

The Role of Top Management Team Conflict. A Redistribution of Power?

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Abstract

Various disciplines have offered prescriptions indicating that intragroup conflict is useful for enhancing group decision-making effectiveness. This paper will deconstruct the notion that intragroup conflict facilitates decision-making by exposing four assumptions that form the basis for the prescriptions that have been offered in the literature.

Background and Purpose

Among strategic management researchers, there has been recent attention to techniques for improving the performance of managerial decision-making teams. The research has come to be known as the "upper echelons perspective," based on the work of Hambrick and Mason (1984). Several aspects of top management teams (TMTs) that have been studied, including the tenure of members (Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990), the information processing abilities of TMTs (Thomas and McDaniel, 1990), the decision speed of TMTs (Eisenhardt, 1989), and the composition of TMTs (Bantel and Jackson, 1989). The study of top management teams is important because rarely are complex strategic decisions made autonomously by individuals (Sundstrum, DeMouse, and Futrell, 1990; Schweiger and Sandberg, 1991). Even if a course of action is eventually authorized by an individual, arriving at a decision is usually the product of input from several sources. Groups have been shown to reach better decisions than individuals when more information is needed than any individual possesses (Maier, 1967), and when the problem is unique, ambiguous, or complex (Robbins, 1974). According to Holloman and Hendrick (1972: 174), the underlying mechanism that enables groups to reach better quality decisions than individuals is based on a social interaction hypothesis whereby "interaction of the group members not only provides an error-correcting function but facilitates individual thinking and involvement."

One way that the social interaction process proposed by Holloman and Hendrick (1972) occurs is through intragroup conflict. For example, Pondy (1969) and Corwin (1967) both argue that intragroup conflict will enhance a group's decision-making ability. Building on this idea, there have been attempts to devise specific group decision-making techniques that employ constructive conflict (Cosier, 1978; Schweiger, Sandberg, and Ragan, 1986; Schweiger, Sandberg, and Rechner, 1989). The purpose of this paper is to critically review the group decision-making literature which advocates the use of conflict-stimulating techniques. Research in the area has generated impressive results and authors have claimed that intragroup conflict explains significant variance in TMT performance. This paper offers 1) an examination of the assumptions and premises that form the basis of this literature, and 2) a deconstruction of the argument that conflict facilitates group decision-making. The deconstruction is intended to show that researchers who prescribe constructive conflict assume that conflict is a well-understood and controllable substance that can be injected into a group to enhance decision-making effectiveness. Group members are advised to employ conflict as they employ any other tool: it can be turned on and off, it can be mastered, and its side effects are understood. The deconstruction uncovers four assumptions made in the intragroup conflict literature: 1) the benefits associated with intragroup conflict in the short-term will also persist over the long-term; 2) TMT members share consensus on group and organisational goals; 3) group members will use constructive rather than destructive conflict and feedback ; 4) there is no gender and conflict interaction effect in conflict management techniques.

Using Deconstruction

Mumby and Putnam (1992:468) indicate that deconstruction of a text does not provide alternative interpretations but instead it attempts to "problematize the present term and to reclaim the absent one (upon which the present term depends for its meaning)." Once the assumptions and premises of a text have been identified, the reader gains a better understanding of the author's purpose. Thus,

deconstruction exposes the text's underlying biases, "internal, arbitrary hierarchies and its presuppositions", as Rosenau (1992:120) points out. Once the underlying biases and assumptions have been identified, the reader is in a better position to draw inferences about the utility of the text and the author's conclusions.

The way theorists conceptualize organisations and organisational processes flavours the prescriptive theory that they offer (Knights and Morgan, 1991). By deconstructing the discourse on intragroup conflict, this paper highlights the narrowness in the traditional conceptualization of intragroup conflict. Rather than perpetuating the traditional conceptualization of how TMTs use intragroup conflict, this paper encourages researchers to be wary of traditional conclusions that have been prescribed about intragroup conflict.

