Front. Bus. Res. China 2008, 2(1):1–14
DOI 10.1007/s11782-008-0001-z

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Impact of team conflict on team decision quality and satisfaction: An empirical research in China

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Abstract Conflict is a pivotal variable influencing team decision performance. This article reviewed literature on intragroup conflict and studied how different types of conflicts affect perceived team decision quality and satisfaction. We conducted a survey on 156 managers and found that the task-relationship conflict dimensions are also valid in the Chinese context. We also found that both task conflict and relationship conflict are negatively related to team members' decision satisfaction. Relationship conflict acts as a mediator between task conflict and decision satisfaction.

Keywords team conflict, relationship conflict, task conflict, decision quality, decision satisfaction

摘要 冲突是影响团队决策绩效的重要变量。在总结近年来国内外团队冲突研究成果的基础上, 研究中国文化背景下的不同类型冲突对团队决策质量认知和满意度的影响。通过对156名企业管理人员的问卷调查, 发现中国企业管理人员对团队内冲突同样可以区分为关系冲突和任务冲突两个维度, 两种冲突都对决策满意度有负面影响, 其中关系冲突对于任务冲突和决策满意度有中介作用。

关键词 团队冲突，关系冲突，任务冲突，决策质量，决策满意度

Translated from *Guanli pinglun* 管理评论(Management Review), 2007, 19(7): 10–15

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1 Introduction

Organizational conflict has long been regarded as an important topic in organizational studies. Recently, team conflict has drawn increasingly more attentions from practitioners and researchers alike due to the prevalence of various kinds of teams in organizations. In a new era of changes, as organizations are facing more uncertainties than ever before, how to make correct and effective decisions in a quick-changing environment becomes a must for enterprises. Comparatively speaking, team decision-making can integrate more information and resources. It can also facilitate the implication of decisions. However, team decision-making may bring problems such as free riding, groupthink etc. Researchers have found out that team conflicts exert an influence on team decision performance. Thus conflict is a pivotal variable in team decision-making process(Amason, 1997; De Dreu, 2003). Based on a brief review of western team conflict literature, the paper aims at exploring the effects of team conflict on team decision quality and satisfaction in the Chinese context. We proposed series hypotheses and conducted an empirical study to test these hypotheses.

Conflict has been broadly defined as perceived incompatibilities (Boulding, 1963) or perceptions by the parties involved that they hold discrepant views or have interpersonal incompatibilities. Conflicts can be classified as self-conflict, interpersonal conflict, intragroup conflict, organizational conflict, social conflict, etc. This article focuses only on intragroup conflicts. Traditionally, conflicts were regarded as harmful to organizations(Pondy, 1967). A number of researchers, however, are determined to change the stereotype of conflicts. For instance, Amason and Jehn identified two type of conflicts, namely, emotional-related conflict and task-related conflict(Amason, 1996; Jehn, 2001). Jehn(1995) defined relationship conflict as interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which typically includes tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group; task conflict as disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions.

Although the relationship-task conflict classification has been supported by numerous empirical studies, there are still some controversies arguing that the two types of conflicts can not be distinguished and actually represent the same construct(Williams and O'reilly, 1998). The legacy of dual-type taxonomy is questionable unless team members can distinguish disagreements merely related to task from oppositions accompanied by animosity. On the other hand, how people perceive and interpret social psychological issues like conflict is always affected by their own cultural background. Up to now, most team conflict researches have been carried out in western societies, there has been little

research on how team members cognize and deal with conflict in Chinese enterprises. Therefore, the present research will validate the task/relationship conflict taxonomy, and investigate how different types of conflicts affect team performance, team members' satisfaction, etc. Teams studied in present research are all management teams undertaking decision-making tasks.

