The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication

Introduction to Organizational Conflict

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John G. Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey

Managing conflict is time-consuming and inevitable. One classic study estimated that managers spend 20% of their time managing conflicts (Thomas & Schmidt, 1976). A more recent study suggests that the actual hours spent managing workplace conflict for all employees (not just managers) is around 5%, or 2.1 hours per week (CPP, 2008). Moreover, 29% of employees in this study deal with conflict frequently (with 36% of U.S. employees reporting frequent management of conflict). These figures suggest the inevitability of conflict in the workplace.

More important, unresolved and poorly managed conflict in organizations is costly. The 2.1 hours per week is the equivalent of $359 billion in paid working hours (CPP, 2008). In addition, there are other cost factors such as opportunity costs, reduced decision quality, loss of skilled employees, restructuring, sabotage/theft/damage, lowered job motivation, lost work time, litigation costs, and health costs. Some of the findings related to costs from CPP's study of 5,000 employees in nine different countries (Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States) include the following:

- 27% have experienced or witnessed a conflict escalate into a personal attack
- 25% have been ill or missed work due to a conflict
- 1 in 10 has seen conflict lead to project failure
- 1 in 6 has witnessed a recent conflict escalate in duration or intensity

For these reasons, and the potential benefits that conflict can produce, conflict has been a popular topic of research and practice in the workplace.

Organizational conflict is often referred to as an expressed struggle or disagreement between and among people who work together to achieve common goals. Organizational **[p. 292 ↓]** conflict is often described as occurring in a particular workplace setting, such as a place of business, or an organizational sector, such

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as manufacturing or health care delivery. In this sense, research focuses on conflict within an organizational container (the physical and psychological boundaries of the workplace; Deetz, 2001). On the other hand, organizational conflict also occurs in the process of people organizing toward a common goal. During this organizing, individuals and entities engage in conflict as they coordinate work patterns, policies, and practices. This process is often identified as the constitutive feature of communication (and conflict) in organizations (Deetz, 2001). Conflict research findings are often applied to a particular workplace or sector as that is easier to "visualize" and to identify. The conflict that occurs in the process of organizing is messy and blurs boundaries, and yet it is more likely the reality of work. The authors of the chapters in this section review, critique, and synthesize literature on conflict in various facets of organizational life and sectors and blend the container and constitutive elements approaches in their reviews.

In addition, organizational conflict is often researched in terms of levels of analysis moving from micro to meso to exo to macro. The *micro* includes the individual perceptions and attitudes of employees and managers and the interpersonal communication among coworkers and managers. The *meso* includes the organizational climate and family interactions that shape the way we work and think about work. The *exo* considers the policies and structures of organizations. The *macro* is the larger political, historical, cultural, ethical, and economic features that shape organizational life. The majority of chapters in this section also consider multiple levels of analysis. Organizational conflict does not take place in a vacuum, and organizational scholars often look at these multilevel aspects in any phenomenon.

All of these chapters consider different types of organizational conflict, and a couple of them focus on particular organizational sectors. We begin with the chapters that focus more solely on the micro- and mesolevels in negotiation and workgroup conflict. We then present the chapters on workplace bullying and work–life conflict as these topics involve exo- and macrolevels as well. The next two chapters examine conflict resolution education and health care delivery—that is, organizational conflict in particular sectors. The final chapter considers conflict management systems across all types of sectors. We provide a brief overview of each of the specific chapters in order of presentation.

The opening chapter of this section (Chapter 11) examines negotiation in the workplace. Teucher, Brett, and Gunia explain that negotiation is a social process used when

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achievement of goals cannot be done without cooperation of others. They provide a focused review of research around the notion of joint gains. They include four lenses that have been used to study negotiation and achieving joint gains. The first lens is outcome and centers on the outcome of negotiation, and the key question is "How can we conceptualize negotiation strategy and outcomes?" The second lens is process or the achievement of joint gains; the key question is "How does negotiation strategy affect joint gains?" The third lens is culture and emphasizes cross-cultural variation in strategy and joint gains: "How does culture affect negotiation strategy and joint gains?" The final lens is time or the development of negotiation strategy over time: "What are the dynamics of negotiation strategy?" Teucher et al. review the key conclusions in each of these lenses and also the potential connections between the lenses. They explore these lenses using the case study of IBM's $1.75 billion sale of their PC-manufacturing to the Chinese company Lenovo.

In Chapter 12, Garner and Poole examine conflict in workgroups, which are the basic building blocks of today's organizations. The authors explain that a workgroup is a set of **[p. 293 ↓]** three or more people who carry out common tasks in an organization. Garner and Poole identify three scholarly traditions for the study of workgroup conflict. Historically, each perspective has developed independently, and there is little integration of the perspectives. The instrumental perspective views workgroup conflict in terms of its effects on group performance and related outcomes. They considered aspects of diversity, technology, and networks within this framework. The developmental perspective views conflict as a natural part of workgroup development; conflict is treated as a phase in a group's life cycle that offers an opportunity for growth to the group and its members. The political perspective views conflict as a struggle for power in the workgroup. The authors review research and note the shortcomings in each of these areas. Since the first edition, they note that there has been much more integration of the perspectives, and Garner and Poole highlight this recent research to illustrate the benefits of a multiperspective approach to the study and practice of workgroup conflict.

