget and to move on to different issues, or should they discuss directly their issues with each other, or should they let their superiors decide or suppress the

conflict, or should they involve a neutral third party from outside the company? Differences in understanding the nature of conflict and how to deal with it are often not discussed directly and openly (Argyris and Schon 1996). Differences in understanding frustrate conflict management practice because conflict is something that people do together; if one protagonist is unwilling or unable to discuss conflicts openly and effectively, it's very difficult to manage conflict (Deutsch 1973; Deutsch et al. 2014).

The theory of cooperation and competition can provide a common understanding of conflict and how managers and employees can manage them. Leaders are needed to use this theory to develop a foundation of understanding among employees and managers of constructive conflict management. This common understanding of constructive conflict and also a mutual commitment to making conflicts productive highly contribute to conflict-positive organizations.

Effective leadership has long been thought to require "working with and through others". Similarly, managers have to work with and through disputants if they are going to foster effective mediation. Managers might act as a mediator by asking disputants to engage in direct, face-to-face discussions with each other to develop mutually beneficial resolutions. But for the mediation to be successful, disputants have to express their ideas and feelings directly, work to understand the opposing views, and to develop mutually beneficial solutions (Polster 2011). Disputants must confront their conflicts together and develop resolutions. Managers must work with and through disputants to be effective mediators.

Conflict Theory as a Common Mission and Guide

Theories of conflict management can help organizational members identify their own and each other's approaches to conflict. Theories can also help them reach agreement on how they would like to address disagreements. Since most conflicts require joint resolution, both sides have to agree to a new way of interacting. Imposing resolutions might be appropriate under some conditions, but not as a general approach to conflict management.

This section shows the value of applying the theory of cooperation and competition (Deutsch 1973) to define and manage conflict. The theory does not identify one strategic action suitable for all conflicts, but is a foundation for how managers and employees can decide how to deal with their specific conflicts.

Defining Conflict

Researchers as well as managers have typically considered defining conflict of secondary importance; indeed, they have resolved differences by including several notions into their definition of conflict (Barki and Hartwick 2004). This section

proposes that defining conflict as incompatible actions is a much stronger foundation for research than defining conflict as opposing interests.

Deutsch's (1973) theory of cooperation and competition defines conflict as incompatible activities; one person's actions interfere, obstruct or in some way get in the way of another's action (Tjosvold et al. 2014a). Conflicts can be based on opposing goals and interests but also occur when people have common goals. They may for example disagree about the best means to achieve their common goals. Incompatible activities occur in both cooperative and competitive contexts. Whether the protagonists believe their goals are cooperative or competitive very much affects their expectations, interaction, and outcomes as they approach conflict.

Cooperative and Competitive Contexts of Conflict

Deutsch (1973) theorized that how group members believe their goals are related very much affects the nature of relationships and interaction that they develop. Cooperation occurs when individuals perceive that they can reach their goals if and only if the other individuals with whom they are cooperatively linked also reach their goals, that is, there is a mutual positive relationship among goal attainments. In this case, people in a group will promote each other's efforts to achieve their goals. In conflict, emphasizing cooperative goals by demonstrating a commitment to pursue mutual benefit solutions has been shown to create high quality solutions and strengthen relationships (Deutsch et al. 2014).

Competition occurs when individuals perceive that they can obtain their goals if and only if the other individuals with whom they are competitively linked fail to obtain their goals, that is, there is a perceived negative relationships among goal attainments. As one disputant reaches his or her goals, the others cannot reach their goals.

Approaches to Managing Conflict

Understanding goal interdependence (whether it is competition or cooperation) very much affects how people discuss and negotiate their conflicts (Deutsch 1973). With cooperative goals, disputants negotiate for mutual benefit. People take a "we are in it together" attitude and seek solutions that will benefit all. With these positive expectations, they are more likely to discuss issues directly and open-mindedly where they consider and integrate each other's views as they seek to develop mutually beneficial solutions by engaging in mutual problem solving (De Dreu et al. 2001). The interaction induced by cooperative goals is labeled the cooperative approach to conflict management (e.g., Alper et al. 2000; Chen et al. 2005; Tjosvold 2008; Tjosvold et al. 2006).

   Disputants may also believe that their goals are competitive. They treat conflict as a win-lose contest and engage in actions as overstating their own position to get their way and demanding that others agree with their position. These disputants expect that others will not reciprocate openness and concessions and may even obstruct efforts; protagonists are often inflexible, resulting in deadlocks or the imposing of a solution by the more powerful ones. The interaction process induced by competitive goals is called the competitive approach to conflict (Alper et al. 2000; Chen et al. 2005; Tjosvold 2008).

