

Understanding the Co-occurrence of Task Conflict and Relationship conflict in Teams: The Moderating Role of Political Skill

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Abstract - Previous research has confirmed that task conflict is beneficial for team performance, whereas relationship conflict is associated with negative outcomes. It is difficult to encourage task conflict and avoid detrimental relationship conflict because of these types of conflicts are co-occurrence. In addition, political skill has been stated to be a comprehensive personal trait for necessary survival in modern organization environment. The objective of this study is to explore the moderate effect of political skill on the relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict. This investigation sheds light on the research literature of team conflicts and political skill, and appeals to team managers pay more attention to team members' political skill train.

Key Words: task conflict, relationship conflict, political skill, conflict management, team building

1. INTRODUCTION

Organization researchers have confirmed that not all conflicts are harmful (Choi & Cho, 2011; O'Neill, Allen, & Hastings, 2013). Researchers (Amason, 1996; Karen A. Jehn, 1995) have divided conflicts into two types: task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict is a perception of disagreement or opposition about viewpoints, decisions and ideas; it has been found to have a beneficial effect on organizational innovation, team performance and high-quality decision making (Amason, 1996; De Dreu, 2006). In contrast, relationship conflict causes interpersonal incompatibility, hostility and intense dislike among team members. Thus, relationship conflict is regarded as detrimental to team performance (De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). Theoretically, the team manager should encourage task conflict to stimulate diverse viewpoints and enable optimal decisions to be made in the teams, but should also discourage relationship conflict. Nevertheless, enhancing task conflict and avoiding detrimental relationship conflict is far more easily said than done. This is because task conflict and relationship conflict are highly correlated (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000). In other words, these two types of conflict co-occur in teams (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Some studies (Mooney, Holahan, & Amason, 2007; Tidd, McIntyre, & Friedman, 2004) have investigated the co-occurrence of task conflict and relationship conflict. These researches indicated that the conflicted members may interpret task conflict as relationship conflict due to misattribution (i.e. criticism, attack). When both parties have high levels of trust (Simons & Peterson, 2000), communication and interaction (Camero, González-Romá, & Peiró, 2008), the misattribution of task conflict to relationship conflict is less likely occur. We need to extend our knowledge about the co-occurrence of task conflict and relationship conflict in teams.

Political skill is a recently developed critical competency for the individual, which is defined as "the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al., 2005). This skill is characterized as a comprehensive pattern, which has a particular reference to self-monitoring, political savvy and emotional intelligence in related constructs (Ferris et al., 2007). Politically skilled individuals have a way of making people at ease by establishing a good rapport and continuous emotional communication, with the focus on exerting a strong influence and eliciting a desired response from other people. Researchers (Jawahar, Meurs, Ferris, & Hochwarter, 2008; Smith, Plowman, Duchon, & Quinn, 2009; Todd, Harris, Harris, & Wheeler, 2009) have asserted that political skill is positively correlated with employees' job performance, career success and personal reputation. Additionally, political skill has been proven to moderate the relationship between stress and outcome (Meurs, Gallagher, & Perrewé, 2010), demographic dissimilarity and leader-member exchange quality (Brouer, Duke, Treadway, & Ferris, 2009). However, its contributions to team conflict literature remains unclear.

Based on elaborating the above, the present study then is to investigate the moderate effect of political skill on the linkage between task conflict and relationship conflict. This investigation will prompt team managers to pay more attention to developing and cultivating team members' political skill.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Political Skill

Politics is inherent in organizations (Mintzberg, 1985). It is possible to develop political skill that will help team members understand how best to realize project/individual goals (Mintzberg, 1983). Political skill represents the individual

ability to effectively interpret social cues and enact situation-specific influencing behaviors (Ferris, Perrewe, & Douglas, 2002). Ferris et al. (2007) defined political skill as a comprehensive social competency, which is manifested cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally. Ferris et al. (2005) conceptualized political skill into four interrelated dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and apparent sincerity. Social astuteness refers to the ability to have a high degree of self-awareness and discernment of both one's own and others' behaviors (Ferris et al., 2005). Interpersonal influence is the ability to effectively diagnose situations and exert the most appropriate behavior in order to elicit the desired response from others. Networking ability represents an individual's ability to build coalitions, utilize alliances and deal with a complex social network relationship. Apparent sincerity is perceived as possessing a high degree of genuineness and integrity (Bing, Davison, Minor, Novicevic, & Frink, 2011). Sincere individuals are not perceived as manipulative and therefore others believe they are trustworthy (Blass & Ferris, 2007). Obviously, political skill constructs overlap somewhat with personality traits such as conscientiousness (Blickle et al., 2008), assertiveness (Ferris et al., 2005) and emotion intelligence. This study explores the moderating effect of political skill on team conflicts, which carter to the organization scientist Ferris's (2002) appeal to search for the moderating effect of political skill within all kinds of organizational environments.