In Chapter 13, Lutgen-Sandvik and Fletcher identify a unique type of conflict in the workplace—bullying. Workplace bullying is a pattern of communication that involves repeated hostile behaviors and has severe personal and organizational consequences. The authors explain that bullying is communal and involves bullies, targets, and

bystanders. Lutgen-Sandvik and Fletcher use multiple goals theory and conflict management tactics to identify a framework of motivation to study the three involved parties. The authors review research on the profiles, motivations, and tactics for each of the parties to identify core patterns in workplace bullying with the goals of creating understanding about bullying conflicts and being able to identify effective interventions. They use a case study of a bully at a youth development center to weave a compelling thrice-told tale of bullying from the perspective of bullies, targets, and bystanders. They also identify future research directions in this area.

In Chapter 14, Kirby, Wieland, and McBride review the extensive literature on "conflict" between working and family/personal life. They review and critique the interdisciplinary (outcome-oriented) and communication (process-oriented) literature about work interfering with life and life interfering with work from a multilevel perspective. From the macrolevel, they examine political, economic, historical, and social structures that shape work–life conflict and also introduce cross-cultural analyses of how work–life conflict is addressed in the United States and other countries. At the formal organizational-institutional level, they consider workplace policies, standards, and procedures. At the interpersonal-network level, they consider the relationships of how supervisors, coworkers, family, and friends negotiate and influence work–life conflict. At the microlevel, they consider individual perceptions and experiences of stress and the actual management of work–life conflict. Kirby et al. view the levels as interdependent and that microinteraction and macrostructures are "mutually constitutive."

Chapter 15 examines conflict in schools; this is an organization that is not often studied by organizational conflict scholars but is critical given the focus on training people how to manage conflict constructively. Jones begins by explaining the problem of violence in schools and attributes a large part of the problem to the fact that students are not taught how to deal with conflict and, in particular, to develop the emotional and social competence of youth. The chapter accomplishes three goals. First, she reviews and critiques programs under the umbrella of conflict resolution education, which includes peace education, multicultural education, and social and emotional learning. Second, Jones highlights a few exemplary programs to identify "best practices" in conflict resolution education. Finally, she offers guidelines for creating and implementing conflict resolution **[p. 294 ↓]** education systems with a focus on teacher education and

global initiatives. She presents the Conflict Resolution Education in Teacher Education program as a model.

In Chapter 14, Jameson and Albada review conflict in another specific organizational context: health care. The goal of the authors is to summarize and critique the literature on conflict communication in health care delivery at three overlapping levels of analysis: interpersonal, group, and organizational. The authors address this goal in three core sections. First, they synthesize the cause of conflict between health care providers and patients and family members. The causes of conflict between providers and patients are generally attributed to providers' "bedside manner," expectations of patients' roles and decision making, power, and contributions of the patient's characteristics and illness. The conflict issues between patients and family members are information based, institutional/structure oriented, and relationally oriented. Second, they examine conflict among health care providers in health care teams and within health care organizations and identify the core issues as the following: status inequities, organizational/professional culture, competing discourses, communication structure, tensions of autonomy and connection, and role ambiguity. Finally, Jameson and Albada address conflict prevention and management in health care delivery. The prominent forms include training for improved communication skills; education and training for physicians, nurses, and patients; coaching/mentoring; and dispute system design.

In the final chapter of this section (Chapter 17), McAllum and Simpson focus on conflict management systems, or the structures, policies, and procedures an organization creates to address conflict. They utilize a system perspective to identify the differences in the philosophy of different conflict management systems. They analyze three clusters of conflict strategies that can be adopted or adapted by organizations. The first is *law based,* a confrontive and closed system that aims to confront transgressions of rights and focuses on processes. The second is *management based,* an internally contained system that aims to solve problems and focuses on outcomes. The third is *participation based,* an open system that aims to encourage collaboration and focuses on relationships. They compare and contrast the key elements of these clusters in terms of the following: objects (people, structures, processes, and policies), attributes, internal relationships, environment, and aim of the system. The authors use a New Zealand health care organization case study involving multilevel conflict within an organization to illustrate these different approaches.

In sum, these chapters illustrate the wide variety of conflict communication that is addressed in organizational contexts. Organizational conflict can emphasize the microlevel interaction as well as the broader policy and societal-level structures. The chapters in this section demonstrate both the negative and positive features in organizations and provide a rich tapestry of organizational conflict life. Furthermore, they illustrate the importance of collaboration for managing conflict and achieving coordinated goals.

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