Value Diversity and Affective Conflict Reduction Model: Reducing Value Diversity through Servant Leadership


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Conflict literature reveals value diversity influences team member satisfaction mediated through affective conflict. When the level of affective conflict increases to moderate or higher levels, teams experience unhealthy relational outcomes. This paper illustrates the value diversity and affective conflict reduction (VDACR) model can moderate the negative influence of affective conflict by introducing an internalized moderating variable, servant leadership. Leaders employing a servant leadership approach encourage the harmonization of follower and leader interests resulting in a long-term solution to blend demographically heterogeneous followers without experiencing the negative consequences such as members’ dissatisfaction and poor performance because of evaluated levels of affective conflict.

Researchers concur conflict managed improperly results in increased hostility, loss of energy, decline in morale, stifled cooperation, detrimental behavior, mistrust, poor decision making, and decreased productivity (Amason, Thompson, Hochwarter, & Harrison, 1995; Lippitt, 1982; Ohbuchi & Suzuki, 2003); as a result, people traditionally consider conflict an undesirable and unavoidable interpersonal dynamic to be eliminated (Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Ohbuchi & Suzuki; Shelton & Darling, 2004). In contrast, effectively managed conflict results in productive verbal exchanges, improved problem solving, increased participation, organizational growth, improved relationships, innovation, and increased productivity (Amason et al.; Lippit; Shelton & Darling; Shockley-Zalabak 1984). Thus, the functionality of managing conflict within teams requires careful scrutiny to extricate the beneficial outcomes and discard the detrimental outcomes.
Rahim (2000) argues conflict management “involves designing effective strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and maximize the constructive functions of conflict in order to enhance learning and effectiveness” (p. 5). Thus, the focus of conflict management is not to eliminate conflict; rather, the focus is to minimize the negative effects of conflict and to accentuate its positive effects so that learning transpires (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim; see also Klenke, 2003). However, Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin (1992) caution that not every conflict is manageable and produces win-win scenarios. Lewicki’s et al. concern elucidates the difficulties in managing affective conflict which researchers consider the most destructive and invasive type of interpersonal conflict (Jehn, 1995; Lankau et al., 2007; Rahim, 2002). Researchers argue the necessity of maintaining low levels of affective intragroup conflict to overt destructive outcomes (Jehn; Lankau et al.; Rahim); however, increased value diversity within teams elevates the level of affective conflict (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Lankau et al.). Thus, the research problem is value diversity within teams escalates affective conflict and produces destructive team outcomes such as decreased member satisfaction and reduced organizational commitment (Jehn; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Jehn et al.; Lankau, et al.; Rahim).

Minimal research exists offering strategies to prevent the detrimental affects of affective conflict in value-diversified teams; however, the servant leadership model encourages followers to share similar interests, thus, expressing altruism toward the leader’s organizational values as an outcome of the follower’s hope in the leader resulting in willful follower service (Cerff & Winston, 2006). Thus, employing a servant leadership approach becomes a viable strategy to reduce the breadth of value diversity within the teams to offset the negative consequences of affective conflict. Accordingly, this paper presents (a) a review of conflict literature to establish the theoretical basis of the value diversity affective conflict reduction (VDACR) model and operationalize key terms and variables, (b) a visual depiction of the conceptual model and the descriptions of the variables, and (c) the leadership and spiritual implications of the model.

Conceptual Framework

This paper proposes a model to reduce value diversity within teams; thus, operationalizing the term “team” precedes the discussion of conflict within teams. Researchers assert differentiating a group from a team is a tenuous endeavor because “it is impossible to clearly determine the point
where a group becomes a team” (Stewart, Manz, & Sims, 1999). Subsequently, this paper utilizes the terms group and team interchangeably; furthermore, these terms refer to a collection of individuals who are interdependent and accomplish inter-reliant tasks to produce a good or a service (Stewart et al.; Tuckman, 1965). Therefore, the conflict under discussion is intragroup (i.e., within a group) conflict rather than intergroup conflict, which refers to conflict between two separate groups or teams (Rahim, 2002).

