

Conflict: Useful or Harmful in Self-Managed Project Teams (SMPTs)?

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Abstract: The paper is intended to highlight the effect of different types of conflict; either useful and beneficial or harmful to the project team, particularly the SMPTs. It is evident that task conflict can either be beneficial or harmful depending on the stages or processes the team is going through in their project, meanwhile relationship conflict is found to be always harmful throughout the project. Task conflict is evident to be useful when the project is far from the deadline as the team members have plenty of time to work on their project. However, it is evident that, as time passed, the project progresses, and the deadline is approaching, task conflict becomes harmful as it distracts the team members from focusing on their main task thus delaying and interrupting the progress of the project. The usefulness or harmfulness of task conflict is not based on the type of tasks (either routine or non-routine) but is based on the stages and situation of the project that the team was working on. It is evident that even if the task conflict occurs on a non-routine task, it can be harmful to the project team whenever it interferes with the team concentration on their task. On the other hand, even if it is a task conflict over a routine task, it is evident that if it occurs at certain processes of a project, it benefits the team in order to generate effective solutions. This longitudinal study comprises of evidence collected through semi-structured interviews involving face-to-face interviews and weekly telephone interviews for twelve weeks with the managements and team members from six SMPTs in three small and medium sized KIFs in Malaysia. The findings suggest that deadline is the main reason on how task conflict is perceived in SMPTs.

Keywords: Conflict, Self-Managed Project Teams, Deadline.

1. Introduction.

In the context of a project team, conflict is regarded as inevitable as a team consists of people with different ideas and opinions working towards the same objective. As the team work together, it is impossible for the various ideas and opinions from each of the team members to be implemented. Annoyances and negative feelings will also be involved in this process. As highlighted by Putnam and Poole (1987), conflict is generally defined as consisting of three elements: interdependence between the parties where each party might interfere with each other, perception of incompatibility among the parties' concerns as well as some form of interaction. Although some researchers perceive conflict as disruptive (Jehn, 1995; Schwenk & Cosier, 1993), conversely, there are also researchers who find that conflict can promote group effectiveness (Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997). Therefore, this study reveals the various occurrences of conflict throughout a project, which can either be beneficial or disruptive to organizations. As most small and medium sized firms depend on project teams to survive, it is important to ensure the effectiveness of teams throughout each project in order to increase organizational performance. Therefore, understanding the effect of conflict SMPTs can help the management to create an environment that facilitates the management of conflict and thus promotes conflict as beneficial to project teams. The findings from the study are, therefore, intended to contribute to the existing literature by providing a better understanding of the influences of conflict in organizations.

2. Methodology

The study comprises of evidence collected in two phases comprising of face-to-face semi-structured interviews and weekly telephone interviews in each phase. The first phase of the data collection was conducted for six months which began with three months of face-to-face interviews and another three months of weekly telephone interviews with team members and the managements from four projects in two

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small and medium sized KIFs in Malaysia, known as ITCo and BiotechCo. As the research progressed, the second phase of data collection was set out to challenge the initial findings from the first phase. The second phase was conducted for four months which began with one month of face-to-face interviews and three months of weekly telephone interviews with the respondents. The respondents for the second phase consisted of the management and team members of two projects from one small and medium KIFs in Malaysia, known as HerbalCo. For both phases of the data collection, the data gathered from the weekly telephone interviews is the main data being used in this research which provides longitudinal, processual data of conflict and its management strategy in each of the project teams and the face-to-face interviews provide contextual data for further understanding of the processual data. The data were analyzed in two stages: within-case analysis and cross-cases analysis. This approach was aided by a variety of analytical tools applied within and across the cases. For example, Time-Ordered Matrices, and Event Listings were used to identify and chronicle the event of conflicts.

3. Findings

The findings are intended to highlight the effect of different types of conflict; either useful and beneficial or harmful to the project team, particularly the SMPTs. Tjosvold, Poon and Yu (2005) highlight that the effect of conflict depends on the different types of conflict, which can either be useful or harmful to organizations. Previous researchers find that task conflict is useful and beneficial as it helps in improving a team's productivity (eg. Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). This is due to the varieties of ideas generated by the team members which will then provide the best solution towards producing high quality work outcomes. This will also assist in producing good decisions due to the brainstorming activities of the team members (Tjosvold, 1997).

