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**Point/
Counterpoint**

The conflict-positive organization: it depends upon us

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Summary

Although still widely assumed to be disruptive, conflict, when managed appropriately, has been found to make teamwork within and between organizations effective. However, organizational members often have competitive relationships and orientations to dealing with conflict that lead to conflict avoidance and escalation, approaches that sabotage decision-making and relational bonds. Conflict researchers have contributed to the bad reputation of conflict by confounding conflict and competition and suggesting that the kind of conflict, rather than its management, determines its outcomes. Studies in the West and East indicate that by developing cooperative relationships and the skills to discuss diverse views open-mindedly, organizations can empower managers and employees to use conflict to probe problems, create innovative solutions, learn from their experience, and enliven their relationships. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Conflict can be highly constructive, indeed, essential to teamwork and organizational effectiveness. Why have a team if team members have similar backgrounds and think alike? The very rationale for an organization is to combine the energy, ideas, and knowledge of diverse people. Combining this diversity requires ongoing conflict management; management cannot simply mix various perspectives in a bowl but people must themselves hammer out new ideas and approaches through ongoing discussion. To work in an organization is to be in conflict. To take advantage of joint work requires conflict management.

In Tjosvold (1991) I tried to be a gadfly by starkly arguing that, because conflict is both inevitable and potentially highly constructive, organizations should become conflict-positive. I was predicting to myself that although readers, including conflict researchers, may be initially skeptical, in 10 years this message would seem obvious. Perhaps if this prediction was public, I would have been confronted with disagreement and my assessment would have become more realistic. The world has become more interdependent with greater need to manage conflict, but appreciating and developing the capabilities to manage it are too often woefully inadequate. Conflict has great potential but we are far from fully realizing it.

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This essay argues that available evidence has clearly demonstrated that cooperative management of conflict has both short-term and long-term significant benefits for both organizations and individuals across a wide range of situations. Although managing conflict cooperatively demands considerable intellectual, emotional, and relational capabilities, executives, professionals, and workers have all demonstrated that they can discuss their differences openly and constructively. Indeed, studies show that conflict pervades all aspects of organizations and conflict management is necessary for people to do their jobs effectively.

What Is Positive Conflict?

Our research has documented that protagonists who emphasize their cooperative, positively related goals where they believe that as one moves toward goal attainment the others do too are prepared to engage in open-minded discussions; they express their various views directly, try to understand each other, and combine their ideas to solve the underlying problem for mutual benefit. In contrast to this theory on the approach that is likely to result in positive outcomes, our definition of constructive conflict is not so clearly operationalized. Deutsch (1973) argued that conflicts are constructive to the extent that participants consider that overall they have gained more benefits than costs. Assessing these benefits and comparing them with the costs though involve a complex calculus. Conflicts can have wide-ranging effects and it seems likely that actors typically experience different effects and that consequences valuable in the short-term are not necessarily valuable in the long-term.

Studies to be reviewed have documented that cooperative conflict management can have important short-term and long-term consequences that protagonists are likely to experience as beneficial. Experiments have shown that cooperative conflict can be constructive in the short-term as measured by understanding issues, making quality solutions, and strengthening relationships. Field studies provide evidence that these effects generalize to various organizational settings and persist over time. A recent study provides evidence of the value of being predisposed to manage conflict cooperatively for long-term psychological development and health (Tjosvold, Huang, Johnson, & Johnson, 2006).

Conflict Is Everywhere and Everywhere Can Be Valuable

Conflict management is usually considered a niche area within organizational behavior, but we have found that it extends throughout organizational studies. Conflict pervades all the functional areas in organizations and, when well-managed, promotes vital organizational outcomes. Avoiding conflict has proved ineffectual as a general approach toward collaborating, although it can be useful in some circumstances (Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Wishing for a 'conflict-free' work environment is unrealistic and pretending to have such an environment is undesirable. Ironically, conflict offers a broad understanding of organization and is a way of uniting organizational studies. I feel lucky to study conflict.

Working with others and managing conflict are inseparable; dealing with conflict is not an activity separate from work. Our studies show that people are not only continually confronted with conflict but that they must manage conflict to work successfully in accounting, marketing, human resources, information systems, and other functional areas (Tjosvold, Leung, & Johnson, 2006). The next section takes accounting as an example of a functional area that requires conflict management.

Conflict management in functional areas: accounting

Accounting professionals must manage conflict to apply their specialized expertise. As they collect data and present the results, accountants often conflict with exuberant managers who want to exaggerate their business performance. Jack Welsch argued that confronting reality was the first rule of management but accountants must fight to get people to face it (Tjosvold & Poon, 1998). Accountants also need to discuss diverse issues directly and constructively with managers to develop quality budgets that provide resources to organizational units that can use them most profitably (Poon, Pike, & Tjosvold, 2001; Tjosvold & Etherington, 1998). Although some ethical remedies are straightforward, typically people must frankly discuss possible violations and work out ethical resolutions that are responsive to people and the business (Snell, Tjosvold, & Su, 2006).

