

Harnessing Conflict

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A recently overheard criticism of a work colleague was surprising: “She makes her employees too comfortable.” This appeared to fly in the face of much that librarians have been taught about management, such as fostering team spirit, encouraging openness, and making employees feel valued. In this case, however, the issue was that the manager’s employees were not growing. They were all highly competent at their jobs, but in the eyes of the critic, “nothing new is ever coming out of that group. They are not being taken outside of their comfort zone; they are never challenged.”

Compare this to a description of internal product pitches in Google. Cofounders Brin and Page dress up in white lab coats. Teams of engineers have twenty minutes each to pitch their ideas; it all comes down to this presentation.¹ Google is known for treating them well, but clearly they do not shy away from placing their employees in uncomfortable situations. Unlike the work colleague criticized for overly-comfortable employees, however, Google is known for innovation.² The approaches taken by the criticized colleague and by Google can be viewed as polar opposites on the traditional spectrum of managing conflict. This spectrum ranges from eliminating conflict (e.g., the criticized colleague) to actively introducing conflict (e.g., Google). Along this spectrum, four distinct approaches to managing conflict have evolved over the last century.

In this paper, a review of the literature on conflict management will be utilized to offer an analysis of these four positions, and a framework will be articulated for using these approaches in order to successfully harness conflict to stimulate positive organizational improvements. Finally, I will argue that a fifth approach to conflict management is emerging—an approach not yet described in the literature on conflict management.

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Four Approaches to Managing Conflict

A Brief History of Conflict Management

Robbins³ and Kathman and Kathman⁴ provided similar overviews of the history of the thinking on conflict management. According to them, prior to the 1940s, conflict in the workplace was viewed as destructive, and managers strove to eliminate it. By the 1950s, this traditionalist line of thinking gradually evolved into a behaviorist approach that saw conflict as inherent to organizations. Behaviorists believed that managers should strive to maintain an acceptable amount of conflict. By the 1970s, there was some recognition of the value of conflict, a belief that once it inevitably arose, collaborative resolutions could improve group decision making. Because neither Robbins nor Kathman and Kathman provided a name for this approach, I’ve coined the term “solutionist” for the purposes of this paper.

Kathman and Kathman’s history stopped here. Robbins, however, without specifically designating solutionists as a separate phase, quickly moved on to argue that this line of thinking must be extended. Robbins argued that if conflict can be beneficial, then managers may sometimes need to increase conflict. Robbins did not, however, simply argue for managing the quantity of conflict. He also argued for a qualitative look at a conflict, a consideration of functional versus dysfunctional conflict. According to Robbins, if functional conflict is properly managed, it can stimulate positive change. Dysfunctional conflict, however, can be harmful. The manager’s job is, in Robbins’ eyes, to increase functional conflict while decreasing dysfunctional conflict. Robbins called this the “interactionist” approach.⁵

In short, between the two histories, there appear to be four positions:

- *Traditionalist.* Conflict is destructive and managers should eliminate it.
- *Behaviorist.* Conflict is destructive, but it is inherent to organizations and cannot be eliminated. The

manager's role is to maintain an acceptable level of conflict.

- *Solutionist*. Conflict is inherent to organizations. It can stimulate positive change. The manager's job is to resolve conflict as it arises, with an eye toward achieving beneficial outcomes.
- *Interactionist*. There are different types of conflict. The manager's role is to actively increase functional conflict and decrease dysfunctional conflict.

Analysis of the Four Approaches

Traditionalists and behaviorists

Both Robbins and Kathman and Kathman dismiss the traditionalist and behaviorist approaches for their failure to recognize the benefits of conflict. Likewise, the belief that conflict can stimulate positive changes is inherent to every article reviewed for this paper.⁶ The literature review for this article stretched back to the classic 1954 Robbers Cave experiment by Sherif et al., and even at this point there was an underlying assumption that conflict is inevitable in groups and can be channeled toward positive results.⁷

Of all the works referenced for this paper, Stueart and Moran come closest to making the behaviorists' case when they noted that "some people think that we have become too contentious and have begun to argue for the sake of arguing"; Stueart and Moran went on, however, to espouse the view that managers must "manage conflict so that the organization will reap its benefits and avoid its negative aspects."⁸ Clearly, there is a contrast between the current theory and the practice of the criticized colleague from the initial example whose employees were nearly bereft of conflict.

Solutionists and interactionists

A breach exists between Kathman and Kathman's history, which ended with solutionists, and Robbins' history, which extended to interactionists. A review of the literature on conflict management suggests that a relatively

clear distinction between the solutionist and interactionist approaches remains. A closer look at these two positions reveals benefits to both approaches.