On the other hand, relationship conflict is claimed as not beneficial in project teams as whenever it occurs, it will involve interpersonal issues and negative emotions amongst team members (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). In a way, it distracts the project team from focusing on the team's main objective (Amason, 1996) as they would be focusing on interpersonal matters which will interfere with the completion of the team's project. This will then hinder the process of interaction within the project team. This is considered to be a threat to the project team as the process of interaction is very important when working in a team as the team members need to interact in order to share their knowledge and discuss the best ways to perform their tasks in order to meet the objective of the project team. However, even though task conflict is known to be beneficial, especially for the decision making process in project teams, it is also argued that this type of conflict will interrupt the team members from achieving their goal and hinder the implementation of their project (Amason, 1996; Hambrick, Cho, & Chen, 1996). These occur when team members are being overwhelmed by the conflict that they are dealing with and the difficulties to reach an agreement to resolve the task conflict that they face (Amason & Schweiger, 1994).

In this study, it is evident that task conflict can either be beneficial or harmful depending on the stages or processes the team is going through in their project, meanwhile relationship conflict is found to be always harmful throughout the project. Task conflict is evident to be useful when the project is far from the deadline as the team members have plenty of time to work on their project. Whenever task conflict occurs, the team members sit together and discuss the best way to resolve the conflict, together, as a team. Task conflict is considered useful at the beginning or early stage of a project as it motivates the team members to be involved with others in solving conflict as well as getting to know each other better during the process. In handling task conflict, it ensures that the team members are clear of the project objective and everyone works together towards achieving the objective by solving the conflict. Task conflict that occurs will help to navigate the team's direction towards fulfilling the team's objective as they start to have responsibility towards their project and ensure that they are heading towards the objective in the right way. Dealing with task conflict at the beginning of a project will ensure that the team members are ready when the conflict occurs again throughout the project duration. This is useful as the team members have experience of how to deal with the conflict in an effective way, which will then assist them in managing conflict.

However, it is evident that, as time passed, the project progresses, and the deadline is approaching, task conflict becomes harmful as it distracts the team members from focusing on their main task thus delaying

and interrupting the progress of the project. This finding is consistent with the literature which suggests that task conflict might be constructive as it stimulates discussion of ideas which will help team members in increasing their decision making quality and productivity (Jehn, 1995, 1997). However, in certain situations it distracts team members from focusing on their task. For example, as evident in this study, task conflict which occurs during the brainstorming process is beneficial as it enables the team to generate useful ideas in order to proceed with the project; meanwhile, task conflict which occurs at a later stage of a project results in a distraction for the team members from focusing on their task especially when the particular type of task conflict has not occurred previously during the project. The explanation for this is that there are situations during a project which need all team members to give their opinions and ideas in order for their task to be carried out or in order to solve any urgent problem which occurs. Task conflict occurs as the brainstorming process generates varieties of new suggestions for the project team. This will then enable the team to implement the ideas and this will benefit the project team in a way that might help to improve their working style as well as their work performance.

Meanwhile, in a situation where the task conflict is no longer focusing on one issue and is becoming more intense in a way that it spreads into other issues and involves more people, it is no longer considered beneficial to the project team as they need to spend extra time and effort being involved in the conflict thus neglecting their main responsibility towards their task in achieving the project's objective.

Task conflict is claimed to be beneficial in a way that promotes creativity and effectiveness to the project team as, during the process, it generates new knowledge and insights which lead toward a more effective team (De Dreu, 2006). However, it is suggested that task conflict is only beneficial when it occurs during non-routine tasks where there is no standard solution (Jehn, 1997). Therefore, generation of creative ideas or opinions are needed from the team members to handle the conflict. However, in this study, it is found that the usefulness or harmfulness of task conflict is not based on the type of tasks (either routine or non-routine) but is based on the stages and situation of the project that the team was working on. It is evident that even if the task conflict occurs on a non-routine task, it can be harmful to the project team whenever it interferes with the team concentration on their task.

On the other hand, even if it is a task conflict over a routine task, it is evident that if it occurs at certain processes of a project, for example, at the beginning of a project during the planning session, it benefits the team in order to generate effective solutions. The findings suggest that deadline is the main reason on how task conflict is perceived in SMPTs. This occurs when the team members are aware that the deadline is approaching, task conflict becomes a burden instead of an opportunity to generate new ideas for the project regardless of the type of tasks on which they are working. Subsequently, team members feel that focusing on each of their assigned tasks for the project is more beneficial rather than spending their time dealing with conflict. Task conflict is regarded as an interruption towards achieving the project deadline which will disrupt the team members.