2 Hypotheses and conceptual model

2.1 Task conflict and relationship conflict

Simons and Peterson(2000) reviewed team conflict researches and concluded that relationship conflicts have negative impact on team decision-making performance. Relationship conflicts consume plenty of time and energy of team members' and constrain their ability of information processing; the conflicts increase members' pressure and anxiety, which affect their cognitive ability; finally, relationship conflict may cause antagonistic attribution for other team members behavior, which leads to mutual confrontation and conflict escalation in the team. Most extant literature suggests that relationship conflict is crucial to team decision quality and members' mutual affective commitment. Although the above conclusions were put forward and tested in western countries, we argue that they were also valid in the Chinese context. Cross-cultural studies have showed that, Chinese managers pay more attention to the harmony of interpersonal relationship. And Chinese people usually communicate in more tactful ways than people in the United States and the European countries. There would be great negative impacts on every team member if relationship conflicts occur. What's more, with the presence of relationship conflict, interpersonal communication within a team is impeded and the team's focus would be deviated from the ongoing task itself. As interpersonal harmony is viewed important in Chinese culture, relationship conflicts in team always cause serious problems: team with relationship conflicts is usually regarded as problem-ridden and inefficient. Thus relationship conflict will be detrimental to the quality of team decisions. It also decreases team members' acceptance to the final decision. Relying on these analyses, we develop a hypothesis as below:

H1: In the Chinese context, relationship conflict is negatively related to the decision quality and decision satisfaction perceived by team members.

In comparison to the relationship conflicts, the impacts of task conflicts on team decision making is more complicated. Jehn(1995) analyzed the function of task conflict and suggested that task conflict could be beneficial since it facilitates constructive criticism on decision alternatives, prevents team member

from accepting other's opinion under pressure, and reduces the chances of groupthink from occurring. Amason(1996) suggested that task conflict can help team members recognize and think about different viewpoints and opinions, thereby deepens their understanding of decision issue. Researchers also found that task conflict can help team members come up with creative thinking and ingenious solutions. Task conflict may, however, also have some disadvantages. Jehn(2001) suggested that task conflict also bring about internal tension and animosity thus may reduce the willingness of continued cooperation. Brehmer (1976) pointed out that pure cognitive conflict can also incur affective conflict because people can not judge their preference and choice objectively, resulting in mutual distrust and suspicion. Baron(1991) depicted the developing process of conflicts in team decision-making: to begin with, team members can exchange their own opinions rationally, and then affective factors involved, causing negative perception among team members. Therefore, we deduce that task conflict will be beneficial to decision-making quality under certain conditions, but it also decreases team members' satisfaction, and should be controlled carefully during the decision-making process. Given these assumptions, we develop the following hypothesis:

H2: Task conflict is positively related to the decision quality perceived by team members and is negatively related to team members' satisfaction.

Conflict is a sensitive topic in teams in Chinese enterprises. Conclusions drawn from occidental team conflict researches should not be expanded and applied in Chinese context without cautions. Compared to western people, Chinese people lay great emphasis on "Mianzi" (Social face), and will try to avoid direct conflicts(Tjosvold, 2005). Chen(2005) indicated that Chinese culture inclines to mix up human factors with business and can not distinguish the two things at the cognitive level. Thus if a Chinese management team is involved in conflicts, parties concerned are more likely to attribute task conflict to relationship conflict. In other words, there is a strong possibility that task conflict gives rise to negative affective reactions from team members in the Chinese context. Researches in western context have all validated a correlation between task conflict and relationship conflict(Simons and Peterson, 2000). Based on above analysis, it can be inferred that such kind of correlation may also exist (or even more significant) in the Chinese context. Thus, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that:

H3: In the Chinese context, task conflict will incur relationship conflict, and there is a high correlation between the two kinds of conflicts.