Conflict theorists offer a myriad of definitions for the term “conflict” resulting in the absence of a generally accepted definition (Thomas, 1992). However, most researchers emphasize how real or perceived differences between two or more parties produce conflict (Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Kolb & Putnam, 1992; Lippitt, 1982; Rahim, 2002). Rahim argues conflict occurs when (a) circumstances necessitate participation in an activity oppositional to a party’s needs or desires; (b) a party’s preferred activities are incongruent with the implantation of an opposing party’s preferred activities; (c) one party’s acquisition of a scarce resource negates another party’s acquisition of the same resource resulting in dissatisfaction; (d) one party’s enactment of “attitudes, values, skills, and goals” (p. 207) excludes another party’s perceived enactment of those same aspirations; (e) two conjoining parties express opposing behavioral preferences; (f) two interdependent parties perform mutual roles or activities.

Rahim (2002) stipulates “conflict can relate to incompatible preferences, goals, and not just activities. . . . [I]n order for conflict to occur, it has to exceed the threshold level of intensity before parties experience (or become aware of) any conflict” (p. 207). In other words, a breach must occur in the threshold level of intensity for the individual or group to experience conflict. This threshold level varies within individuals and groups. Rahim’s insights are congruent with Barki and Hartwick’s (2004) notion that conflict germinates when an enactment causes a party to experience a negative emotion.

Thomas (1976) provides a model explicating the process of conflict by incorporating four components: (a) frustration, (b) conceptualization, (c) behavior, and (d) outcome. The onset of conflict occurs when a party ostensibly frustrates the satisfaction of the other party. Frustration causes one or both parties to conceptualize the conflict. According to Thomas, conceptualization may be a conscious or subconscious activity whereby one or both parties ascribe meaning to the frustration and develop potential recourses with their respective plausible outcomes. Furthermore, during the
conceptualization phase, the conflicting parties consider the possible results of their actions in contrast to the degree of satisfaction that each party may experience.

Subsequent to the conceptualization phase, the parties enter the behavior phase of the process in which they select one of five approaches to manage the interpersonal conflict. Thomas’ (1976) five approaches of managing conflict are a reinterpretation of Blake and Mouton’s (1964; 1967) conceptual scheme in their managerial grid where individuals choose varying degrees of satisfying self and others. The five approaches of managing conflict are (a) competition, (b) avoidance, (c) accommodation, (d) sharing, and (d) collaboration. Further discussion of these approaches is beyond the scope of this paper.

Synthesizing Thomas’ (1976) conceptual scheme of conflict with Rahim’s (2002) descriptive account, conflict further reduces into three primary forms: (a) affective, (b) process, and (c) task. Affective conflict refers to an individual’s emotions, feelings, and relationships. The terms, affective and relational, are interchangeable terms for emotive-based conflict. Affective conflict is an “inconsistency in interpersonal relationships, which occurs when organizational members become aware that their feelings and emotions regarding some of the issues are incompatible” (Rahim, p. 210). Process conflict refers to how a task is accomplished (i.e. procedures, methods, assignments, timelines, etc.). Task conflict refers to what is accomplished. Researchers frequently utilize task and cognitive conflict interchangeably (Amason & Sapienza, 1997).

Jehn (1995) explored the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict and found as affective conflict increased, members’ positive perceptions of their groups decreased. Additionally, as affective conflicts continued to escalate, members became psychologically distressed and, as a result, engaged in vile language and harsh behavior toward other group members.

