THREE KEY THEMES LEADERS MUST KNOW

TO BE CONFLICT SPECIALISTS

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Introduction

> "Successful leaders manage conflict; they don't shy away from it or suppress it but see it as an engine of creativity and innovation…. The challenge for leaders is to develop structures and processes in which such conflicts can be orchestrated productively."
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> **…** Ronald Heifetz & Marty Linsky

The aim of this paper is to summarize a sampling of relevant research literature examining the connections between leaders, organizations and conflict and to present three key themes that emerged. The first theme deals with the context in which leaders find themselves in conflict: their organization and its culture. The second theme examines what impact a leader's perspective on conflict has on followers and the organization. The third theme discusses the role and responsibilities of leaders in relation to constructive conflict engagement.

First Theme: Organizational and Cultural Relationship to Conflict

The intersection between conflict, organizations and culture has been examined in several revealing studies. Katz & Flynn (2013) interviewed and surveyed a wide-range of workplace leaders, managers and employees in private, public and non-profit organizations to determine their level of awareness, perception and use of conflict management systems and strategies. The key finding was that there was a distinct lack of awareness of the value of conflict management systems and strategies (Katz & Flynn, 2013, p. 395).

Surprisingly, this lack of conflict management awareness was in spite of the amount of time leaders actually spent dealing with conflict, and for most leaders, the amount of time spent is substantial. Katz & Flynn (2013) cite four separate studies

showing how much time senior, middle manager and supervisors spend dealing with conflict, and the range is from 21 to 50% of their time (Dana 2001, O'Leary & Van Slyke 2010, Thomas & Schmidt 1976, Watson & Hoffman 1996).

This lack of conflict management awareness for leaders and within organizations shows up in two specific areas: firstly, a lack of awareness about how conflict impacts an organization's performance and its finances and secondly, a lack of awareness regarding the types of tools and strategies available to help with conflict (Katz & Flynn, 2013, p. 400).   Although leaders stated they spent three to four hours a day dealing with conflict, none of the organizations contacted had ever attempted to estimate the cost of conflict within their organization (Katz & Flynn, 2013, p. 400).   As Management Guru Peter Drucker has said: "What *gets measured gets* managed."

Dana's research (2001) does speak to the impact of conflict on workplaces and organizations. In his research on exit interviews, he discovered that 50 percent or more of voluntary resignations were directly related to chronic, unresolved conflict (Dana, 2001). In the case of involuntary resignations, conflict was a decisive factor in 90% or more of the people leaving (Dana, 2001). One cost of conflict, that of replacing an employee, is cited as between 75% and 150% of the departing employee's annual salary (Phillips, 1990, p. 58).   This cost alone justifies training leaders in conflict management. The researchers Slaikeu & Hasson (1998) gathered data showing that organizations with developed collaborative conflict management systems experienced significant cost savings. The company Brown and Root reported as much as an 80% reduction in outside litigation costs; Motorola a 75% reduction over six years; NCR a 50% reduction with a drop of pending lawsuits from 263 to 28 (Slaikeu & Hasson, 1998, p. 14).

Although such research does show the impact of conflict as a significant cost to organizations, most importantly, cost remains largely unrecognized and unquantified within organizations themselves (Dana, 2011). The reason for this gap between leaders grappling with conflict and this lack of awareness of conflict's impact, or the tools needed to deal with it constructively, may be explained through organizational culture. Organizational culture impacts all parts of an organization and thereby influences what the conflict management systems and strategies will be (Katz & Flynn, 2013). How an organization deals with conflict is a subculture, and a critical and influential element of an organization's overall culture (Katz & Flynn, 2013, p. 398). Conbere (2007) illuminates this idea of a subculture by identifying that the ideas underlying conflict management stand in stark contrast and difference from the recognized cultures and cultural norms in most organizations (p. 215).