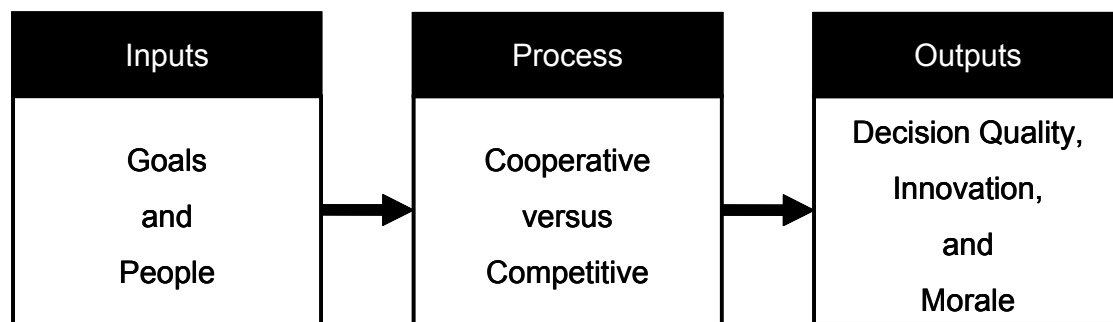
Both solutionists and interactionists believe that conflict can be valuable. This belief is widely, if not even universally, supported in current literature on conflict management as well as by numerous studies.⁹ The basic argument is quite convincing on an intuitive level: if companies must adapt or die, managers must allow their employees to face challenges so that the employees—and the organization—can adapt.¹⁰ Leonard and Straus made a compelling case that "conflict is essential to innovation . . . innovate or fall behind."¹¹ Likewise, Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois argued that "the absence of conflict is not harmony, it's apathy."¹²

There is, however, a vital distinction between solutionists and interactionists. Solutionists suggest that managers should wait for conflict to naturally arise, and then seek to turn the conflict into a win-win situation that adds benefit to the organization. Interactionists, however, believe that there are times when managers ought to increase the level of conflict in an organization. The key to making this work is to distinguish between the types of conflict that can help and the types of conflict that can hurt.

The majority of the articles reviewed for this paper support the interactionist approach.¹³ There are, however, some articles that approached conflict management from the solutionist's position, including Phillips and Cheston¹⁴ and Kathman and Kathman.¹⁵ It is important to note, though, that even these articles did not specifically recommend against increasing levels of functional conflict. Instead, these articles provided valuable and specific advice about how to steer conflicting parties toward win-win outcomes, which is a valuable skill whether one is engaged as a manager in the solutionist's or the interactionist's role—or even if one is an employee on a team whose members have conflicting approaches toward a task.

The experimental evidence, the bulk of the literature reviewed for this paper, and the logical train of thought

Figure 1. A Framework for Harnessing Conflict



Source: Modified from Janssen, Van De Vliert, and Veenstra¹⁷

all point to the wisdom of the interactionist camp: managers ought to focus on increasing functional conflict and decreasing dysfunctional conflict. In Robbins' words, however, "the demarcation between functional and dysfunctional is neither clear nor precise."¹⁶ Although decades of research have been conducted since Robbins wrote this, the ambiguity remains. How, then, can the manager proceed?

A Framework for Utilizing Various Approaches to Conflict Management

A framework for harnessing conflict can serve as a point of commonality for examining and combining the benefits offered by both interactionists and solutionists. An exploration of a scenario within this framework reveals some common types of conflict and demonstrates how they are functional or dysfunctional.

A typical scenario that illustrates this framework is a cross-functional team of employees (the people input) who are assigned the task of creating a software application for internal use (the goal input). The managers hope that the software engineers (developers) and the future end-users on the team will work cooperatively (the process) to achieve a high-quality software package (the decision quality and innovation outputs), and that after completing their goal, the team will feel positive and ready to continue working together (the morale output). Further analysis and description of each of the three phases will help to clarify this framework and demonstrate the value of the interactionist and solutionist approaches.