Conflict and organizational research: leadership

Conflict has important implications for understanding central organizational phenomena and performing needed functions. For example, conflict management research is updating our understanding of effective leadership. Considerable research indicates that leaders can be successful through quality relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Less recognized is that leaders and employees cannot allow frustrations to brew; they need to manage their conflicts to develop quality relationships (Chen & Tjosvold, 2007; Chen, Tjosvold, & Su, 2005; Tjosvold, Poon, & Yu, 2005). An important reason why quality relationships are useful is because they promote constructive conflict that in turn results in employee involvement and performance (Tjosvold, Hui, & Law, 1998).

A traditional, still compelling image is that effective leaders make tough decisions and then use their power to enforce compliance. But this is a dangerous stereotype. Studies by diverse researchers have documented the contribution of conflict to making decisions (Amason, 1996; Anderson, 1983; Cosier, 1978; George, 1974; Gruenfeld, 1995; Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Peterson & Nemeth, 1996; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Ragan, 1986; Tetlock, Armor & Peterson, 1994; Tjosvold, Wedley, & Field, 1986). Through conflict, conventional thinking is challenged, threats and opportunities identified, and new solutions forged. Discussing opposing views has been found to give teams the confidence to take calculated risks where they also are prepared to recover; with this preparation, they innovate (Tjosvold & Yu, in press). Even in a crisis, leaders are typically more effective when they seek out diverse views (Tjosvold, 1984, 1990b). Rather than making tough decisions alone, effective leaders are oriented toward promoting the conditions and relationships for open-minded discussion of opposing views among colleagues and employees.

Conflict management in diverse organizational settings

Organizational researchers divide their work into areas of studies such as teams and performance management. But conflict cuts across these areas. In addition to leadership, conflict occurs in teams and between departments and its management is vital for their effectiveness. Conflict spills out across organizations. Marketing specialists must deal with conflicts within their firm but also with their customers (Tjosvold & Wong, 1994). Supply-chain partners able to manage conflicts improved product quality and reduced costs as well as strengthened their relationships (Tjosvold, Cho, Park, Liu, Liu, & Sasaki, 2001; Wong, Tjosvold, Wong, & Liu, 1999). Conflict offers a way to understand organizations as a whole and their dependence on other organizations.

Conflict management for diverse outcomes

Conflict management gets things done. It promotes team performance and citizenship behavior (Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000; Tjosvold, Poon et al., 2005). When employees discuss their views openly and constructively, they reduce costs and improve quality (Tjosvold, 1998; Tjosvold & MacPherson, 1996), use new technology advantageously (Tjosvold, Meredith, & Wong, 1998), and make restructuring effective (Tjosvold, 1990a). Top management teams who managed their conflicts cooperatively developed their company's strategic advantages (Chen, Liu, & Tjosvold, 2005). Conflict management helps entrepreneurs strengthen their networks so that they can develop their business (Tjosvold, 1997; Tjosvold & Weicker, 1993).

Conflict management promotes learning as protagonists begin to doubt the adequacy of their present ideas and search to understand perspectives that may be more adequate (Johnson, Johnson, & Tjosvold, 2006; Tjosvold, Sun, & Wan, 2005). Students who disagreed with each other checked out more books from the library and demonstrated greater understanding of the issues than students who agreed with each other. Teams able to manage conflict cooperatively are able to reflect on their experiences to improve their performance (Tjosvold, Hui, & Yu, 2003).

Developmental psychologists have long argued that controversy induces perspective-taking that in turn promotes moral and cognitive development (Kohlberg, 1969). A recent study provides direct evidence of the value of cooperative conflict for psychological development and health. Employees in China predisposed to manage conflict open-mindedly and integratively were psychologically healthy both in terms of general and work-specific measures (Tjosvold, Huang et al., 2006). Being predisposed to resolve conflicts in win-lose ways seemed to have at least some benefits for long-term psychological health. Avoiding conflict was not useful for either general or work-related health and resulted in alienation from work and co-workers.

Managing interest and emotional conflict

The value of open-minded discussion is not limited to decisions and differences of opinions but is also useful for conflicts involving interests. For example, management and union representatives with cooperative goals expressed their opposing views directly to each other, listened open-mindedly, conveyed an intent to work for mutual benefit, and combined their ideas. With this kind of discussion, they developed creative, quality solutions and used their resources efficiently (Tjosvold & Morishima, 1999; Tjosvold, Morishima, & Belsheim, 1999). They resolved their grievances with positive feelings, satisfied both union and management, and improved procedures that would help them resolve future grievances.

