

# A Review of Research on Team Conflict, Conflict Management and Team Performance

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the research on the relationship among team conflict, conflict management and team performance, mainly introduces the influence of different mediating factors and moderator effects on this relationship. To clarify the research status of conflict management theory and points out that the formation and transformation of conflict needs further research, not only from the linear causality but also from the system dynamic perspective. At the end of this paper, the trend of future research in this field is prospected.

**Keywords:** *team conflict, conflict management, team performance, conflict formation and transformation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

To cope with the increasingly fierce competitive international environment, companies must actively improve the management and operation of the team to increase the speed of response to the market dynamics. With the development of globalization, the formation and transformation of team conflicts, the management of conflicts, and the relationship between team performance have been widely concerned. With the expansion and integration of capital and operation, more enterprises build work framework around the team, so as to fully expand and share the knowledge and experience of team members and rely on diversified teams to accomplish complex or creative tasks. However, the differences of knowledge and experience of team members often lead to differences and divergences in their understanding of the task itself and the task objectives, therefore leading to team conflicts. As a result, conflict management and team performance have attracted more and more attention from scientific and applicatory perspective. In the past 20 years, there have been a lot of related academic research. This paper reviews the research on the relationship among team conflict, conflict management and team performance, mainly introduces the influence of different mediating factors and moderator effects on this relationship, in order to clarify the research status of the theory of conflict management; and also points out that the formation and transformation of conflict needs further research, not only from the in prior linear causality conflict study but also from the extended system dynamics framework, at the same time it puts forward the direction that the current research is worth expanding.

## 2. RESEARCH ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONFLICT AND TEAM PERFORMANCE

At the organizational level, there are three types of typical team conflicts, including task conflict, relationship conflict and process conflict, are proposed by Jehn[1]. In early research, conflict and groups theories focused on the negative effects of team conflict. Conflict has been suggested to interfere with team performance and reduce satisfaction because it produces tension, antagonism, and distracts team members from performing the task. However not all conflicts are negative. The task conflicts about different understandings, viewpoints and perspectives of the work itself; the relationship conflict between the disputed interpersonal tension, friction, resentment, etc. that might hurt the team relationship; and the process conflict about how to complete the inconsistent views of the task. All of these conflicts are likely to improve team performance and innovation. These conflicts against tasks rather than people are called constructive conflicts. De Dreu and other researchers pointed out that task conflict has a strong negative correlation with team performance and team satisfaction. Task conflict types with high complexity (such as decision-making type, project type, mixed type) have stronger negative correlation with team performance rather than task conflict types with less complexity (such as production). And task conflict was less negative correlation to team performance when task conflict and relationship conflict were weakly correlated per De Dreu and Weingart[2]. Structural equation analysis supported the model that a cooperative instead of competitive approach to conflict leads to conflict efficacy that in turn resulted in effective performance as measured by managers. And also suggested how organizational teams can be prepared to make sure of their autonomy to deal

with conflicts for their productivities by Alper, Tjosvold and Law[3].

Later, De Wit and Jehn conducted meta-analysis on the empirical studies of group conflict and its relationship with group performance. Through their exploration of the trends, and the heterogeneity across the studies, and a number of moderating variables, it was found that relationship conflict and process conflict had a stable negative correlation with group performance. And in the contrary to the findings of De Dreu and Weingart, it reveals that there is no correlation between task conflict with team performance. A more complex framework across the moderator analyses, that task conflict and group performance were more positively correlated when task and relationship conflict were relatively weak. De Wit, Greer and Jehn and other researchers studied the contingency model of conflict type moderator and found that when the research object is the enterprise senior management team rather than the non-senior management team, as well as the financial indicators or decision quality as the performance evaluation criteria, and the correlation between task conflict and relationship conflict is weak, task conflict and team performance are positively correlated. This reveals that the type of task conflict no longer bears the relationship with performance. The moderators including the group contextual characteristics (1. cooccurrence of conflicts types; 2. task type; 3. organizational level; 4. cultural context). And methodological characteristics ( 5. average level of intragroup conflict; 6. setting; 7. subjects; 8.conflicts scale; 9. operationalization of group performance; 10. measurement of performance; 11. publication status)[4].

