

Do Debates Get More Heated In Cyberspace? Team Conflict In The Virtual Environment

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Advances in information and communication technologies have provided teams the opportunity to communicate virtually, without dependence on face-to-face communication. This has made it possible for organizations to assemble teams from around the globe that wouldn't otherwise be formed. As a result, organizations are in a better position to compose teams that leverage and combine diverse knowledge, skills, and resources to innovate and improve performance. Technology has also provided more flexibility for co-located teams to communicate virtually. Because of these attributes, most organizational teams now have some element of virtual communication in their team collaboration processes.

While virtual communication has its benefits for teams, it also presents formidable challenges to the team's functioning. One of these challenges, researchers have found, is that team conflict often is exacerbated when working in a virtual environment.

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Understanding conflict in virtual teams is important because conflict has been shown to have direct effects on team performance and satisfaction. If managed right, conflict can be kept constructive and may improve team outcomes. If left unchecked, conflict can spiral into more destructive personal conflict that distracts team members from

the tasks at hand and jeopardizes team performance.

Although researchers have studied conflict for a long time now, research on conflict in virtual teams is scant. Our research examines conflict in virtual teams and focuses on two questions that have important practice implications: How does virtuality influence the development of team conflict? What strategies can help teams better manage conflict in the virtual environment? Our research is in an early stage and will be extended over the next year. This article reports our initial insights regarding our research questions as well as offers preliminary advice for ways in which managers can help virtual teams manage conflict effectively.

Constructive and Destructive Conflict in Teams

Conflict can have paradoxical effects on team decision-making and outcomes.

Conflict can improve decision quality of teams, as well as their understanding of and commitment to the team's decisions. Unfortunately, conflict can degrade team decision-making and performance when it distracts team members from the essential issues of the team project. This paradox exists because of the nature of the conflict

the team experiences. Specifically, conflict is multi-dimensional, and exists in both constructive and destructive forms.

Constructive conflict occurs when team members debate differing perspectives about the tasks at hand. Such exchanges improve decision-making because they help team members better understand issues surrounding the decision context and synthesize multiple perspectives into decisions that are superior to any individual team member's perspectives. Destructive conflict occurs when team members engage in debates that are emotional and personal in nature, such as power struggles and personal incompatibilities. These debates create tension and animosity among team members, distracting teams from the tasks to be accomplished and inhibiting team decision-making and performance.

The prescription for resolving this paradox seems simple – teams should stimulate constructive conflict but avoid destructive conflict. The challenge is that constructive and destructive conflict often occur together. Researchers have consistently reported that teams who experience high levels of constructive conflict also tend to report high levels of destructive conflict. Specifically, researchers have found that constructive conflict tends to trigger relationship conflict. What starts off as rational, productive exchanges of diverse ideas has a tendency to spark more relationship-oriented differences.

The tendency for constructive conflict to trigger destructive conflict appears to have to do with team members' attempts to interpret other team members' intentions and motivations during decision-making. When the

perspectives offered by other team members are different from their own, team members are likely to rationalize those diverse perspectives by making attributions about the individuals who offered the perspectives. Researchers have found that when team members' diverse viewpoints are more subjective or difficult to justify, team members may have greater reason to misinterpret those viewpoints and attribute them to being motivated by more sinister intentions, such as political game-playing.

How to Keep Conflict Constructive

To avoid the misattributions that underpin the tendency for constructive conflict to trigger destructive conflict, researchers have explained that team members must develop strong trust in one another (Simons and Peterson, 2000). When one person trusts another, they may be less prone to attribute self-serving motives or hidden agendas to another's conflict behavior. Perceiving that they are trusted, a person is also more likely to reciprocate trust.

The second factor found to mitigate the relationship between constructive and destructive conflict is behavioral integration (Hambrick, 1994). A team with strong behavioral integration has strong unity of effort. The members share information and

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resources, work collaboratively on projects and tasks, and make decisions together. On the other hand, teams with little behavioral integration work more independently. They exchange little information and resources, and do not consult each other on tasks and decisions. In short, a team that exhibits behavioral integration has a high degree of teamness.