   Research has also recognized that disputants may avoid conflict by trying to smooth over conflict and minimize direct exchange. They communicate that opposing ideas should be minimized rather than discussed openly (Peng and Tjosvold 2011). Avoiding conflict has proved ineffectual as a general approach to managing conflict (Friedman et al. 2006; Ng and Feldman 2011; Tjosvold and Sun 2002).

Impact of Approaches

To the extent that mediators and disputants develop strong cooperative goals and low levels of competition, they have laid the groundwork for effective mediation and the constructive resolution of conflicts. Mediators often call face-to-face meetings for disputants in order for them to understand each other's ideas and positions and to create mutually beneficial resolutions. Many studies document that a strong cooperative context where disputants believe that their goals are cooperatively related promotes listening and understanding opposing views, integrating these views to create new, mutually beneficial resolutions that disputants accept and implement (Deutsch et al. 2014; Tjosvold et al. 2014b).

   Disputants who believe their goals are competitively related are unprepared to engage in mediation activities effectively. Studies indicate that competitors tend to avoid open and direct discussion if they can (Tjosvold et al. 2014a). When they discuss directly with each other, competitive disputants, though they may listen and understand others' views, they often reject and disparage the opposing views. They try to show that their views are superior and should dominate and "win" the discussion by forcing others to accept their resolutions. People who assume that their conflicts are competitive are unlikely to be able to develop constructive ways of managing their conflicts despite opportunities to meet and discuss.

   The next section briefly reviews research documenting the value of the cooperative approach to conflict for organizations. The following section outlines how managers and other mediators help disputants develop cooperative conflict management by strengthening cooperative goals and open-minded discussion skills.

Constructive Role of Cooperative Context

Several studies have demonstrated that cooperative management of conflict has both short-term and long-term significant benefits for both organizations and individuals in many situations (Halpert et al. 2010; Somech et al. 2009; Tjosvold et al. 2014a). This section illustrates the value of managing conflict cooperatively by reviewing research on how it contributes to leadership.

Leadership researchers have very much supported that successful leaders develop high quality relationships with employees so that they can coordinate and work with and through individual employees (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). Studies also indicate that managing conflict cooperatively with individual employees develops and maintains these quality relationships (Chen and Tjosvold 2006, 2008; Chen et al. 2008).

Recently, researchers have begun to understand that leaders may have their effects not just simply on the individuals but also on how employees relate to each other (DeGroot et al. 2000; Dionne et al. 2004). For example, studies have shown that leaders using a variety of leadership styles are effective to the extent that they help employees manage conflict cooperatively so that they can coordinate and make decisions effectively.

For example, a study conducted in India investigated the impact of leadership values on conflict management among subordinates (Bhatnagar and Tjosvold 2012). Results showed that productivity values encouraged cooperative, open-minded controversy and team effectiveness and productivity. The study's findings suggest that leader productivity values coupled with cooperative conflict management provide a foundation for effective teamwork. Zhang et al. (2011) found that transformational leadership improved team coordination and performance when subordinates employees managed conflict cooperatively. Servant leadership emphasizes service to others, team consensus, and the personal development of individuals (Wong et al. 2015); findings indicate that teams with servant leaders discussed their disagreements, frustrations, and difficulties cooperatively and worked out solutions for the benefit of the team and their customers. Although servant leaders maybe thought of as avoiding conflict, they were found to promote open and constructive conflict management.

These and other recent studies emphasize the value of quality relationships between leaders and employees and among employees. Through these relationships, leaders can motivate employees and help them manage conflict and perform.

Developing Cooperative Conflict Management

Conflict management is something to do as well as to understand. Key ways to develop cooperative conflict management are strengthening cooperative goals and developing open-minded discussion skills (Tjosvold and Tjosvold 2015).

Cooperative Goals

Ideally as they approach a conflict, managers and employees realize that they have a strong cooperative context. They realize that they have a common task in that they should make one set of recommendations, develop and produce a new product, or solve a problem together. Team members are encouraged to integrate their ideas and develop one solution and product.

Understanding that they need to coordinate and use each other's abilities helps convince disputants they have cooperative goals. They recognize that their own personal rewards are based on team performance, they receive more tangible and intangible rewards the stronger the team performance. Disputants who have built a community where they know each other as persons and identify as a team also have cooperative goals. As their goals are cooperative, they realize that their achievement and rewards depend to a great extent on how effective the whole team is. Disputants then are likely to conclude that they "are in this together" and that they "sink or swim together". At this point, they will want to resolve their conflicts cooperatively.