Amason’s (1996) study parallels Jehn’s (1995) findings because he reported, as affective conflict increased, the decision quality and the affective willingness of group members to accept the group’s decision drastically decreased (see also Rau, 2005). Jehn and Chatman (2000) discovered similar patterns when comparing affective conflict to task and process conflict. Whenever affective conflict was proportionately higher than task and process conflict, the members of a group experienced low levels of commitment, cohesiveness, satisfaction, and performance. Similarly, Jehn,
Chadwick, and Thatcher (1997) discovered that affective conflict decreased group member’s satisfaction and performance.

The specific type of diversity within teams serves a significant function concerning the production of affective conflict. A substantially influential diversity feature that stimulates affective conflict is value diversification both within teams and between team members and their leadership (Lankau et al., 2007). Research of 31 CEOs and 133 members of their respective managerial teams supports perceived value diversity increases the probability of affective conflict manifesting and producing harmful results (Lankau et al.). Furthermore, utilizing unfamiliar verbal and nonverbal communication techniques (Ayoko, Hartel, & Callan, 2002), which is common within value-diversified teams, heightens affective conflict and member dissatisfaction.

Researchers concur maintaining low levels of affective conflict is essential if workgroups desire to glean the positive outcomes associated with conflict while minimizing the negative effects of affective conflict (Amason et al., 1995). Numerous studies cite such undesirable byproducts of affective conflict as group disharmony (Jehn et al., 1997; Jehn & Chapman, 2000; Li & Hambrick, 2005), dissatisfaction (Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Chapman), impaired judgment (Xin & Pelled, 2003), perceived poor workgroup performance (Mohammed & Angell, 2004), and poor work products (Amason, 1996; Jehn & Chapman; Li & Hambrick). The intensity of these outcomes depends on the severity of the affective conflict.

Servant leadership is a service-oriented leadership theory (Greenleaf, 1977). Leaders assume a posture of willful service because of the concern for their followers’ best interests, which integrates the variables of love, service, and trust (Patterson, 2003). Congenial teamwork and self-actualization are natural byproducts of this supportive atmosphere (Patterson). Cerff and Winston (2006) expand Patterson’s model of servant leadership by suffixing the model with the inclusion of hope. As the follower voluntarily loves the leader, the follower’s commitment to the leader rises producing an internalization of the follower’s motivation to hope. Hope produces the willful alignment of the follower’s interests and values with the leader’s interests and values. The aspect of “internationalization” is salient because intrinsic motivations translate into long-term interventions compared to extrinsic motivations, which only pertain when applying the external stimulus. Transformation leadership is an example of an external application requiring a focus on external
shared objectives (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Once sufficed, the external stimulus ceases to motivate the follower. However, servant leadership profits from an intrinsic motivation so that the follower shares the leader’s values and interests, thus, producing a long-term or more enduring intervention compared to transformational leadership.

Within the context of the VDACR model, high levels of servant leadership incorporate perceived organizational value congruency between team members and between individual members and their leader. In contrast, low levels of servant leadership incorporate perceived organizational value incongruency between team members and between individual members and their leader.

Finally, team member satisfaction refers to a member’s overall satisfaction with the team. Specifically, team member satisfaction refers to a member’s (a) desire to remain part of the team, (b) level of pleasure working with other team members, and (c) level of commitment to the team.

**Model Description**

The value diversity and affective conflict reduction (VDACR) model integrates four variables for the purpose of reducing the negative consequences associated with elevated levels of affective conflict by introducing the moderating variable, servant leadership, to decrease the team’s level value diversity so that team member satisfaction does not lessen (Figure 1).

The VDACR model reveals the causal relationship between value diversity (i.e., the independent variable) and team member satisfaction (i.e., the dependent variable) as mediated by
affective conflict. Following Baron and Kenny (1986), affective conflict “represents the generative mechanism through which the focal independent variable is able to influence the dependent variable of interest” (p. 1173). Furthermore, “Mediators explain how physical events take on internal psychological significance” (Baron & Kenny, p. 1176; see also Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). In this instance, as value diversity increases, then the aggregate level of affective conflict increases, which produces a decrease in team member satisfaction.

