An Empirical Examination of the Relationship Between Team Commitment and Conflict Management Orientation in Project Teams

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between team commitment and the conflict management approach of project team members. Project team members completed measures of team commitment and situational conflict management (approach used in the project team). Pearson product moment correlations support the hypotheses that team commitment is positively associated with cooperative conflict management approaches (compromising and problem-solving), and the Williams T2 test supports the hypothesis that the association between team commitment and a problem-solving conflict management approach is significantly greater than the association between team commitment and a compromising conflict management approach. This research highlights the importance of examining the potential influence of team commitment on the process of managing project conflict.

Keywords: teamwork, project teams, projects, conflict, conflict management, team commitment

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There are numerous indicators of intensifying conflict ranging from large opposing marches associated with Brexit, riots in the United States Capital related to allegations of election fraud, significant property destruction in multiple US cities triggered by opposition to policing practices, and airline personnel strapping uncontrollable passengers to their seats. Workplace conflict appears to be just as problematic as indicated by recent research suggesting that the UK economy loses approximately £28 billion pounds (approximately £1000 pounds per employee) per year due to challenging workplace conflict (Saundary & Urwin, 2021). Research conducted with employees from multiple countries around the world (CCP Global Human Capital Report, 2008) found that approximately one third of employees reported having to frequently deal with disruptive conflict, and employees in the United States spend on average 2.8 hours a week trying to resolve conflict (based on average hourly earnings of $17.95 for non-farm workers, this is approximately $359 billion in paid hours in 2008).

Interpersonal intensification of the workplace driven by the increased emphasis on collaboration, teamwork, projects and complex social networks (Gibson et al., 2003), combined with productivity pressures, increasing diversity (situational, informational, expertise, perspective, social category, attitudinal, disability, personality etc.) (Wong & Birnbaum-More, 1994), and greater demands for inclusion (Garg & Sangwan, 2021), has increased the potential for greater process losses, frustration, and conflict (Mohammed & Angell, 2004; Puck et al., 2011; Thatcher et al., 2003; Thatcher et al., 1998). Research on the translation of diversity, teamwork and projects into organizational value under escalating performance pressures (Pavez et al., 2021), has identified the importance of moderating variables that promote efficient and productive forms of openness, supportiveness, and conflict management (Jehn et al., 1999; Liu et al., 2020; Pelled et al., 1999; Puck et al., 2011).

Research that identifies the conditions that encourage a more productive conflict management approach in work teams is particularly important given the expanding use of increasingly diverse project teams (Hyväri, 2006; Wombacher & Felfe, 2017), and the significant amount of workplace time invested in the process of navigating and addressing challenging workplace conflicts (CCP Global Human Capital Report, 2008). Research conducted by Zhang and Huo, (2015) confirms a negative association between project conflict and project performance, and research conducted by Liu et al. (2020) confirmed a positive association between project diversity and project conflict, and the positive moderating influence of cooperative conflict management approaches.

Research supports a positive relationship between organizational commitment and a cooperative conflict orientation (Akhtar & Hassan, 2001), and research conducted by Wombacher and Felfe (2017) identified a network of influential relationships between organizational commitment, team commitment and inter-team conflict handling strategies. A search of key research databases produces no research that examines the association between team commitment and conflict management approaches in project teams. This research study examines the association between team commitment and the conflict management approaches used by members of project teams.

Team Commitment

Definitions of commitment typically reference both focus (Becker et al., 1996; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001) and dimensionality (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Focus within an organizational context includes macro-level orientations like organizational commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990) and micro-level orientations like commitment to a supervisor or team (Becker, 1992; Becker & Billings, 1993; Morrow, 1993; Zaccaro & Dobbins, 1989). The dimensions of commitment within an organizational context typically includes affective, normative and continuance components (Meyer & Allen; 1991). Affective components refer to the level of emotional attachment, involvement, and identification with the target entity, whereas normative

refers to the experience of obligation toward the target entity. Continuance refers to the perception of costs associated with leaving the target entity. Micro-level commitment constructs, like team commitment typically exclude the continuation component, especially with regard to limited duration work teams, because the perception of continuance costs is predominantly associated with the relationship between the individual and the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Research suggests that micro-level commitments, like team commitment, are positively associated with satisfaction and performance at the individual and team level (Bishop & Scott, 1997; Bishop et al., 1997; Scott & Townsend, 1994). Research by Becker (1992) suggests that micro-level commitments may be uniquely influential on the satisfaction and performance of individuals and teams.