Open-Minded Discussion

With these cooperative goals, disputants must still work out their conflicts. Mediators can help disputants develop open-minded discussion skills that complement cooperative goals (Richter and Tjosvold 1980; Tjosvold and Deemer 1980; Tjosvold and Tjosvold 2015). Employees can be trained to express their own views and prepare to be direct and persuasive. Disagreeing is an opportunity to know opposing positions as well as to develop and express one's own. Listening and understanding opposing views as well as defending one's own makes discussing issues more challenging but also more rewarding.

Disputants recognize that conflict is an opportunity to develop new solutions. They do not assume that only their own and the opposing view exists, they can put together the best ideas from several standpoints to create new alternatives. Conflicts are opportunities to resolve their disputes but they may have to engage in repeated discussions to reach an agreement that is mutually beneficial. They may, for example, be unconvinced that the evidence warrants modifying their original positions. They may have to continue to discuss their opposing views until they develop a mutually beneficial resolution.

Teams and organizations can develop supportive norms and patterns to help team members be open with their ideas, open to other views, and integrate them. Managers and employees understand that they should seek the best reasoned judgment, not winning; they criticize ideas, not people; they listen and learn everyone's position, even if they do not agree with it; they differentiate positions before trying to integrate them; and they change their mind when logically persuaded to do so.

Becoming a Conflict Positive Organization

We (Tjosvold and Tjosvold 2015, 1995) have been experimenting and applying cooperative conflict management in our family business since the mid-1970s. We provide residential services for people with special needs from nursing care, developmental assistance, elderly, and traumatic brain injury. Like other businesses, ours also has conflicts and it is more effective for the clients and employees when they are managed cooperatively. We want employees throughout the company to join us as we use the theory of cooperation and competition and related ideas to understand and strengthen the business.

Workshops

Workshops promote continuous learning and reinforcement for staff of their cooperative interdependence and need to discuss conflicts open-mindedly. Managers and employees get involved through short lectures, structured activities, and reflection to learn more about cooperation and competition and how managing conflict cooperatively can help them strengthen their teamwork and leadership.

These workshops are particularly valuable because managers and employees are learning ideas and practicing their open-minded discussion skills together. They can see that people throughout the organization want to and are developing the skills of cooperative conflict management. Workshops are concrete ways for leaders to develop shared understanding and common commitment to managing conflict cooperatively.

Book Clubs for Leadership and Mediation

Book Clubs are an important way for using theory and research to develop cooperative, open-minded leadership and teamwork throughout the company. Mary, as the CEO of the company, offers managers and supervisors from different units within the company to form a Book Club to read and discuss a teamwork and leadership book, such as one of our own (Tjosvold and Tjosvold 2015). Before a session, they read a chapter and prepare to discuss and criticize the ideas of the chapter. They also reflect on their own experiences by identifying concrete times when they faced a similar problem. During later sessions, they describe specific times when they have used ideas from the book to strengthen their leadership.

For example, after reading a chapter on managing a conflict with an employee, they talk about specific times when they managed a conflict with one of their employees. They brainstorm concrete ways that they can apply the chapter's ideas

so that they can manage conflict with employees more effectively. At the next meeting, they discuss their attempts to apply the ideas and get suggestions for how to continue and improve their efforts at dealing with conflicts with employees openly and constructively. This way, managers and supervisors encourage and provide concrete support to improve their conflict management.

Team discussion of ideas, reflecting on experiences, and making commitments on how to improve are powerful ways to learn and become a leader. People throughout the company use the model to have fruitful conversations about their experiences as they develop their teamwork and leadership. The model helps everyone have a common understanding of the kind of conflict management they want to use and the qualities of the organization they want to develop.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarized a theory and team oriented approach to mediation that has been less used than the traditional reliance on outside experts. We are not saying that leaders can easily adopt this team approach and help disputants manage their own conflicts cooperatively and directly. Indeed, managers and employees have to work hard in order to understand the theory of cooperation and competition and develop the teamwork needed to apply it effectively. However, to work in an organization is to be in conflict (Maynes and Podsakoff 2013). To take advantage of joint work requires ongoing conflict management.

Research challenges the common assumption that conflict is harmful and that the less of it and the quicker it is resolved the better. We know that conflict, when managed cooperatively, can solve problems, get things done, strengthen relationships, and enhance individuals. Current research suggests that mediation can highly contribute to the effectiveness of organizations.

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