Some western researchers have identified the positive effect of task conflict on team performance, while other researchers argued that we should pay more attention to the interaction of the two types of conflicts. In the present study, we

adopted the Input-Process-Output framework as it was used in most team and group decision making researches. At the stage of input, team members define the decision task and develop several solutions. In the process of decision-making, they put forward their new solutions and discuss every possible alternative. Task conflicts are likely to occur and develop at this stage. Disagreements at the initial stage of team discussion are normal and will not affect team member's satisfaction. But as divergence increases, involved parties may make biased attribution. Once the disagreements between team members arouse negative emotions (like animosity, confrontation, etc), task conflict leads to relationship conflict. The presence of relationship conflicts counteracts positive effects of task conflict, impedes team members from adopting other opinions and from integrating all knowledge and information owned by the team. At the stage of ending, tensions and animosity caused by relationship conflicts will debase team members' evaluation on final decision and obstruct the implement of team decision. The above discussion shows that task conflict not only decreases team members' satisfaction, but also affects decision satisfaction indirectly through the mediation of relationship conflict. The mediating effect of relationship conflict may be either partial or full, depending on the greatness of the effect of task conflict on team members' decision satisfaction: when the direct effect is significant, relationship conflict acts as a partial mediator. It works as a full mediator when the direct effect is insignificant, as showed in Fig.1:

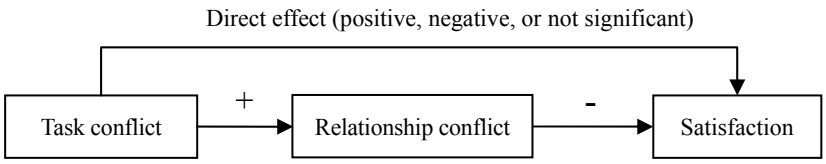

Fig.1 Mediating model of relationship conflict

As above-mentioned, the correlation between task and relationship conflicts is more significant in Chinese cultural context and the relationship conflict has a more significantly negative impact on team performance. Thus we can conclude that, in the Chinese context, relationship conflict can explain more parts of task conflict's effects on members' satisfaction as a mediator. Thereby we propose that:

H4: Relationship conflict mediates the effects of task conflict on team decision satisfaction.

2.2 Decision-making task

The decision-making task also has great impact on team decision-making process.

Complex task stimulates team members to work harder and promote team performance and output accordingly. McGrath(1984) discriminated team tasks by two dimensions: the horizontal dimension shows behavioral tasks to the right and conceptual or intellectual tasks to the left. The vertical dimension shows facilitative compliance tasks at the top and conflict tasks at the bottom. The model consists of four quadrants including Generate quadrant (involving planning and creative tasks), the Choose quadrant (involving intellective and decision-making tasks), the Negotiate quadrant (involving cognitive conflict and mixed-motive tasks), and the Execute quadrant (involving competitive tasks or tasks with a standard of excellence to achieve). The focus of the present study is not the nature and dimensions of team tasks, but the task complexity. Task complexity is a composite variable defined by the number of goals the team has, the number of paths that can be taken to achieve those goals, and the amount of cooperation among members required to carry out the task (Kuhn, 2000). Highly complex tasks are those that contain a large number of goals, many paths to achieve those goals, and require high levels of cooperation.

In the situation of high levels of task complexity, it is emergent for decision-making teams to manage intra-team conflicts effectively. When facing multi-goals tasks or multi-paths tasks, team members are more likely to get involved in disputes over task solutions, which mean more task conflicts during team decision-making process may occur. Once divergent solutions were provided, it would be quite difficult for team decision makers to settle the arguments, since it is hard to evaluate each solution. As a result, conflicts in the team may increase and upgrade, prohibiting the team from reaching a consensus. Overwhelming conflicts may even ruin cooperation among team members and disable the team from performing its task. Under such circumstances, guidance, coordination, and effective conflict management skills from a good team leader become especially important.

H5: The level of task complexity is positively related to task conflict.