The Role of Conflict

The contention that conflict could constructively facilitate group decision-making can be traced to Coser (1956:8), whose "concern [was] mainly with the functions, rather than the dysfunctions, of social conflict." He and other sociologists (e.g. Dubin, 1957) provided the seminal works that attempted to identify the reasons for why conflict could be beneficial. Assael (1969: 573) summarized the sociological framework for the distinction between functional and dysfunctional conflict by stating:

They regard conflict as potentially beneficial to the system when it brings about a more equitable allocation of political power and economic resources by the formation of new countervailing forces, and a greater balance and stability within the system. Conflict is destructive when a lack of recognition of mutual objectives results. Continued coercion by the more powerful economic forces drive less powerful, yet functionally essential, members from the system.

The purpose of conflict, according to this view, is to rectify any inequities in the distribution of power and resources within the social system. Constructive conflict allows inequities to be recognized so that they may be addressed and corrected. In contrast, destructive conflict further represses the class, subgroup, or member of the system that is powerless or subordinate. Assael (1969) carefully notes that the powerless members of the system are no less essential than the powerful, yet they have been denied recognition of their views and their objectives.

The reliance on conflict for the purpose of gaining equality in a social system continues to permeate literature on intragroup conflict. Researchers in organization theory, organizational behaviour, strategic management, and industrial psychology have adopted the sociologists' notion that conflict will foster equalization in the social system. For instance, the notion of "groupthink" was first described by Janis (1982:9) as:

a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' striving for unanimity overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.

In other words, the problem underlying the groupthink phenomenon is a narrow-mindedness that precludes the decision-making group from considering diverse alternatives. Groupthink emerges in groups that, whether intentionally or not, suppress minority opinions. Janis suggests that cognitive conflict within the group is needed to avoid poor problem identification and to kindle the generation of alternative solutions. Rather than stifling divergent or minority viewpoints, Janis (1982) prescribes intragroup conflict to bring them to the forefront.

Cosier (1981) was one of the earliest experts in applying intragroup conflict to strategic management decision-making. He argued (p.643) for "the need to program differing interpretations of a common problem", indicating an attempt to include alternative interpretations in the strategic planning process.

Cosier's reliance on conflict is an idea that can be traced to Hegelian inquiry systems. Any inquiry system, according to Churchman (1971:32), builds its "fact nets" or "stories of the world" or weltanschauungen during its production of knowledge. Churchman recognizes that the weltanschauungen of any inquiring system is susceptible to a narrow-mindedness which threatens the effectiveness of the system:

As the net grows, certain sentences will become very critical, in the sense that if they are false, the entire net, or a significant portion of it, becomes false. Relative to the net, these sentences take on a privileged character: they become likely truths (p.32, italics added).

A Hegelian inquiry system prevents the weltanschauungen from being woven with privileged, likely truths by including a "watchdog" in the design of the system. This is necessary because "many 'points of view' are required to create an 'object' like an elephant or a university" (Churchman, 1971:149-150). The "watchdog" of the Hegelian inquiry system enables all parts of the system to contribute to the system's purpose by creating conflict within the system: thesis is countered with antithesis. By stressing many points of view, the system avoids constructing a weltanschauungen that privileges the views and objectives of some members to the exclusion of the views and objectives of other members.

In proposing a technique of conflict management, van de Vliert (1985:19) described escalative intervention as "a purposeful, systematic operation through which an outsider seeks to increase the frustration experienced by participants in a conflict." Van de Vliert (1985) identified the objectives of escalating the conflict in groups, many of which indicate an attempt to restore intragroup equality so that the group's communication and effectiveness can be restored. For example, the first objective of escalating intragroup conflict is to "make drastic changes in existing power relations, interaction patterns, and opinions" (van de Vliert, 1985:22). Thus, conflict prescribed by the small group interventionist serves a role similar to the one argued by Churchman: to restore a level playing field within the system so that many points of view contribute to the performance of the system.