Inputs as the Source of Conflicts

Task and process conflicts

People have individual interests and varied experiences, so when they tackle common goals, conflict sometimes emerges. Conflict is, therefore, inherent to the basic inputs (goals and people). In the framework's scenario, the managers selected the people—a team of developers and users. If the engineers focus on reducing development costs while the users focus on expanding the scope of the system, dysfunctional task and process conflicts will arise as team members disagree on how to achieve goals or how to allocate resources.¹⁸ Management can help to reduce this dysfunctional conflict by establishing clear goals at the outset. In the scenario, for example, the managers could supply an overarching goal, such as developing a software package that supports core requirements within a set timeframe and budget. Superordinate goals (goals that supersede individual interests) are widely viewed as an effective means of alleviating dysfunctional conflict. As far back as 1954, Sherif et al. provided evidence that supports this use of superordinate goals.¹⁹

Cognitive conflicts

Nevertheless, conflict will most likely arise due to the discrepancy between the developers' expertise on technical implementation (and focus on controlling development costs and time) and the users' focus on the robustness and versatility of the software package. This paper will refer to this type of conflict, which stems from informational diversity, as "cognitive conflict," a term borrowed from Amason.²⁰ Because the software engineers and the future end-users bring different sets of expertise and information to the team, the group as a whole possesses more expertise and information than do the individuals that comprise the team. This is the potential benefit of information diversity.

Relationship conflicts

Research has demonstrated, however, that high levels of cognitive conflicts can often deteriorate into dysfunctional conflicts surrounding personal issues.²¹ In the scenario, for example, the team may disagree regarding an impersonal issue like the proper security measures for a piece of software. This disagreement may spill over into personalized issues, like annoyance or distrust over colleagues' motives. Jehn, Northcraft, and Neale referred to these types of personalized issues as "relationship conflicts."²² Relationship conflicts are widely recognized as a form of dysfunctional conflict.²³

There is a significant body of literature that focuses on how managers can control the inputs to successfully achieve the desired outputs: improved decision making, innovation, or morale.²⁴ This is an interactionist approach. By managing the inputs, interactionists believe that managers can affect the basic components that create conflict. Leonard and Straus, for example, argue that one way to help increase functional cognitive conflict is to create teams of people who have fundamentally different styles of thinking, such as a variety of Myers-Briggs types.²⁵ Along with this recommendation, they caution that placing a group of diverse thinkers together may intensify dysfunctional relationship conflicts. As a remedy, they offer some conflict resolution tools taken from the solutionist's toolbox (but see Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois²⁶ for a more thorough guide).

Process as the Manifestation of Conflicts

Cooperative process

The approaches to resolving conflicts that are inherent to the inputs may be broadly categorized as either cooperative or competitive.²⁷ Turning back to the scenario, imagine that a conflict has arisen between software developers (focused on development time and costs) and software users (focused on robustness and versatility of the software package). This conflict may be resolved in a cooperative process. For example, both parties may turn away from

their intergroup goals and focus on the intragroup superordinate goal supplied by their managers: create a cost-effective application that meets the users' needs. These two groups both possess expertise that is vital toward achieving this goal, a goal that could not be achieved without a cooperative approach.

Competitive process

On the other hand, the conflict may result in a competitive approach in which each group focuses on its own needs, fighting to achieve as much of their conflicting intergroup goals as possible. A significant body of literature focuses on techniques for achieving win-win solutions during the process phase.²⁸ Because it is focused on the process, wherein conflict has already arisen and must be managed, this literature often describes a solutionist approach because it does not broach the topic of how to actively introduce functional conflict. Instead, solutionists focus on how to capitalize on already existing functional conflict and how to minimize already existing dysfunctional conflict.

In the past, managers were expected to wield these techniques in order to achieve a cooperative process. Today, many organizations utilize teams that are more autonomous. These teams are expected to be reasonably versed in these conflict resolutions techniques so that, given the proper inputs, they can actively strive toward a cooperative process. These techniques are, therefore, invaluable to solutionists, interactionists, and employees.

Outputs

The desired outcomes in this framework are high-quality decisions, effective innovation, and improved (or at least not reduced) morale. It is important to note that these three outcomes do not always improve and decline together; it is possible, for example, for teams to develop "considerable bitterness" even while producing high-quality decisions.²⁹ Nonetheless, most of the articles referenced in this paper support the general idea that by selecting the proper inputs and by properly managing the process, managers can harness conflict to achieve positive results.

Is There An Emerging Fifth Approach?

Underlying Assumptions of the Four Historical Approaches

The four approaches to conflict management discussed thus far are differentiated by distinct assumptions:

- *Traditionalist.* Assumes conflict can and should be eliminated.
- *Behaviorist.* Assumes conflict is destructive but that it

cannot be fully eliminated.

- *Solutionist.* Assumes conflict arises naturally but can generate positive changes when properly managed.
- *Interactionist.* Assumes managers should actively increase functional conflict while decreasing dysfunctional conflict.