The conflict culture Katz & Flynn (2013) discovered in the majority of organizations they studied, was what they termed a "culture of avoidance" amongst both leadership and employees. A number of leaders admitted they ignored certain interpersonal conflicts in their organizations expecting the conflicts would work themselves out or "just go away." More than half of those surveyed admitted they avoided dealing with a conflict issues directly and complained instead to others about it; avoidance of conflict was found to be an inherent cultural characteristic present in most workplaces (Katz & Flynn, 2013, p. 404). What is used instead, Katz & Flynn (2013) tell us, is an overwhelming reliance on the adversarial practices of executive denial, managerial avoidance, formal grievances, and litigation or threats of litigation (p. 406).

Kuttner (2011) states that in an organizational culture where the overall tone is

one of avoidance of conflict and its complexities, it is common for employees to expect

or defer to authorities to resolve their issues, instead of being encouraged, feeling

empowered to and wanting to play an active role in solving their own problems (p. 114).

Lipsky & Avgar's (2010) found that whether conflict management systems are beneficial

or detrimental in an organization is primarily a function of whether it is integrated with

the organization's dominant culture (Lipsky & Avgar, 2010, p. 41).

Morgan (2006) found a key part of how conflict is viewed by the organization and

its leaders is dependent on the type of image or metaphor the organization uses to

describe the organization itself (p. 5). Morgan's (2006) premise is that all theories of

organizations and culture are based on images and metaphors that dictate how we see and

interact with organizations (p. 4). Morgan (2006) offers many images an organization

can be living into and three that seem relevant to conflict avoidant cultures common to

most organzations are: the organization as a machine, with people as cogs, the

organization as a psychic prison and the organization as a political, power-oriented

system (p. 6). These kinds of images are consistent with Cloke & Goldsmith's (1997)

contention that the original purpose of management was to command and control, with its

roots in slavery, with management going through an evolution towards more democratic

leadership values (p. 161).

The research chosen for this literature review also references cultural

characteristics required for the success of integrated conflict management systems, of

which two will be identified. One key characteristic of successful conflict management

systems is a culture that expects people to engage with conflict, and to do so early.

Lipsky & Avgar (2010) called this a "Culture of Toleration and Early Resolution" (p. 39).

A second characteristic is an organization that has chosen an image of itself conducive to constructive conflict engagement. Organizations that see themselves as prisons or power-over places do not support constructive conflict engagement and stifle upward communication. Organizations as evolving learning systems, as democracies, as collaboratives, are all images which make it more likely that healthier conflict and conflict engagement can take hold.

To summarize the first theme then, an organization's culture and its attitude towards conflict influences both its leaders and employees. To date, conflict avoidant cultures seem to be the waters of denial most leaders and followers swim in. Katz & Flynn (2013) anticipate organizations will experience ever-increasing conflict because of seismic changes such as shifting organizational structures, more reliance on shared leadership models, continued budget cuts and global competition. The need for more conflict aware organizations and cultures, they intimate, is growing.

Second Theme: Leader's Impact on Followers and Organization

While culture has a strong impact on conflict, leaders have a strong impact on followers and the organization. Katz & Flynn (2013) observed a connection between leaders who had a flexible style of leadership and also possessed a favourable attitude toward conflict management (p. 404). Leaders who promoted collaboration and a shared responsibility for handling conflict, using tools such as mediation, negotiation, and facilitation rather than the traditional grievance process, had lower incidences of conflict in their organizations. (Katz & Flynn, 2013, p. 404).

Notably, Runde & Flanagan (2007) found a strong correlation between effective leadership and constructive engagement in conflict (p. xiii). They suggest the way

leaders are seen handling conflict sends a strong message to those around them about the ability to engage conflict constructively (Runde & Flanagan, p. 9). This is consistent with the leadership researchers Kouzes & Posner (2012) who have interviewed hundreds of thousands of leaders asking what their key practices were during peak leadership experiences. The very first practice is called "Modeling the Way" – the capacity of a leader to model how they want things "done around here" (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).   A leader's approach to conflict is reflected in their followers.