Team commitment, particularly as it applies to more short-term project teams, is defined as those aspects of a team members' experience that relates to the acceptance of the team, support for the team, and the desire to maintain membership within the team (Bishop & Scott, 2000; Mowday et al., 1982). The positive relationship between team commitment and team performance is partly explained by a reduction in withdrawal behaviors (lack of task and interpersonal engagement, lateness, absence and turnover) and an increase in supportive behaviors, including extra-role behaviors (assisting others, accepting unexpected task requirements, creativity and innovation) (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). This suggests that committed team members put effort into enacting behavior that is cooperative and supportive.

Conflict Management

Conflict is defined as incompatible actions, postures or states; where one person's actions, posture or state interferes with the desired actions, outcomes or states of another (Ayub et al., 2017; Tjosvold, 2006). There are various types of conflicts including both task and relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), and conflicts occur in a variety of contexts including both competitive and cooperative situations (Tjosvold & Poon, 1998). Conflict participants demonstrate a variety of orientations toward the conflict management process,

including avoidant, submissive, aggressive and cooperative approaches (De Dreu et al., 2001, Rispens et al., 2021). Conflict management orientations are defined as consistent cognitive and behavioral patterns used to frame and manage conflicts (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Thomas et al., 2021, 1976; Van de Vliert, 1997).

The identification of conflict management styles emerged out of dual concern theory (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986) and the theory of cooperation and conflict (Deutsch, 1973). These theories argue that conflict management is a function of high or low concern for self, combined with high or low concern for others. High concern for self and others produces a *problem-solving* style which involves seeking outcomes that satisfy the needs for both parties as much as possible (win-win). An intermediate concern for self and others produces a *compromising style* which involves making matching concessions to reach agreement. The compromising style has been referred to as half-hearted problem solving (Pruitt & Ruben, 1986). High concern for self and low concern for others produces a *forcing style* which involves imposing one's will on others. This style typically involves the use of bluffs, threats, blocking actions and positional commitments. Low concern for self and high concern for others produces a *yielding style* that involves submitting to the preferences of others. Low concern for self and low concern for others produces an *avoiding style* which involves suppressing thoughts about existing conflicts, reducing the perceived importance of conflicts, and avoiding any engagement about the conflict.

Research suggests that people have a preferred or default conflict management style, but are also able to adapt their style depending on both the demands of the situation and their preferences (Ayub et al., 2017; Huang, 2010; Marquis & Huston, 2009; Tjosvold et al., 2014). By doing so they are able to enact situational and contingent conflict management approaches (Marquis & Huston, 2009; Tjosvold, 2006). The term style is used when referring to the general behavioral preference across situations, whereas the term approach refers to a particular conflict style profile (particular levels and proportions of problem-solving, compromising,

yielding, forcing and avoiding) used in a particular situation. Conflict management orientation (style and approach) has a significant influence on performance at the individual, relational and team levels (Blake & Mouton, 1964; DeChurch et al., 2013; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit et al., 2012; De Dreu, 1997; Morrill & Thomas, 1992; Putnam & Poole, 1987; Rahim, 1983; Ruble & Thomas, 1976). Problem solving, and to a lesser extent compromising, are traditionally viewed as cooperative problem-solving styles (De Dreu, 2006). Research supports the view that cooperative approaches capture most of the benefits that can be derived from conflict (De Dreu, 2006; Tjvosvold, 1991) and is positively associated with team performance (De Dreu et al., 1999, Montoya-Wiess et al., 2001).

The type of expectations, conflict management approaches and conflict outcomes that occur within team conflicts, partly depends on the whether the participants perceive each other's goals and posture as cooperative or competitive (Tjosvold, 2006). Co-operative approaches typically arise when those involved believe that the other party is not deliberately and unjustifiably engaging in blocking actions, and that an opportunity for a win-win solution is available (Akhtar & Hassan, 2001; Averill, 1982). Competitive approaches are more likely when the participants believe that the other party is intentionally and unfairly frustrating them, and the only possible outcome is win-lose (Akhtar & Hassan, 2001; Huang, 2010; Kelley & Stahelski, 1970). The choice of how to frame the conflict and which conflict management approach to take impacts team functioning and effectiveness (Papenhausen & Parayitam, 2015). Suspicious and competitive approaches typically elicit similar responses which reinforce win-lose beliefs (Deutsch, 1973), and once initiated, are hard to reverse (Kelley & Stahelski, 1970). Cooperative approaches typically elicit more positive responses, and reinforce beliefs that some degree of compatibility exists within each person's goals. This supports the search for win-win outcomes (Tjosvold, 2006).