Researchers have suggested that behavioral integration helps teams keep conflict task-oriented because the mutual interaction associated with behavioral integration provides opportunity for team members to share and explain the rationale for their perspectives. As a result, other team members are more likely to understand each other's perspectives and less likely to make faulty attributions and social judgments. Research by Mooney, Holahan and Amason (2007) found that when teams display norms of behavioral integration, they are more likely to experience constructive

conflict and avoid triggering destructive relationship conflict.

Media Richness and Virtuality Defined

Two issues are important to understanding how a virtual environment affects how a team experiences conflict: media richness and virtuality. Below we define what these terms mean and discuss how they affect team conflict.

According to media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; 1984), "richness" is the key characteristic of a communication medium that is important for effectiveness. Richness is defined as the ability of information to change understanding in a timely manner, or the clarity with which information can be communicated through a specific channel in a way that reduces information ambiguity in a timely manner. Lower levels of richness require more time for comprehension of the information. Several researchers have linked various attributes of virtual communication technologies to differing degrees of richness. Virtual communication technologies such as video conferencing are relatively high in media richness because they allow information to be communicated in real-time, using both verbal and non-verbal means. Virtual communication technologies such as e-mail are seen as relatively low in media richness, as they rely only on written communication and are less synchronous (i.e., real-time). In other words, not all virtual communication technologies are created equal – some are "richer" than others.

Virtuality has been defined in several different ways. Our work uses Kirkman and Mathieu's (2005) definition of virtuality, which includes:

- the extent to which team members use virtual communication technologies to coordinate and execute team processes
- the amount of informational value or "richness" provided by such technologies

Table 1- Strategies for Managing Conflict in Virtual Teams

Develop Virtual Team Members' Experiences with Virtual Communication Technologies:

- Do not rely solely on on-the-job training for virtual communication technologies.
- Consider virtual technology training that begins when employees join the organization and is followed up periodically to refresh knowledge and train employees on new virtual technologies.
- These learning opportunities should focus not only on depth – understanding a particular technology well – but breadth: becoming proficient in a wide variety of virtual technologies.
- With exposure to a spectrum of virtual technologies, employees would also benefit from stronger instruction on the advantages and disadvantages of different virtual technologies and how to choose technologies that are well-suited for their communication processes.

Develop Virtual Team Members' Experiences with One Another:

- When composing virtual teams, consider including team members that have prior experience working together.
- Offer virtual teams team-building opportunities to help team members without prior experience together gel.
- Time team-building opportunities at the beginning of the project, as this is the time that team members begin to make assessments of trustworthiness and develop norms of working together that tend to get reinforced in future interaction.
- Team-building efforts can be done virtually but may be even more effective if virtual teams are given some face-to-face team building opportunities.

- the synchronicity of team member interactions

Thus, team virtuality is a continuum that increases as teams increase the frequency with which they use asynchronous communication technologies which provide only limited informational value, i.e. are low in media richness.

Like Kirkman and Mathieu, we assume that when team members are co-located, they are less likely to communicate via virtual communication technologies, and that geographic dispersion is more likely to be correlated with the adoption of virtual means of communication. But geographic dispersion is not a prerequisite for virtuality. In other words, being co-located does not preclude team members from interacting via virtual communication technologies or from being highly virtual.

The Influence of Virtuality on Team Conflict

Researchers have noted that the social ties in virtual teams are different from those observed in teams that interact face to face. In virtual teams it has been observed that conformity is lower, interpersonal bonds and cohesiveness are lower, members are less satisfied with their interaction and like each other less compared to members of face-to-face teams. Researchers attribute these outcomes to the diminished effects of social influence and social identity processes in virtual teams. These researchers argue that technology-mediated communication carries less social information than face-to-face communication, which inhibits the development of social ties and shared meaning.