Despite the widespread beliefs that conflict's benefits are limited to task and rational issues, studies indicate that open-minded discussions of anger can be very useful for strengthening relationships and restoring respect between persons (Tjosvold, 2002; Tjosvold & Su, in press). These discussions communicate that the angered person believes that other had intentionally and unjustifiably frustrated him or her and the reasoning the person used to reach this conclusion. The discussants are then able to clarify their intentions and make amends, and these understandings can in turn develop confidence that similar incidents are less likely.

Conflict in collectivist cultures

Although conflict management is often thought to be limited to the individualistic West, our studies conducted since the mid-1990s indicate that cooperative conflict management can be very useful for

teamwork and alliance partners in China. Indeed, experimental and field studies have found that collectivist, compared to individualistic, values promote cooperative, positive conflict (Tjosvold & Wu, 2005; Tjosvold, Law, & Sun, 2003; Wong & Tjosvold, 2006). Conflict management strengthens genuine harmony and respected, effective leadership.

The costs of avoiding conflict

Avoiding may be the most popular approach world-wide to deal with conflict. Evidence does not support this approach. Since the late 1970s, we have conducted experimental and field studies that indicate that avoiding is seldom useful. Recent experiments have built upon previous findings by indicating that the value of open compared to avoiding approaches extends to the collectivist culture of China in that open discussion promotes understanding each other's perspective, developing high quality solutions, and strengthening relationships (Tjosvold & Sun, 2003; Tjosvold, Hui, & Sun, 2004; Tjosvold, Sun et al., 2005). Indeed, Chinese people considered those discussing their views openly to be more competent and respectful than those avoiding conflict.

Our field studies indicate that avoiding conflict undermines relationships and performance in teams and supply-chain partnerships (Chen & Tjosvold, 2002; Wong et al., 1999). Noteworthy is that teams that rely on avoiding conflict also tend to rely on competitive approaches. It seems that unproductive teams avoid conflict but as that proves frustrating, they try winning but as that too proves ineffective, they revert to avoiding. The result very much undermines performance and relationships.

But Why Does Conflict Have a Bad Reputation?

Conflict in part deserves its reputation as it can very much wreck havoc on relationships, individuals, and organizations. The reality is that conflicts are often handled in costly, painful ways (Tjosvold & Janz, 1985). And even conflicts that are well-managed do not necessarily result in much satisfaction; sometimes people chose not to be friends.

Challenges to manage conflict

Studies, some of which were just reviewed, have documented that many people in a wide range of settings are able to make effective use of conflict. Top executives, professionals, and workers have given us many examples of how they managed conflict openly and constructively. Cooperative conflict management occurs in what would appear to be inhospitable situations. When confronted with a threat to the safety of their airplane, flight crew members were able to discuss their various views open-mindedly that helped them restore the plane to safety (Tjosvold, 1984, 1990b).

Conflicts are often poorly managed. Managing conflict gives a lot but requires a lot. Protagonists must be both emotional and rational; they should express their feelings but also develop their arguments rationally using deductive and inductive reasoning. They must honestly express their views but do so in ways that encourage others to express theirs. Perspective-taking is a social capability valuable for conflict management as well as overall social and cognitive development, but putting oneself in another's shoes is difficult to do, especially in the heat of an intense conflict. Incorporating opposing arguments into one's own thinking requires moving away from one's original position and re-thinking

one's arguments. Unfortunately, we are typically more skilled at resolving minor conflicts than more vital ones. Life involves giving and taking; conflict presses us to do these fully and skillfully.

Conflict management is a joint activity, much more effective when all sides believe they are trying to make their conflicts mutually beneficial. But these expectations are fragile as people misread each other's intentions. Avoiding a discussion can be intended to minimize the other's discomfort but be experienced as closed-mindedness. Arguing a position forcefully can be intended to initiate an open dialog but be experienced as an attempt to coerce. Strong relationships promote conflict management but too often relationships in organizations are fragmented and ambivalent. Conflict management does not play to our strengths but reveals our weaknesses.

As people have to deal with conflict everyday, they develop skills and procedures but they also develop ineffectual habits and insensitivities. Managing conflict is like skiing. On the easy slopes, it is easy to keep form and keep one's weight forward but on the difficult slopes, average skiers lean back, losing control and confidence. We often let bad habits and impatience emerge when confronted with complex conflicts with people important to us.