2.2 Political Skill in Task Conflict and Relationship Conflict

Scholars have proposed two major possible explanations for the co-occurrence of task conflict and relationship conflict in teams. The first argument is that task conflict causes relationship conflict through a process of misattribution (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Faced with a task-oriented conflict, which includes disagreement on viewpoints, ideas and opinions, team members tend to over-attribute other members' behavior to dispositions (Allred, 2000). When this attribution process points toward personal attack (Torrance, 1957) or hidden agendas (Amason, 1996; Amason & Sapienza, 1997) task conflict triggers relationship conflict through a process of biased information processing and self-fulfilling prophecy (Simons & Peterson, 2000). In this way, misattribution leads to a line negative mental hint and then results in a deeper misunderstanding between team members. The second mechanism of conflict scholars is emotion (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Emotions, especially negative emotions, are an important aspect of relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Rispens, 2012). Negative emotions include anger, discomfort, frustration and hatred (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Yang and Mossholder (2004) suggested that emotions and emotional expression act as cues influencing team members' attitudes toward conflict and subsequent behaviors. This is because emotional expression conveys information about senders and provides a basis for assessing interpersonal relationships. Moreover, negative emotional expression evokes more negative behavior. To sum up, task conflict and relationship conflict are consistently correlated through a process of misattribution and negative emotional expression. These theoretical analyses are applied in the current study.

The misattribution and improper emotional expression will be less likely when team members with high levels of political skill. For one thing, political skill is thought to create feelings of trust, confidence and likability in others (Ferris et al., 2007). Politically skilled team members have ability to understand task conflict accurately and respond rapidly, dealing with such task-related conflict in nonthreatening ways. Politically skilled team members are good at utilizing social relationships and genuine attitudes to communicate with other party, and other party will feel at ease and see the politically skilled team members as trustworthy and connected around. Thus, the higher the levels of political skill of the team members possess, the less possibility there is of misunderstanding. Moreover, team members with high political skill more readily adjust their feelings and emotional expressions (Liu, Perrewé, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2004). Collins (1981) argued that whether people are well-accepted and able to successfully interact in a team depends on how they express emotion, positively or negatively. Team members with high levels of political skill will obtain more emotional support from others, and they tend to conduct positive behavior to deal with conflict situations. Additionally, emotional expression has the characteristic of being retrospective. The positive outcome will be received when both parties are politically skilled.

Thus, from the perspective that political skill can both (a) reduce misattribution via creating trust, confidence and likability and (b) adjust emotional expression via conducting proper behavior, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis: The association between task conflict and relationship conflict is moderated by political skill such that the association becomes less strong when team members with high level of political skill.

3. METHOD

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

The sampling frame for the survey was based on the Chinese contractor firms listed in the Engineering News-Record's (ENR's) top 250 international contractors. A survey questionnaire for data collection was adopted in this study. When the survey was finished, a total of 206 questionnaires were confirmed. An analysis of the demographic information of the respondents reveals that an overwhelming majority (92%) of the respondents was male and the average age of respondents was 35 years old. The respondents had a good education background (i.e. 84% with bachelor degree or

above), and many of them were staff (86%). The respondents also had considerable relevant working experience (i.e., 51.5% of them have worked more than 5 years in the construction industry).

3.2 Measures

Task conflict. Drawing on prior research on conflict study (Jehn, 1995), we measured the task conflict with four-item scale. For example, respondents indicated the extent to which team members had conflicting opinions or disagreements about task-related issues. An example item is “In our team we have many task-related conflicts.” Responses on scales were given on a five-point Likert scale from 1 “Strongly Disagree” to 5 “Strongly Agree”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.92.

Relationship conflict. Drawing on prior research on conflict study (Jehn, 1995), we measured the relationship conflict with four-item scale. For example, respondents indicated whether interactions between team members are characterized by a relationship-related issue. An example item is “How much interpersonal fighting about interpersonal relationship issues is there in our team.” Responses were given on a five-point Likert scale from 1 “Strongly Disagree” to 5 “Strongly Agree”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91.

Political skill. We used Vigoda-Gadot and Meisler’s (2010) shortened eight-item version of the self-reported Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al., 2005). The shortened PSI consists of four dimensions: two items assessed social astuteness (e.g. “I have good intuition or savvy about how to present myself to others.”), two assessed interpersonal influence (e.g. “I always seem to instinctively know the right thing to say or do to influence others.”) and two assessed networking ability (e.g. “I spend a lot of time and effort at work networking with others.”), two assessed apparent sincerity (e.g. “When communicating with others, I try to be genuine in what I say and do.”). Respondents were asked to self-report their perceptions of their own political skill. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 “Completely Disagree” to 5 “Completely Agree”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91.