A New Assumption

For a distinctly new approach to emerge, different assumptions will need to diverge from the interactionist position. Google is an example of an organization that is operating under a new assumption. Interactionists believe that managers should actively increase functional conflict by manipulating the inputs in the conflict-harnessing framework as described earlier. Organizations such as Google embrace decentralized structures, making regular use of self-created teams that lack managerially controlled inputs. This creates a potential risk from the interactionist perspective because employees may decide to avoid conflict, perhaps even unconsciously, by working with employees who are similar to them, thereby promoting "groupthink," reducing the information diversity on teams, and decreasing the level of functional conflict.

Google has, however, demonstrated a potential solution for this issue. Google requires employees to spend 20 percent of their time "on technical projects of their own choosing."³⁰ Employees have the freedom to self-select projects and self-create teams, but they are expected to demonstrate results by successfully producing products. These products have to pass the stressful and authoritarian review described in the opening of this paper. Employees who want to succeed will be forced to seek other employees with a different set of skills in order to successfully develop a project. For example, an employee may excel at writing efficient code but require a partner who excels at designing user-friendly systems. By holding employees accountable for the results of self-selected team efforts, Google is requiring its employees create teams with rich information diversity.

Herein lies another risk. As explained earlier, teams with information diversity have the benefit of cognitive conflict, but they run the risk of increased dysfunctional relationship conflicts. At Google, team members are self-setting superordinate goals insofar as they are required to independently decide what products to develop. Google has, however, established another superordinate goal of passing the Brin/Page review. Put another way, Google has set a superordinate goal by expecting its employees to achieve high-quality outputs. The internal product pitches make this a measurable goal that holds employees accountable.

As noted earlier, superordinate goals help to minimize the potentially exasperated relationship conflicts. By throwing the teams into a stressful product pitch where

they are pitted against an authoritative ruling, Google is encouraging team members to set aside their inter-team relationship conflicts (i.e., engineers pitted against fellow engineers) by focusing on an intra-team relationship conflict (i.e., the engineers versus management). Note that this is the same territory that Sherif et al. explored in their Robbers Cave experiments, so this may be a recent application of a well-established technique.³¹

In short, what appears to be emerging is a belief that managers do not have to actively manipulate inputs in the conflict management framework; instead, this effort can be shifted to employees. In a sense, this is similar to the division between solutionists, who tend to place the manager in oversight of the process phase, and interactionists, who tend to place the manager in oversight of the input phase. Is it possible to pull managers back even further? Can managers create systems wherein employees establish inputs (teams and goals) that increase functional conflict and decrease dysfunctional conflict, thereby improving cooperative processes and outcomes, including better decision making, increased innovations, and high morale? Google's example suggests that this approach is not only plausible, but it is highly successful in the company's environment and may be applied more widely.

Conclusion

This paper leaves three unresolved points. First, is a fifth approach truly emerging? This question cannot be answered yet, but further examination of highly decentralized organizations may help to demonstrate the impact of self-selected teams and goals upon levels of functional and dysfunctional conflict. Such explorations might also reveal more nuances in approaches to conflict management.

Second, assuming that a new approach is emerging, what are the pre-conditions that make this approach successful? While this paper did give a brief background of some of the key practices employed by Google, further research could look further into other potentially relevant managerial practices in place at Google, such as their creative recruiting and hiring practices and their carefully crafted corporate culture.

Finally, does a gap remain between the approaches toward conflict management expressed in the literature and the approaches that are widely used by managers today? Robbins believed this was true when writing in 1978.³² Likewise, there is a dichotomy between the theories described here and the anecdote of the manager who was criticized for her overly comfortable team. If this gap between theory and practice does exist, further research may help to provide practical means of closing the gap and improving managerial practices.

These questions may linger, but the evidence presented in this paper clearly supports the interactionist approach and suggests that a new, successful approach is emerging.

Managers ought to focus on increasing functional conflict and decreasing dysfunctional conflict, and they can do this by ensuring that their teams possess rich informational diversity and clear superordinate goals. This support for the interactionist approach does not dismiss the solutionist approach, as the tools for resolving conflict and generating win-win outcomes are still vital.

The interactionist approach suggests that well-trained employees can be expected to wield conflict-resolution tools in the workplace, allowing managers the freedom to focus on establishing systems, goals, and teams while monitoring the resulting outcomes. The interactionist approach succeeded because it built upon the strengths of the solutionist approach. By capitalizing on strengths of the interactionist approach, new approaches can succeed, with self-selected teams setting self-selected goals, allowing managers to focus on harnessing conflict to yield organizational-wide improvements in decision quality, innovation, and morale.

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