The contribution of conflict research

Unfortunately, conflict researchers have contributed obstacles to the constructive management of conflict in organizations. Rather than challenge managers and employees to confront and relinquish their stereotypes and misleading theories about conflict, researchers have reinforced them. This section examines central confusions in the study of conflict that have frustrated progress.

The most critical confusion has been equating conflict with competition (Tjosvold, 2006). Conflict is typically either not defined or defined in terms of opposing interests as if in every conflict protagonists' goals are negatively related. This definition is confounding; are the effects due to conflict or to competition? This confusion reinforces competitive ways to deal with conflict. Managers and employees who assume that their conflict is about opposing interests are oriented toward winning and imposing, approaches that typically escalate or suppress conflict.

Conflict can be defined as incompatible activities; one person's actions interfere, obstruct, or in some way get in the way of another's action (Deutsch, 1973). Incompatible activities occur in both cooperative and competitive situations. Just because protagonists believe that their goals are cooperative in that as one person achieves his or her goals, the other also achieves, does not mean that they do not have incompatible activities. They may argue for different approaches to solving their common problem or they might be upset about the fairness and effectiveness of their division of labor. In our studies where managers and employees identify concrete cases, the vast majority indicate that they have largely cooperative goals when they disagree (Tjosvold, 1993). Within this cooperative context, they are much more likely to discuss their incompatible activities open-mindedly, integrate their ideas to develop a resolution, get things done, and strengthen their relationships.

Conflict researchers have become enamoured with categorizing conflict as to its content (e.g., task or relationship) and its source (e.g., scarce resources or the need for cognitive consistency) and theorized that conflicts within one category are more or less likely to be constructive. For example, conflicts that involve task issues are more constructive than relationships ones; conflicts based on resource scarcity are more likely to be destructive whereas those about cognitions can be more useful.

But issues over tasks can be discussed effectively or ineffectively, as can relationship ones (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Tjosvold, Law, & Sun, 2006). In addition to not providing practical advice about what to do about relationship conflicts—other than to somehow avoid them—this categorizing of conflict tends to reinforce destructive stereotypes. Although often believed, impersonal, 'rational' discussion that inhibits expressing feelings is not ideal for conflict management. We know that feelings and thinking are highly related. Even discussing philosophical issues involves important emotions;

researchers have strong feelings about how to conduct their studies. Dealing with conflict requires an integration of our rational, task, emotional, and relationship sides.

Categorizing types of conflict strengthens the even more harmful stereotype that destructive conflict 'happens' to people as if the conflict takes over, leaving people paying the price. Many people do feel helpless in an escalating conflict; the harder they try, the hotter the conflict gets. It may give some short-term comfort to believe that 'People cannot manage their relationship conflicts'. But the kind or source of conflict is not the culprit; it is how people manage it that determines its course and outcomes. Our research should help people confront their stereotypes, move away from blaming conflict itself, and adopt more useful ways to manage their conflicts constructively.

Conflict Management Knowledge

Progress is being made. More managers and employees around the world are recognizing the reality of conflict and the need to manage it. In a recent experimental study in Beijing, recently recruited middle managers were randomly assigned to take the role of a newcomer in a company that valued positive conflict or valued conflict avoidance (Chen, Tjosvold, Huang, & Xu, 2007). They really enjoyed being in an experiment; they never had introduction to psychology compulsory experiment requirements! But in the de-briefing, many managers in the condition where the culture of their new company was to remain harmonious by avoiding open discussion of differences gave sincere, thoughtful lectures to us about how this approach was unrealistic and counterproductive.

Globalization, demanding international marketplaces, immigration flows, business alliances, and other forces are intensifying the demands on people throughout organizations to confront their differences and manage their conflicts. Because we need to manage our conflicts does not mean that we will. Traditional stereotypes that conflict involves opposing interests where one has to fight to win, a 'conflict-free' environment is possible, avoiding conflict is a viable long-term solution, conflicts should be discussed 'maturely' without emotions, and only task conflicts can be successfully managed confuse and distract managers and employees.

Leaders though can have an enduring impact by structuring more discussion about conflict and its management. As leaders and employees study and debate conflict, they can realize that a 'conflict-free' organization is an unrealistic, dysfunctional illusion and understand the need to confront their confusions and develop a more realistic understanding of the nature of conflict and the relationships and skills needed to make effective use of it.

To draw an implication from Albert Einstein's idea that God does not play dice, would God be so cruel to structure so much conflict if it could not be constructive? Developing a conflict-positive organization, or at least an organization where conflicts can at times be discussed openly and mutually, is needed. Devoting a fraction of the energy and time now wasted on avoiding conflict to developing cooperative conflict management would payoff handsomely for many organizations. Learning to manage conflict is a challenging, invigorating journey and conflict research will be invaluable for providing directions.

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Author biography

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