If virtuality (the use of asynchronous virtual communication technologies that provide only limited informational value) constrains the social context of communication, then it follows that interpersonal processes such as trust and the establishment of team norms – like behavioral integration – will be harder to establish in the virtual context. If trust and behavioral integration are lacking, then it follows that it will be more difficult for teams to keep conflict focused on task-related issues, and in essence, effectively manage team conflict. Thus, the question becomes, how might team members overcome or circumvent these negative effects of virtuality?

Managing Conflict in the Virtual Environment: Experience Helps

In the paragraphs above, we discussed how virtuality indirectly affects the team's ability to manage conflict via its effects on team trust and behavioral integration. In essence, the higher the virtuality, the more difficult it will be for teams to establish trust and norms of behavioral integration due to the more limited social cues and context inherent in highly virtual communications. Thus, virtuality is negatively related to the team's ability to establish trust and norms that support behavioral integration.

The news isn't all bad, though. With the right experience, teams are better positioned to avoid the negative effects of virtuality. Two aspects of experience in particular seem important in managing the effects of virtuality – experience with the communication media and team members' experiences with one another.

As team members become more experienced with a given virtual communication technology (e.g., email, discussion boards, video conferencing), they are likely to

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become more comfortable with its shortcomings and adapt it accordingly, in essence "enriching" it. For example, adding emoticons in email is an attempt to increase the media richness of email. Workman (2007) found that teams learn over time how to impose rules and procedures to compensate for media shortcomings. For example, team members may try to avoid confusion by being more comprehensive in the information they provide. See Table 1 for strategies for developing experience with technology.

Another factor that may diminish the negative effects of virtuality on team trustworthiness and behavioral integration is experience with one another. Teammate

experience with one another may reduce the constraints that the virtual environment imposes on team members' ability to build trust. When members have a wealth of experience working with each other, they gain knowledge of each other's attributes, such as work habits and personality factors. That knowledge can come in handy because it improves the team member's ability to interpret the subtle messages and social cues of other team members' communications that may be difficult to pick up in highly virtual communications. Team member experience with one another should help improve the accuracy of the attributions about the underlying meaning in virtual messages. As a result, experience with one another should in part substitute for the lack of richness in highly virtual communications and aid in assessments of trustworthiness and the establishment of team trust.

Experience with one another should also lessen the tendency for virtuality to inhibit behavioral integration. It takes time for newly formed teams to establish strong behavioral norms and cooperation. When new teams work virtually, it should be even

more difficult for such norms to take root because, depending on the virtual communication technology employed, team members may be limited in the manner in which they are able to communicate both verbally and nonverbally. If, however, team members have prior experience working together, team members begin with some basic level of shared understanding and expectations regarding roles and norms from their past experiences with each other. In other words, team members with experience working together have a reservoir of shared understanding from which to draw. This shared understanding around norms, roles, goals, etc., lessens the effects of virtuality on behavioral integration.

Conclusion

Cyberspace is here to stay. Among the many benefits it offers is the ability for high performing, diverse teams from around the globe to be formed that would not otherwise be possible. Virtuality, however, presents new and different challenges for teams. Due to the limitations of various types of communication technologies, virtual communication can give rise to misunderstandings, miscommunication, and misinterpretations of messages. Such virtual difficulties increase the likelihood that constructive conflict related to a team's tasks will lead to destructive conflict within the team, hampering the team's ability to function and perform effectively.

The challenge for teams is to learn how to manage conflict by keeping it task-oriented and to avoid destructive relationship conflict because it will have important consequences for the quality of their decision-making and performance. The initial message of our early stage research is that the challenge of managing conflict is even more difficult for

virtual teams, who are less able than non-virtual teams to develop trust and behavioral integration norms. We suggest, however, that virtual team members may be able to overcome these difficulties by gaining experience with the virtual communication technologies and with one another. ■

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