Despite the potential positive significance, team task conflict often leads to team relationship conflict. Past studies have shown that a series of interpersonal factors, such as team communication, team trust, etc., can help to reduce such correlation. Another alternative view is that performance related factors (such as perceived team performance) are proposed, which play a moderating role in this relationship as per Guenter et al.[5]. The perceived team performance can uncouple task conflict from relationship conflict. Only when perceived team performance is low, task conflicts relate with relationship conflict. Task conflicts may be beneficial for team performance whereas relationship conflicts are associated with negative team performance. Because the two conflict types are typically correlated within teams, it is difficult to enhance task conflicts and simultaneously avoid relationship conflicts. Rispens examined how importance of the conflict issue moderates the association between task and relationship conflict and tested that the interaction between task conflict and issue importance on relationship conflict is mediated by task conflict emotionality. Results confirmed that the buffering effect of conflict issue importance. When teams fight about important task issues, no association between task conflict and relationship conflict was found. This effect could be partially attributed to the decrease in negative emotions present in teams during important task conflicts per Rispens[6]. Jimmieson, Tucker and Campbell studied the

relationship conflict in the workplace by examining the process underpinning the escalation of task conflict to relationship conflict with one's supervisor and the moderating effect of employee trait self-control (TSC) to predict employee strain. The result showed that the positive effect of task conflict on relationship conflict was significant for low TSC employees and non-existent for high TSC employees. Furthermore, the other result showed an indirect positive effect of task conflict (through relationship conflict) on psychological strain, job burnout, and turnover intentions, but not job dissatisfaction [7].

The study of De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia found that task conflict and team creativity are positively correlated, which are moderated by employees' learning orientation and goal consistency respectively. When the learning orientation of employees is high, the relationship is strong; when the goal consistency of employees is high, the relationship is weak; at the same time, when the learning orientation of employees regulates the impact of goal consistency, the high learning orientation will weaken the impact of goal consistency [8]. The studies show that task conflict plays an important role in the team operation process, but little about who exhibits greater creativity when in conflict for a greater team creativity. To strengthen the understanding of the team creativity, the study found that the relationship between task conflict and team creativity is an inverted U-shaped relationship, which is moderated by the intensity of employees' growth needs, according to Y. Li, Yang and Ma[9]. Under the condition of structural work resources regulation, the relationship between task conflict and team creativity is an inverted U-shaped; under the condition of social job resources regulation, the relationship between task conflict and team creativity is a linear positive correlation. At the same time, it shows that increasing structural job resources and social job resources, will positively affect employee creativity, that moderate task conflict has the potential to benefit organization, per Petrou, Bakker and Bezemer[10].

At the individual level, the model of team task conflict's differential influence on individual creativity reveals that cognitive reappraisal makes individuals show a higher level of creativity in the face of task conflict, and perspective selection partially mediates this relationship; expression inhibition makes individuals show a lower level of creativity in the face of task conflict, and emotional exhaustion completely mediates this relationship, as per Zhang Xiaojie et al.[11]. Conflicts and functional confusion within the team are likely to lead to unsatisfactory team operation and performance. The relationship between team internal conflict and job satisfaction. When individual members in a team perceive a larger team internal conflict, individual satisfaction is low. As a mediator, individual emotion causes team members to have negative emotions, which results in lower job satisfaction. The support of the supervisor will moderate the relationship, and the high support of the supervisor will buffer the internal conflict of the team and reduce the adverse impact on job satisfaction, according to Greenwood and Haar[12]. The indirect relationship

between individual task conflict and individual creativity is mediated by employee information refinement, while team reflection moderates the relationship between individual task conflict and employee information refinement. When the level of team reflection is high, the indirect relationship is stronger; on the contrary, when the level of team reflection is low, the indirect relationship is weaker, as per C.-R. Li, Li and Lin[13].

### **3. RESEARCH ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND TEAM PERFORMANCE**

A large number of literature studies show that task conflict in perspective is generally considered to be beneficial to team performance, and there is a close relationship between task conflict in perspective and relationship conflict in emotion. DeChurch and Marks examined the influence of team conflict management on team performance, and the moderating role of group conflict management on the relation between task conflict and team performance. Results of a field survey indicated that the use of agreeable conflict management in response to task conflict was associated with greater group satisfaction. Results examining team conflict management as a moderator showed that the relationship between task conflict and group performance was positive when conflict was actively managed and negative when it was passively managed. Similarly, task conflict improved group satisfaction when managed with agreeable behaviour, and harmed satisfaction when neutral or disagreeable behaviours were used [14]. De Dreu found that when task conflict was moderated by conflict management approach, the work team showed higher creativity; meanwhile, the achievement of the team's short-term goals was negatively affected. There is a linear relationship between task conflict and team creativity, but there is no such relationship between relationship conflict and team creativity. Task conflicts are mediated by factors that the team collaboration to solve problems [15]. Conflict management theory can help leaders and team members understand how to make their conflicts productive and learn cooperative conflict skills of direct expression of feelings, an elaboration of ideas, emphatic understanding of opposing perspectives, creating alternative solutions, and accepting new resolutions. Studies show that people's values of social face, persuasion, and nonverbal communication, when appropriately expressed, promote cooperative and constructive conflict. Field studies indicate that cooperative conflict contributes to successful teamwork, quick service, and leadership in organizations. With such cooperative conflict, individuality and freedom of expression very much contribute to team life and team productivity, according to Tjosvold and Ding[16].