In addition to granting a voice to the members who have been repressed by the power structure within the system, van de Vliert (1985) argues that conflict can also stimulate contribution from members who have chosen not to fully participate in the activities of the system. Accordingly, intragroup conflict can help overcome lack of motivation or commitment in the group members. In cases where members may be ambivalent, conflict and tension can help motivate members to become active in the decision-making process. According to Walton (1969), such a method of stimulating group members can amplify their ability to produce, process and use information. For example, if a disinterested employee is given the task of solving a problem and is required to defend his or her decision in the face of peers' criticism, the employee may feel motivated to exert more effort on the project. Similarly, Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1990: 509) argued that "conflict was necessary for team members to avoid complacency and mistakes that might drain resources."

So, while researchers have endorsed the prescription that intragroup conflict improves the performance of TMTs (e.g. Amason, 1996), some confounds to that prescription have gone unexamined. The next sections of the paper deconstruct the prescription by identifying four underlying assumptions made in the literature. Making these assumptions explicit serves to identify the biases inherent in the authors' perspectives.

Assumption One : The Effectiveness of Conflict is Retained Over the Long-Run

The literature on intragroup conflict has contained a debate about the superiority of two common methods for designing conflict within groups. Mitroff (1982) argued that dialectical inquiry (DI) is the superior method while Cosier (1983) questioned the causality evoked in Mitroff's studies and concluded that devil's advocacy (DA) was the better method. In attempting to resolve the debate, Schweiger and his colleagues (Schweiger and Finger, 1984; Schweiger, Sandberg, and Ragan, 1986; Schweiger and Sandberg, 1989) have conducted several studies to determine which technique leads to enhanced group decision-making. Both techniques employ conflict to equalize members within the group: "to prevent uncritical acceptance of the seemingly obvious and to tap the knowledge and

perspectives of group members" (Schweiger, Sandberg, and Rechner, 1989). The conclusion drawn from these studies is that there is no significant difference in performance associated with either technique. However, an important inconsistency characterizes this research, indicating an assumption made by the authors: they assume that the repeated use of conflict in TMTs will enhance decision-making but will have no long term costs or side effects.

Both the development and testing of the theory about intragroup conflict have implicitly limited the definition of group effectiveness to a short run perspective. Citing Mason and Mitroff (1981), Schweiger, Sandberg, and Ragan (1986:51) note that there are several elements characterizing the complex problems faced by strategic decision-making groups:

- dynamic and uncertain environments
- numerous complicated linkages among organizational and environmental elements
- ambiguity of available information
- lack of complete information
- conflicts about the outcomes of decisions among interested parties.

Conspicuous in its absence is possibly the most critical characteristic of strategic decision-making: ubiquity. Andrews (1987) argued that "balancing short-term and long-term profitability is the central challenge of professional management" (p.vii) and that strategy "is effective over long periods of time" (p.14). Similarly, Ansoff (1988:8) noted that "strategic decisions are not self-regenerative" and that long run success depends on "recognizing conditions under which concern with the operating problem must give way to a concern with the strategic." Even when a TMT adequately "solves" a strategic management issue, the problem can recur or be replaced by a more surprising or demanding problem. Consequently, when Schweiger and his colleagues (1986; 1989) gathered data on decision-making groups over one week's time, it was premature to conclude that some groups were more effective decision makers than others. For a TMT to be effective, it must demonstrate consistent ability to solve problems over time, rather than focusing entirely on short-run solutions. Katz and Kahn (1978:245) suggest that organizational effectiveness must be defined as long-run maximization since "short-term maximization might mean catastrophe in the longer run". Without such consistency, a TMT cannot, by definition, fulfill its role as an effective strategic decision-making body.

The relative worth of conflict depends on its effectiveness over extended periods. Researchers have simply assumed that the short-term benefits of intragroup conflict will be retained over the long-term, yet this assumption is untested and is even disputed in other literature that addresses the affective nature of conflict. By employing permanent conflict in group decision-making, the residual effect of conflict may have a crucial impact on long term effectiveness. In their research, Wall, Galanes, and Love (1987) hypothesized that group decision quality would increase as the number of conflict episodes increased. The results of their study confirmed this hypothesis up to a point, after which the marginal utility of each conflict episode became negative. The data "clearly suggests a curvilinear relationship" (Wall, Galanes, and Love, 1987:44) between decision quality and the number of conflict episodes. In short, researchers of intragroup conflict have assumed that a short-term prescription will enhance group decision-making over the long-term, and this assumption has not been verified. So, intragroup may increase group participation in the short-run, but may also saddle the TMT with more difficult burdens over time.