Control variable. Age and tenure were controlled in this study. Respondents’ age and tenure are commonly controlled for conflict study (e.g. Jehn, 1995; Mooney et al., 2007) and were treated as continuous variables.

4. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics and correlation coefficient matrix of the variables in this study are shown in Table 1. As noted in Table 1, task conflict and relationship conflict are positively related ($r = 0.44, p < 0.01$), which is consistent with prior research (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000). In addition, political skill, as a moderator variable, is not correlated with any other variables.

The hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the hypothesis. To prevent multicollinearity issues, the variables were mean-centered before conducting the moderation analyzed (Aiken & West, 1991). We analyzed the data by taking the following steps: first, we included the control variables, namely, age and tenure; second, we entered the main effect variable; and third, the interaction terms were entered.

The hypothesis predicts that the association between task and relationship conflict becomes weaker when team members have high levels of political skill. The regression analysis (see Table 2) confirmed this expectation. The interaction effect of task conflict and political skill had a significant beta-weight ($\beta = - 0.33, p < 0.01$) and explained 2 per cent ($p < 0.01$) additional criterion variance (see also Chart 1). Chart 1 shows the slopes of the regression lines linking the task conflict and relationship conflict under conditions of political skill. We followed the procedure of Aiken and West (1991) by computing the slopes from β coefficients derived from regression equations that adjusted the interaction term to reflect different values of moderation. Since the continuous moderating variables of political skill were breakpoints, there was no theoretical meaning. We defined the low scores as one standard deviation below the means and high scores represent one standard deviation above the mean. As shown in Chart 1, the positive relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict was weakened under conditions of higher political skill. This result provides support for the hypothesis.

Table-1: Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients matrix for all study variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	35.1	9.80	—				
2. Tenure	8.68	8.57	0.89**	—			

3. Task conflict	2.60	0.72	-0.04	-0.01	-		
4. Relationship conflict	2.40	0.70	0.03	-0.06	0.44**	-	
5. Political skill	3.36	0.55	0.2	0.01	-0.07	-0.08	-
Notes: n = 206, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.							

Table-2: Hierarchical regression results of task conflict × political skill on relationship conflict

Variable	β	R ²	ΔR ²
Step 1: Control			
Age	0.23		
Tenure	-0.06		
Gender	0.08	0.08	0.08
Step 2: Main effects			
Task conflict (TC)	0.47***		
Political skill (PS)	-0.23	0.37*	0.29**
Step 3: Interaction effects			
TC × PS	-0.33**	0.39**	0.02**
Notes: n = 206, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.			

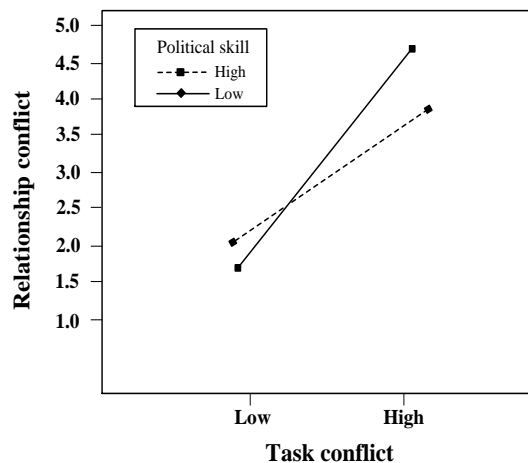


Chart-1: Interaction effect of task conflict and political skill on relationship conflict

5. DISCUSSION

The results of present study provide support for political skill as a moderator that influences the relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict. The interrelation between task conflict and relationship conflict was demonstrated to be weaker when team members possessed higher levels of political skill. Politically skilled team members have the ability to perceive the motives of others and enact influential methods such as genuine communication and harmonious negotiation to eliminate misunderstandings and negative emotions, thus reducing the likelihood of detrimental relationship conflict between team members.

This research provides a new perspective to understanding team conflicts. Political skill is a comprehensive personal ability, which involves the adoptions of an integrated trait-behavior perspective in team conflict research. This research

opens up new territory for future conflict theory studies and promotes researchers to explore other personal factors in future conflict theory studies. Furthermore, this research responds to calls by organizational scientist (Ferris et al., 2002), who have appealed to scholars to search for boundary conditions or the moderating effects of political skill in all kinds of organizational environments. Our study sheds light into the “black box” between political skill and team conflicts. More specifically, this research has explored political skill’s moderating effect on team conflict. Under the moderating effect of political skill, relationship conflict caused by task conflict reduced. Additionally, team managers need to give the time, effort and resources to create and use political skill training programs.

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