The being managed task conflicts affect the relationship conflicts subsequently. The conflict management strategy moderates this relationship: the competitive task conflict

management model deepens the subsequent relationship conflicts; the collaborative task conflict management model alleviates the subsequent relationship conflicts, per L. A. Dechurch, Hamilton and Haas[17]. In the relationship among team conflict, conflict management, team cohesion and team performance, conflict management has a direct positive impact on team cohesion and moderates the relationship between relationship conflict and team cohesion, as well as the relationship between task conflict and team cohesion. This result suggest that a high level of conflict management not only has a direct impact on team cohesion but also alters the negative and positive effects of relationship conflict and task conflict, respectively on team cohesion. At the same time, team cohesion will positively affect team perceived performance, team satisfaction, and team vitality, per Tekleab, Quigley and Tesluk[18]. Shaw, Zhu and Duffy etc. tested the relationships of task conflict, relationship conflict, and 2 dimensions of team effectiveness (performance and satisfaction) among 2 samples of work teams in Taiwan and Indonesia, their finding shows that relationship conflict moderates the relationship between task conflict and team performance, specially the relationship is in an inverted U shape when relationship conflict is low, but the relationship is linear and negative when relationship conflict is high. And the team satisfaction are more equivocal, but provides some evidence that relationship conflict exacerbates the negative relationship between task conflict and team satisfaction [19]. Lu and Wang studied the relation between conflict management styles and relationship quality and the moderating effect of the level of task conflict on the relation between conflict management styles and relationship quality. The results show that the integrating style is positively related to relationship quality, and the compromising style is negatively related to relationship quality. Furthermore, with an increase in the level of task conflict, the positive effect of the obliging style on relationship quality will be weakened and the positive effect of the avoiding style will be strengthened [20].

There are studies about the effect of leaders on some aspect of team conflict, however there is no compilation of research that gives clear picture of when, why and how leaders influence team conflict. Zhao, Thatcher and Jehn studied on the critical role of the leaders in group conflict through integrative review and synthesis, and figured out that leaders regulate, manage and promote team conflict, something that is missing from the team conflict literature. They conducted multidisciplinary review incorporates the role of leaders in instigating, engaging in, and managing team conflict. And conflict manifests in teams triggered them to study the multitude of ways that leaders impact conflict, through intentional or unintentional conflict instigation, engagement in conflict as strategic observers, or conflict management via conflict resolution [21].

Although conflict management has been widely concerned, most of the research is still focused on the individual and small team level, there is no verification whether the conflict management method created by the

organization can become the norm shared by the society. Gelfand et al. studied three conflict cultures, including cooperation, domination and avoidance, as unit level respectively, and found that leaders' conflict management behaviours were related to typical conflict culture research units. It is proved that conflict culture has an impact on the macro results of an organization, including its vitality (such as cohesion, potential and burnout) and its performance (such as creativity and customer service). The view of conflict culture transcends the individual level and brings a new perspective to the dynamic conflict management at the organizational level [22]. For the purpose to study the relationship between task, relationship, process conflict and team performance, as well as the conflict types at team level, team conflict dynamic model is used to study the relationship between conflict types and key variables (including psychological safety, conflict management, team performance). Such model considers dynamics by examining conflict transformation over time, reciprocal effects of conflict management processes, and negative feedback loop. Furthermore, the model includes contextual features involving team design and the organizational environment, according to Apos, Neill and McLarnon[23].

#### **4. EXTENSION RESEARCH ON CONFLICT FORMATION AND TRANSFORMATION**

As for the research on the relationship among team conflict, conflict management and team performance, the current mainstream is to study conflict as an independent variable, while the research on conflict as a mediator or dependent variable is relatively limited.