2.3 Team leadership behavior

Relevant researches have shown that effective leadership makes a collectivity more cohesive. In addition, studies focusing on small groups have found that the existence of effective leadership greatly enhance the overall team efficiency. Leadership behavior consists of task-oriented(job-centered) and relation-oriented (people-centered) dimensions. Existing researches have proved that both task-oriented and relation-oriented leadership behaviors are beneficial to the performance of the organization and team alike. For team decisions, if the decision-making tasks are simple and procedural, they can be completed by empowered team members themselves; if tasks are complicated and need the

whole team to work together, team leader may need to devote more time and energy and play a vital role in the decision-making process. Since team leaders are usually more experienced and have access to more resources, they are very helpful in solving complicated tasks. More specifically, task-oriented leadership behavior efficiently reduces team conflicts resulted from information asymmetry, as well as arguments over the decision-making procedures and solutions. Relation-oriented leadership behavior helps maintain a harmonious atmosphere within a team. It also restrains the interpersonal conflicts from deteriorating. Drawing on the above rationale, we propose the following hypothesis:

H6: Task-oriented and relation-oriented leadership behaviors are negatively related to task conflict and relationship conflict respectively.

3 Methods

3.1 Survey procedure

We adopted in the study prevailing survey procedures to validate the above six hypotheses. For example, similar to the research design of Janssen and Veenstra (1999), we conducted a survey on more than one hundred managers and asked them to recall their experiences of team decision-making in the previous year and finish the questionnaire. The respondents from different teams and organizations are all on-the-job students attending a MBA program in Xi'an Jiaotong University. Out of the 200 questionnaires handed out, 156 valid ones were retrieved, with a response rate of 78 percent.

3.2 Measures

All independent, mediating, and dependent variables were measured on five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1(I totally disagree) to 5(I totally agree). The scales we adopted in the present study were frequently used in many other studies. Back translation method was used to guarantee the accuracy of Chinese version of scale. Translators were Ph.D students majoring in organizational behavior and all the translations were proofread by an oversea Chinese management professor.

Task complexity was measured with five items adapted from Kuhn's(2000) scale. Items include: (1) how much effort is required to complete the task? (2) To what degree is there more than one acceptable solution to the task? (3) To what degree is the task interesting and motivating to members? (4) To what degree is integrated action among team members required to complete the task? (5) To what degree are team members experienced with this type of task?

Task conflict and relationship conflict were measured through the scale developed by Jehn(1995). Items describing relationship conflict include: (1) How much frictionis there among members in your team? (2) How much are personality conflicts evident in your team? (3) How much tension is there among members in your team? (4) How much emotional conflict is there among members in your team? Items for task conflict are: (1) how often do people in your team disagree about opinions regarding the decision being made? (2) How frequently are there conflicts about ideas in your team? (3) How much conflict about the work you do is there in your team? (4) To what extent are there differences of opinion in your team?

Leadership behavior was measured with six items which were adapted from task-relationship leadership scale (Northhouse, 2002). Items about task-oriented leadership are: (1) the team leader concerns only work issues and tasks during the decision-making process; (2) the team leader provides directions for team members on work and solutions; (3) the team leader prescribed in advance each team member's responsibility and task. Items about relationship-oriented leadership are: (1) the team leader is very concerned about members' emotion and perception, and could treat other team members equally; (2) compared with issue of business achievement, the team leader is more concerned about maintaining interpersonal relationship harmony within the team; (3) the team leader is amiable and unassuming when he communicates with other team members.

Decision quality and member satisfaction are measured through scales used in Janssen's(1999) study. Decision quality scale consists of three items: (1) final team decisions is of much higher quality than the initial proposals of the individual members; (2) final team decisions reflects the best that could be extracted from the team; (3) final team decisions usually extended the quality of team member's individual input. Satisfaction among team members is measured by the following four items: after taking final team decisions (1) the atmosphere in the team is generally very good; (2) team members show a lot of respect for each other; (3) team members regularly talk gossips about each other, and (4) team members are usually heartily sick of each other (item 3 and 4 are reverse-worded).

4 Results

4.1 Reliability and validity

The Cronbach's Alpha tests(SPSS 13.0.) of all the 156 samples showed that most coefficients are above 0.7, except for those of task complexity and task oriented leadership behavior, whose values are only above 0.65. Several items were deleted to improve the internal consistency of the scale.