The moderating variable, servant leadership, is a quantitative type of moderator (Baron & Kenny, 1986) indicating the level of value congruency introduced between the predictor variable (i.e., value diversity) and criterion variable (i.e., affective conflict). Baron and Kenny note that mediating variables can “shift roles from effects to causes, depending on the focus of the analysis” (p. 1174). In this instance, affective conflict assumes the role of the dependent variable caused by value diversity. Servant leadership moderates the level of value diversity within teams. When servant leadership is strong (i.e., team members demonstrate high levels of perceived organizational value congruency with team members and the leader), the initial level of value diversity level decreases which lessens its influence upon affective conflict and results in a diminished negative influence upon team member satisfaction. However, when servant leadership is weak (i.e., team members demonstrate low levels of perceived organizational value congruency with team members and the leader), the present level of value diversity does not change its influence upon affective conflict and, thus, does not alter its influence upon team member satisfaction. These results agree with Baron and Kenny’s description of a moderating variable “which partitions a focal independent variable into subgroups that establish its domains of maximal effectiveness in regard to a given dependent variable” (p. 1173; see also Mitchell & Jolley, 2007).

Implications

The proposed research study of the VDACR model seriously considers the implication of leadership’s responsibility to employee satisfaction. Because of increasing heterogeneity within teams, which directly relates to value diversity (Lankau et al., 2007), and the increased interest in employee development and job satisfaction revealed in leadership theories such as supportive leadership and developmental leadership, providing servant leadership to moderate the damaging effects of heightened affective conflict on employee satisfaction is advantageous. Leaders managing
highly diversified value-based teams experiencing the detrimental outcomes associated with high levels of affective conflict can lessen these undesirable outcomes by encouraging the leader to assume a servant leadership approach so that the leader’s and the followers’ interests and values converge. The crucial implication for leaders is to monitor signs of affective conflict such as team member dissatisfaction. If affective conflict levels rise to unhealthy levels, then leadership can assume a servant leadership approach to reduce affective conflict levels. Unfortunately, a proven instrument to measure the salient variables within the servant leadership model is unavailable.

The VDACR model seriously considers the implication of leadership’s responsibility to the team’s spiritual wellbeing. The Scripture explicitly communicates the responsibility of leadership is to mitigate the damaging effects of conflict. Paul’s assertion to the church in Rome was fitting: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18 NIV). Paul reiterates his aggressive posture on averting the negative effects associated with conflict as he declared to the young minister Timothy, “the Lord’s servant must not quarrel” (2 Timothy 2:24). Clearly, leaders need to employ extreme caution and care when they encounter affective conflict to minimize its destructive outcomes. Jesus’ erudite advice applies that in such instances leaders must be as wise as serpents and gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16).

Conclusions

Elevated levels of affective conflict within teams produce detrimental outcomes such as decreased levels of member satisfaction. One factor that affects the level of affective conflict within teams is the level of value diversity. As perceived value diversity increases, the level of affective conflict increases.

Minimal research exists offering viable intervention strategies for leaders to lessen the negative affects of affective conflict stimulated by value diversity within teams. Servant leadership moderates the level of value diversity by aligning leader and follower organizational interests and values reducing the negative effects of affective conflict.

The VDACR model offers servant leadership as a moderating variable to reduce the negative outcomes produced by value diversity. Affective conflict mediates the effect of value diversity upon team satisfaction. These theoretical advantages demonstrate substantial support to generate
instruments to measure the essential variables within the servant leadership model to enable future opportunities to discover the veracity of the VDACR model.

Finally, the VDACR model addresses the implication for leaders to maintain positive levels of team member satisfaction by influencing a healthy level of affective conflict through increasing servant leadership tendencies. In addition, the model empowers leaders to mitigate the destructive effects of conflict which agrees with Paul’s mandate in Scripture for leaders to live in a state of peace and to avoid being quarrelsome.
References


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