Task interdependence is used as an independent variable to study the influence of task conflict, relationship conflict and team cooperation as intermediary factors on team performance. Task interdependence has a significant positive impact on team cooperation and team performance, and a significant negative impact on relationship conflict; relationship conflict has a significant negative impact on team cooperation; task conflict has a significant positive impact on team performance; team cooperation has a significant positive impact on work performance; trust significantly regulates the effectiveness of task conflict on team performance, per C.-c. Lee et al.[24]. Organizational climate consistency is used as an independent variable to study the relationship between team task conflict and team communication quality. Compared with the team with strong organizational climate consistency, the team with weak organizational climate consistency tends to have higher task conflict and lower team communication quality, per Gonzalez-Roma and Hernandez[25]. The political atmosphere of an organization is regarded as an independent variable to study the relationship between team conflict (including task conflict and relationship conflict) and individual creativity. It is found that political atmosphere is

positively related to team conflict. Team conflict is negatively correlated with employee creativity. Political atmosphere regulates the relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict. When the political atmosphere is strong, the relationship between them is strengthened, by Bai, Han and Harms[26]. Change leadership is used as an independent variable to study the impact of team task conflict and relationship conflict as mediators on job satisfaction and performance. Through structural equation model research, Kammerhoff, Lauenstein and Schutz reveal the effectiveness of task conflict mediated change leadership on team performance and relationship conflict mediated change leadership on job satisfaction [27].

Taking individual factors and group factors as antecedents, ZhuShixiang and Zhang Yong study the causes, process and performance of senior management team conflict. The interaction between task conflict and relationship conflict indirectly affects performance under different conflict management methods and situational factors [28]. Taking task conflict as dependent variable, G. Lee et al., have revealed that formal control and Chinese "relationship" are effective corporate governance mechanisms to restrain task conflict in outsourcing business when Chinese manufacturing organizations outsource R & D and manufacturing, while Chinese "relationship" regulates the effect of independent formal control on dependent variable task conflict, especially in the case of R & D outsourcing. Such study provides a reference for effective management of task conflict [29].

The nature of conflict could change along its progress, however most of the researches in prior used to adopt the linear single point measure of the phenomenon, treating conflict as a stable and static property. Packer and Chasteen discussed three levels of temporal units as period, episode, and move examined the states and processes of conflict[30]. Paletz et al. studied the time in conflict formation, defined into three levels of temporal units and came out as periods, episodes, and moves. In the meantime, they studied the size in conflict formation, revealed how micro-conflicts were built into meso-conflicts, and then accumulated into macro-conflicts. They stated that it is time and not the number of parties involved, and the analysis of the nature of such move, episode, and period framework to form and test the hypotheses about conflict dynamics, yet their resulting models and hypotheses were still about the linear static relationships[31]. Cronin and Bezrukovarealized that dynamics have been indirectly present in conflict research but neglected as an aspect of study. They continued the study about the conflict dynamics and developed the system dynamics framework to capture dynamic change and review in a different model which is moving beyond linear causality. They also disclosed the system dynamics framework can reinterpret and synthesize a multitude of static cause and effect findings from cross levels research about conflict formation and transformation. When time was included into the relationship research between conflict, conflict management and team performance, it reveals that the teams with early success would have less

task conflict and process conflict, time was a moderator that still had a fixed relationship to conflict. With the system dynamic framework could explain, predict and control how such multilevel and multifaced conflict system will evolve on the basis of its own history over time, and advance the study of conflict beyond the linear causality and predict and manage conflict dynamic in a more substantial approach[32].

Yu introduced the concept of team mindfulness, which is being defined as a share belief among team members that their interactions are characterized by awareness and attention to present event, and experiential, non-judgmental process of within-team experiences. Team mindfulness is examined as a safeguard against multilevel team conflict transformation processes. Their result from three multi-wave field studies validated a team mindfulness instrument and indicate that team mindfulness negatively relates to team relationship conflict, and reduces the connection between task conflict and relation conflict at team level, and reduced the cross-level spill over of team relationship conflict to individual social understanding. It is showing that team mindfulness is a promising intervention to reduce team conflict and its negative effects [33].

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper reviews the research progress of the relationship among team conflict, conflict management and team performance, combs the influence of different mediating factors and moderating effects on this relationship. In order to clarify the research status of conflict management theory and points out that the formation and transformation of conflict needs further research, not only from the linear causality but also extended from the system dynamic framework perspective. And the influence of team engagement, team mindfulness to team conflict. Nowadays, with the rapid development of global economy, science and technology, and the influence of Geopolitics on the international pattern, these have brought more challenges to the modern and future organizations. More dynamic research is needed in the study of conflict management and team performance.

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