However, although it was revealed that task conflict can either be beneficial or harmful throughout a project, a different finding was evident for relationship conflict. The data gathered shows that whenever relationship conflict occurs it will impact the project team negatively as it involves emotions of the team members which is difficult to deal with as they need to work closely as a team but at the same time they need to manage their emotions. In this respect, the researcher would speculate that the harmfulness of relationship conflict among the team members is influenced by the relationship ties amongst the team members as perceived by them. This is due to the close relationship between the team members who, in some cases, have been working together previously in various projects. Moreover, most of the team members claim that they are close and treat each other as families. Therefore, as the relationship tie is strong, the team members found that it is difficult for them to deal with the relationship conflict compared to with people that they have never known before. As relationship conflict involves negative emotions and annoyance, it is difficult for those involved to overcome as they do not want to talk with each other about the issue because they do not want to take the risk of losing their relationship as well as being worried that it will affect other group activities. Therefore, relationship conflict becomes worse as the person involved will either take no action or will start talking behind the others' as well as influencing others to have negative feelings with those involved.

The finding contradicts the literature which claims that a strong relationship is associated with a low level of conflict in organizations. Relationship ties is claimed to be affecting the occurrence of conflict as a study by Nelson (1989) finds, it is typical of low conflict organizations to have strong ties amongst the members. This is because strong relationship ties are more likely to facilitate cooperation thus reducing conflict within teams in organizations (Labianca, Brass, & Gray, 1998; Nelson, 1989). Surprisingly, in this study, as the relationships between the team members are close with each other, the occurrence of relationship conflict becomes harmful to the project team. For example, during a relationship conflict, those involved were not talking to each other and trying not to get involved in doing their task. This becomes harmful to the team as they need to work together but are ignoring each other, which is not helping the team to meet their objective. This contradicts with the findings of Shah and Jehn (1993) and Murnighan and Conlon (1991) that, even though groups of friends experience more relationship conflict than groups of strangers, friend groups are better able to manage conflict successfully. These studies suggest that friendship increases relationship conflict in teams, but that these teams, also, are better able to harness the conflict to improve task performance.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the deadline has been observed as a condition of time pressure for the teams in this study. It is perceived by the team members as part of the team's overall objective and they must work towards achieving the objective. The deadline induces SMPTs to move forward in their task completion. Therefore, heading towards the deadline, team members are under pressure and do not want to get involved with anything other than their assigned task.

Therefore, dealing with any type of conflict is considered as a distraction towards achieving each of their project objectives. According to Waller et al. (2001), teams which consist of individuals with various conceptualizations of time may affect the flow of processes in a project which then affect the overall team performance. As evident in this study, as the deadline is approaching, it affects the team in a way that they want to ensure that the flow of their project is as planned. This, then, influences the team members' perception towards conflict as conflict is no longer seen as beneficial but more of a distraction. The approach taken by the team in dealing with conflict changes affects the overall team processes. This supports the findings of Waller et al. (2002) who propose that work with stable deadlines will increase attention to time as the proximity of the deadline increases. Therefore the group increases their task performance activity and work towards meeting the deadline, thus ignoring any distractions along the way.

As for relationship conflict, particularly in SMPTs, most decisions have to be made by the team members themselves but during relationship conflict it hinders the decision making process as the people involved are not communicating with each other. This is in line with by Wall and Callister (1995) who expound that stress and emotions which occur during conflict prohibit straight and analytic thinking amongst those involved. Adding to that, it is also evident that the ways the team members handle emotions affect how they perceive relationship conflict. This causes the project team to react to conflict differently. As relationship conflict involves emotion, most of the team members agree that it will get severe when being dealt with, therefore it is harmful when it occurs at any point of their project duration especially when they are having a close relationship with each other. These findings on conflict usefulness are summarized in Proposition 1 and Proposition 2:

Proposition 1: Nearness to the deadline is negatively related to usefulness of task conflict and positively related to harmfulness of task conflict.

Proposition 2: Relationship conflict is always harmful to the project team.

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