Construct validity was assessed by factor analysis. By using the principal components extraction and varimax rotation methods, we found out the following six factors, as showed in Table 1:

Table 1 Results of factor analysis

	Components					
Item	Leader behavior	Task conflict	Relationship conflict	Decision quality	Satisfaction	Task complexity
*COMP*1	.095	–.018	.069	.062	.202	**.834**
COMP3	.088	.328	.058	.378	.002	**.516**
COMP4	.047	.209	–.015	.170	–.024	**.769**
*RC*1	.011	.097	**.831**	–.096	–.106	.017
*RC*2	.020	.195	**.797**	.070	–.169	–.011
*RC*3	–.001	.273	**.747**	–.090	–.022	.009
*RC*4	–.114	.338	**.678**	–.016	.031	.075
*TC*1	–.031	**.790**	.197	.070	.057	.026
*TC*2	–.002	**.781**	.230	–.012	–.121	.007
*TC*3	–.124	**.746**	.173	–.171	–.076	.137
*TC*4	–.060	**.643**	.282	–.051	–.186	.164
*LEAD*1	**.752**	–.217	–.047	.062	.077	.213
*LEAD*2	**.672**	–.238	–.019	–.101	.144	.297
*LEAD*3	**.831**	.029	.030	.326	.123	–.016
*LEAD*4	**.752**	.029	.120	.286	.074	.016
*LEAD*5	**.684**	.155	–.260	.200	.165	–.255
*QUAL*1	.131	–.089	.040	**.818**	.277	.076
*QUAL*2	.290	–.117	–.134	**.695**	.200	.262
*QUAL*3	.243	.006	–.105	**.839**	.154	.125
*SATI*1	.103	–.079	–.129	.094	**.720**	.226
*SATI*2	.256	–.022	–.092	.294	.777	–.195
*SATI*3	.115	–.142	–.059	.209	**.780**	.112
Total variance	3.042	2.769	2.698	2.472	2.085	1.995
explained (%)	13.826	12.588	12.262	11.238	9.479	9.070
Total Variance explained (%)	68.464					

Total factor analysis indicated that most variables loaded strongly and distinctively on separate factors, with exceptions of task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership items which loaded on the same factor. We named this factor as leadership behavior and made a separate factor analysis of it. The result of factor analysis for leadership behavior is showed in Table 2, indicating that dualistic constructs of leadership in present study are validated through the survey data.

Table 2 Factor analysis of leadership behavior

Item	Components	
	Task leader	Relationship leader
*LEAD*1	.402	**.738**
*LEAD*2	.126	**.904**
*LEAD*3	**.814**	.405
*LEAD*4	**.742**	.345
*LEAD*5	**.862**	.070

4.2 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 3 shows the mean, standard deviation, and correlations among all variables. Since there were no significant correlations between the control variables(age and gender) and the independent/dependent variables, we did not include these control variables in the regression analysis.

Table 3 Correlations and descriptions of variables

Variables	*Mean*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Control variables									
Age	30.56	4.494	.013	–.067	–.053	.139	.119	.133	.047
Gender（m=0，f=1）	.21	.405	.011	–.023	.067	–.061	–.029	–.120	.026
1.Task complexity	3.7137	.71887	1.000						
2.Relation conflict	2.6683	.79978	.118	1.000					
3.Task conflict	2.9359	.72394	.237**	.519**	1.000				
4.Task-oriented leader	3.5577	.74045	.223**	–.139	–.235**	1.000			
5.Relation-oriented leader	3.3504	.84395	.152	–.052	–.075	.570**	1.000		
6.Decision quality	3.6175	.80215	.360**	–.151	–.130	.338**	.483**	1.000	
7.Decision satisfaction	3.5342	.75318	.169*	–.228**	–.236**	.313**	.371**	.509**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.3 Regression analysis

We used multiple regression analysis method to test our hypotheses (Table 4). The two models demonstrate the effects of variables on decision satisfaction and decision quality respectively.