Team Commitment and Conflict Orientation

Both the affective and normative components of team commitment are positively associated with being more accepting, supportive, and cooperative (Akhtar & Hassan, 2001, Becker & Billings, 1993; Paolucci et al., 2018), which suggests that team commitment is positively associated with both cooperative conflict management approaches (problem solving and compromising) and negatively associated with a non-cooperative conflict management approach (forcing).

H1: Team commitment will be positively associated with a problem-solving conflict management approach (one of the cooperative approaches)

H2: Team commitment will be positively associated with a compromising conflict management approach (one of the cooperative approaches)

H3: Team commitment will be negatively associated with a forcing conflict management approach (non-cooperative approach)

Attachment theory suggests that the strength of an attachment is based on the individual's perception (conscious or unconscious) that the relationship has the potential to satisfy important personal needs (Thompson, 2008). Team commitment therefore includes the perception (conscious or unconscious) that participation within a team has the potential to satisfy important personal needs. However, these need fulfillment opportunities are embedded in a situation containing multiple needful participants (team) which suggests that maximizing the need fulfillment opportunities requires a combination of proactive, assertive and cooperative behavior. Use of a cooperative approach to maximizing need satisfaction in a team conflict situation (use of a win-win approach) involves making choices between a problem-solving approach (put effort into finding creative and appropriate ways to maximize need satisfaction for both parties) and a compromising approach (making matching concessions) or some combination thereof. The attractiveness of perceived need satisfaction opportunities combined with the understanding that some proactive and assertive behavior is required to take

advantage of such opportunities in a situation that includes other needful participants, is likely to influence the extent to which additional effort is put into moving beyond making match concessions (compromising approach) and investing in the search for creative approaches that maximize need satisfaction for both parties (problem solving approach). Team commitment should therefore demonstrate a significantly stronger association with a problem-solving versus a compromising approach.

H3: The positive association between team commitment and a problem-solving conflict management approach will be significantly greater than the positive association between team commitment and a compromising approach

Methods

Subjects and Procedures

The subjects were 262 undergraduate university students enrolled in business courses at universities in the United States and Canada. The courses included a team project worth 25% of the final grade. Each participant was randomly assigned to a four-person project team except for two teams that had five members. Each team was expected to capture and reengineer and important organizational process into a best practice. The teams were expected to capture this process in a handbook and then present their process to their tutorial class members at the end of the semester. The course created an opportunity for students to work in a short-term self-managing project team.

The subjects completed measures of team commitment and situationally oriented conflict management approach (conflict management approach used in the project team) under conditions of anonymity. The procedures recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003) for addressing common method bias were used in this study. The surveys of team commitment and conflict orientation were administered at different times and in different ways, they made use of different scales, and the surveys were psychologically separated by associating them with different components of the study. The team commitment survey was administered as part of a

general team assessment process, whereas the measurement of the conflict management approach used in the project team occurred within a course exercise on organizational behavior.

Product moment correlations were used to test the hypothesized associations between team commitment and situational conflict management. The Williams T2 statistic (Williams, 1959) recommended by Steiger (1980) was used to determine whether the association between team commitment and a problem-solving conflict management approach was significantly greater than the association between team commitment and a compromising conflict management approach. The Williams T2 statistic tests whether two dependent correlations that share a common variable are significantly different.

Measures

Situational Conflict Management Approach

The team-specific conflict management approach was measured by amending the conflict management instrument developed by De Dreu et al. (2001) so that each conflict style question made specific reference to the project team. Each of the conflict management approaches (problem solving, compromising, forcing, avoiding and yielding) were measure using four items each. An example item for problem solving is: “In this team, I examine issues until I find a solution that really satisfies me and the other team members.” An example item for compromising is: “In this team, I strive whenever possible towards a fifty-fifty compromise,” and an example item for forcing is: “In this team, I push my own point of view.” An example item for avoiding is: “In this team, I avoid confrontations about our differences,” and an example item for yielding is: “In this team, I generally concur with the other team members.” The items were measured on a 5-point behavioral frequency scale (1=not at all, 2=occasionally, 3=about half the time, 4=more often than not, 5=very much) and the scores for each subject on each style were derived by adding up the items associated with each style. Cronbach alpha reliability statistics are $\alpha = 0.78$ for problem solving, $\alpha = 0.76$ for compromising and $\alpha = 0.81$ for forcing.