Building on the idea of how leaders impact conflict, Ewing (1989) did a number of case studies of employees who had been exceedingly unhappy at work and caused disturbances because of it. He found that more than half of the cases could have been averted if the supervisors had engaged, in a skillful way with those who had come forward at the outset (Ewing, 1989, p. 69). Most worth highlighting, when Katz & Flynn (2013) researched performance problems in the workplace, they found them to be more attributable to strained relationships in the workplace than to the commonly cited reasons of a deficit in skills or of motivation (p. 387).

Runde & Flanagan (2007) sate that in order to establish credibility as a conflict competent leader, it is imperative to model constructive engagement in conflict (p. 9). One study showing a clear link between conflict competence and leadership competence comes from the research Runde & Flanagan (2007) conducted with over three hundred managers. They found that bosses, peers, and direct reports rated leaders as more effective when they were showing constructive responses to conflict. Conversely, those who engaged in destructive types of responses to conflict were seen as ineffective leaders (Runde & Flanagan, 2007, p. 11).

Despite the strong correlation between a leader's capacity with conflict and the impact on followers and the organization, Guttman (2004) found in many job descriptions of leadership qualities and competencies, the ability to manage conflict is notably absent (p. 48). Runde & Flanagan (2007) state that conflict competence must become a key expectation for effective leadership because a leader's capacity to engage conflict constructively has a crucial and direct impact on organizational success. (p. 11).

In summary, the second theme shows that how a leader engages with conflict in the workplace has a profound impact on their followers and the wider organization.

Third Theme: The Role of Leaders in Conflict

The third theme found in the literature review concerns the specific expectations or role of leaders, in the face of conflict. Daudelin (1996), like Cloke & Goldsmith (1997), linked the increasingly more democratic values in the workplace to the changing role of leaders. Daudelin (1996) suggests a manager's role needs to shift from charismatic leader (who has all the answers) to coach – a person who works with employees to help them discover answers for themselves (p. 38). Kuttner (2011) echoes a similar observation about the role of leaders. Both leadership and dispute resolution research highlight that a central skill for leaders is their ability to empower their employees to take ownership of their situation and to support personal growth (Kuttner, 2011, p. 107).

Kuttner (2011) takes the role of leader further by suggesting leaders must take on the role of conflict specialists (p. 108). Gerzon (2006) interviewed leaders who transformed conflict in their workplaces and found the most effective leaders were those who used the same kinds of skills and mindsets as mediators: working for the interests of all, looking at differences as opportunities and seeing the whole system (p. 6). Gerzon

(2006) suggests, because of the complexity, diversity and changing values of the work world today, leaders can no longer be dictators or even "ordinary" managers, but must lead like mediators (p. 6). Gerzon's research puts dispute resolution and its skills and mindset at the center of what is to be expected as effective leadership.

Runde & Flanagan (2007) see the leader's responsibility to not only model effective behaviors but also to find ways to transform their organization's conflict culture. Runde & Flanagan (2007) advocate for leaders to champion the establishment of processes and systems that strengthen organizational conflict competence, such as conflict training, conflict coaching, and mentoring, which as early intervention strategies, also promote a systems approach to handling conflict (p. 10).

To summarize the third theme, the research puts the responsibility for engaging conflict on the shoulders of leaders. It also calls for a broader definition of leadership, one that includes conflict competence as central to leadership effectiveness. Given the changing dynamic in the workplace, the research calls for changing expectations for leaders: to have the capacity to coach, negotiate and mediate disputes constructively.

Conclusion

This research literature review searched for the relationship between organizations, leadership and conflict resolution. Three themes emerged: wide-spread organizational conflict avoidance, making it difficult for conflict to be acknowledged and worked with; a leader's competency with conflict significantly impacts the outcomes of conflict; the need to expect leaders to be conflict specialists.

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