Table 4 Regression analysis on satisfaction and decision quality

Variables	Satisfaction	Decision Quality
Task complexity	.171*	.344**
Relationship conflict	–.137	–.106
Task conflict	–.172*	–.131
Task-oriented leadership	.044	–.031
Relationship-oriented leadership	.300**	.433**
F	8.750	16.541
R Square	.226	.355
Adjusted *R* Square	.200	.334

The results of correlation and regression analysis showed that relationship conflict and task conflict are both significantly related to team members' decision satisfaction, but not significantly correlated to decision quality. Task complexity has significant impact on members' satisfaction and decision quality, and it is also significantly related to task conflict and relationship conflict. Therefore, both hypothesis 1 and 3 are supported, while hypothesis 2, 5 and 6 are partially supported.

Simons and Peterson reviewed more than ten empirical studies from western researches and estimated that there is an average correlation coefficients value of 0.47 between task conflict and relationship conflict. The correlation coefficient in present study is 0.519, a bit higher than the average value of those based on western samples. Although the comparison is without statistical deductive power, it does comply with the proposition of the present study that task conflict is more likely to induce antagonistic attributions in parties concerned and cause relationship conflict in the Chinese context.

4.4 Mediating effect test

We need to validate the mediating effect of relationship conflict in order to test hypothesis 4. Baron and Kenny (1986) suggested a three-step process for testing mediation using multiple regressions: (1) regress the mediator on the independent variable; (2) regress the dependent variable on the independent variable; (3) regress the dependent variable on both the independent variable and the mediator. If mediating effect does exist, the results of the first and second steps must be significant. Furthermore, if the relationship between the mediator and dependent variable in the regression equation is significant, but the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is not significant, then the mediator may be said to have a full mediating effect on independent and dependent variables. If the latter relationship is still significant, then the

mediating effect is partial.

The above 3-step process was applied to the present study and the results of regression are showed in Table 5. The result suggests that the relationship between task conflict and members' satisfaction are fully mediated by relationship conflict. The mediation of relationship conflict suggests that task conflict itself does not reduce team members' satisfaction directly, but it can incur relationship conflict which decreases satisfaction dramatically.

Table 5 Regression analysis

Steps	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Variables	Relationship conflict	satisfaction	satisfaction
Relationship conflict	—	−.228**	−.212*
Task conflict	.519**	—	−.099
F	56.710	8.431	5.825

4 Conclusions

This study validated a series of hypotheses on the impact of team conflicts on team decision-making. The result of our empirical study found both congruent and incongruent viewpoints compared with western conflict studies. Factor analysis showed that both task conflict and relationship conflict are identified in the Chinese context, but the positive effect of task conflict on team decision quality is not supported. Hypothesis 4 tested the mediating effect of relationship conflict, which is of great practical significance for Chinese managers: conflicts are inevitable in company teams; task conflict is not responsible for poor performance; managers should deal with team conflicts positively and effectively to avoid the generation and escalation of relationship conflict, but they shall not try to avoid all types of conflicts.

In this study, we further validated the impact of leader behavior on team decision-making. On one hand, task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership can decrease the degree of conflict and reduce the negative effects of conflicts. On the other hand, leadership behaviors can directly affect on team decision quality and satisfaction. Effective leadership can set up reasonable decision procedure and leader's ability and knowledge can help team members gain deeper understandings of decision tasks. Besides, team leaders can be very helpful in maintaining intra-team relations and keeping the team cohesive. We need to mention that leadership style is affected by cultural background, and so researchers must be careful when applying relevant conclusions based on occidental researches to Chinese management practice. In recent years, Chinese

scholars have made achievements in localizing leadership theory. Future study need to focus on how to combine the localized leadership theory with team studies.

To further study team conflicts, researchers need to consider introducing more variables that may dilute the strong correlation between task and relationship conflict. A number of Western scholars have suggested that trust, team norms and interdependence can all work on weakening the correlation between the two types of conflicts. By introducing those potential variables and exploring their moderating effects, researcher may learn more about the influencing mechanism of team conflict on team decision performance.

Acknowledgements This article is supported by the Funds for Creative Research Groups of the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 70121001).

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