Team Commitment

The team commitment measure developed by Bishop and Scott (2000) was used to measure team commitment in this study. One question was amended to align with the context within which the study was taking place (the question “I’m extremely glad that I chose this team to work with over other teams” was changed to “I’m extremely glad that I was assigned to this team.” Example items are “I would accept almost any task to keep working with this team,” “I’m proud to tell others that I am a part of this team,” and “I really care about the fate of this team.” The team commitment measure contains 8 items and were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=slightly disagree, 4=neither agree nor disagree, 5=slightly agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree) and a total score was derived by adding up the scores for each of the items within the measure. Cronbach alpha reliability statistic for the measure was $\alpha = 0.83$.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables appear in the Table.

Table

Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Reliabilities and Product Moment Correlations

	Mean	Std Dev	1	2	3	4
1. PS	14.94	2.67	(0.78)			
2. CP	13.76	2.89	0.63	(0.76)		
3. FC	12.71	3.02	0.30	0.10	(0.81)	
4. TC	45.09	7.18	0.36	0.24	0.10	(0.83)

Note. Cronbach Alpha internal reliabilities are shown in parentheses on the diagonal. Correlations above $r = 0.12$ are significant at the level $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed). Correlations above $r = 0.16$ are significant at the level $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed). PS=problem solving, CP=compromising, FC=forcing, TC=team commitment.

All variable distributions are approximately normal and demonstrate reasonable variation across their respective scales. Cronbach alpha coefficients ranged from α=0.76 to α=0.83 suggesting good internal reliabilities. No univariate or bivariate outliers were considered

problematic and the product moment correlations revealed significant associations between most of the variables.

Empirical Tests of Hypotheses

Unless stated otherwise, all hypothesized correlations were in the expected direction and probabilities are based on 2-tail tests ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Hypothesis 1: The correlation between team commitment and use of a problem-solving conflict management approach is statistically significant ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.00$). This provides support for the hypothesis that team commitment is positively association with use of a problem-solving (cooperative) conflict management approach.

Hypothesis 2: The correlation between team commitment and use of a compromising conflict management approach is statistically significant ($r = 0.24$, $p = 0.00$). This provides support for the hypothesis that team commitment is positively association with use of a compromising (cooperative) conflict management approach.

Hypothesis 3: The correlation between team commitment and use of a forcing conflict management approach is not statistically significant ($r = 0.10$, $p > 0.05$). This does not provide support for the hypothesis that team commitment is negatively associated with the use of a forcing (non-cooperative) conflict management approach.

Hypothesis 4: The difference between the correlation of team commitment with a problem-solving conflict management approach, and the correlation of team commitment with a compromising conflict management approach is statistically significant (Williams T2 test: p=0.0171). This provides support for the hypothesis that team commitment has a significantly greater positive association with a problem-solving conflict management approach than a compromising approach.

Conclusions and Discussion

General

The results support a positive association between team commitment and the use of a cooperative conflict management approach in project teams, particularly a problem-solving approach. The direction of this relationship cannot be confirmed from this research and both opposite and bi-directional effects are possible (Akhtar & Hassan, 2021). Previous research suggests that team commitment is a significant contributing cause of cooperative and supportive team member behavior (Becker & Billings, 1993; Paolucci et al., 2018) which supports the perspective that team commitment encourages the use of more cooperative conflict management approaches in teams.

Practical Implications

This study suggests that team commitment may play an important role within the network of relationships that link project membership, diversity, conflict and performance. Research has confirmed a positive moderating influence of cooperative conflict management approaches on the relationship between project conflict and project performance (Liu, Cui, Feng, Perera & Han, 2020; Zhang & Huo, 2015). Therefore, variables that influence conflict management approaches in project teams, like team commitment, add to the profile of important moderators that should be considered when attempting to understanding and influence the relationship between project diversity, conflict and performance.

Interventions aimed at assisting conflicted project management teams to better manage their conflicts and improve project performance must take the influence of team commitment into consideration. The provision of cooperative conflict management training and coaching to uncommitted project team members may not add the expected value. Interventions that integrate both commitment enhancement elements (Sinclair, Tucker, Cullen & Wright, 2005) with cooperative conflict management support may be more reliable.

Limitations and Future Research

The external validity of this study may be influenced by the use of student project teams, however, the conditions within which the teams operated are considered to be a reasonable approximation of general short-term project execution conditions. Future samples should include workplace teams. The significantly greater association of team commitment with the problem-solving cooperative conflict management style (as opposed to compromising) suggests that team commitment may encourage behaviors associated with the problem-solving style like creative and innovative solution development. This suggests that team commitment may influence other key contributors to project performance, like project creativity. Future research should examine other potential benefits associated with team commitment, like project innovation and creativity. In conclusion, this research study confirms a positive association between team commitment and the use of a cooperative conflict management approach in project teams, particularly a problem-solving approach.

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