Assumption Two: TMT Members Share Consensus on Group and Organisational Goals

Relative to many academic fields, strategic management is relatively young. It would be difficult to identify when strategy was first discussed, but attempts to delimit and characterise strategic management (aka business policy) as a field first occurred in the 1960s (eg Ansoff, 1965; Andrews, et al., 1965). Hofer and Schendel (1978) published a seminal book that summarised and advanced the

concept of strategy. They identified a major disagreement that had surfaced in the field during the twelve years since the Ansoff and Andrews books were published. At the heart of the debate was whether "strategy" should be defined broadly (Andrews) or narrowly (Ansoff). Basically, a broad definition of strategy is one that includes both goals and the processes used to pursue those goals, while the narrow definition takes the position that goal-setting is outside the definition of strategy. The importance of goal-setting is not part of the debate; the two camps disagree on whether goals are a component of strategy.

The debate is important for this paper. A critical evaluation of the TMT intragroup conflict literature should consider how the process of conflict occurs and the topics that are debated within the TMT. As with most deconstructions, this paper is an attempt to identify assumptions made implicitly; assumptions that are not always stated but apparently underlie an author's world view. For this section of the paper, the task is to identify which view of strategy (broad or narrow) is preferred by researchers of TMT intragroup conflict. The reason is as follows: if an author takes a narrow view of strategy, s/he would probably not study goal-setting as part of strategic management decision-making (since goals are set before strategy is formulated according to the narrow definition). In fact, s/he would presume that goals have already been set and that the TMT is formulating strategy as a means to achieve the pre-set goals. If an author prefers the broad definition of strategy, goals-setting (or reviewing) should be part of the agenda when TMTs meet to formulate strategy. Thus, goals are a legitimate topic of debate under the broad view of strategy. Most of the research that prescribes intragroup conflict is based on empirical studies that compare the relative effectiveness different strategic decision-making techniques. An examination of those studies reveals how strategy is defined and whether group and organisational goals were a topic of conflict.

Studies of intragroup TMT conflict have been conducted using one of two designs. In one design, decision-making teams are asked to solve a strategic dilemma as part of a lab experiment (the case study technique). Teams are given a comprehensive case study and are required to devise a solution for the organisation described in the case. Conflict (an independent variable) is measured subjectively by the investigators' perceptions of group interaction and/or by surveys administered to the participants after the exercise is complete. Furthermore, conflict may serve as a manipulation; the experimental group is taught how to make use of constructive conflict while the control group is not taught any specific decision-making techniques. Much of the work done by Schweiger and his colleagues (1986, 1989, 1991) demonstrates the case study technique. In two of those studies (1986 and 1989), subjects were given the same task, which was to provide a recommendation for the "Leitch Quality Drug Company" case (Glueck, 1980). According to the study:

The case describes a drugstore company that faced significant environmental changes, including demographic shifts and new competition from large super-discount drugstores. Each of its three stores operated in very different neighborhood markets. Internal problems included weak accounting systems, poor inventory control, and questionable pricing policies (Schweiger and Sandberg, 1989:33).

Students were given no instructions suggesting that they assess the goals and objectives of the organisation.

A similar approach was used more recently by Priem, Harrison, and Muir (1995). In their study, students were assigned the "Harvey Wallbanger" case (Cataora, 1990), which describes a US gourmet popcorn manufacturer that is deciding how to enter the savoury snack market in the UK. For a one-week project, students were given the individual assignment to develop four prioritized strategies for entering the UK market and four actions to implement those strategies. After completing the individual assignment, they were randomly assigned to four-person teams and given the same assignment they had already completed individually. Half the teams were trained to use the dialectical inquiry method (DI) of group decision-making while the other half was trained in the consensus method (C).

In the study, the authors explicitly state their assumption about the breadth of strategy: "cognitive conflict is depersonalized, task-related conflict, involving the amount of disagreement over implications of a common set of facts, or over the proper courses of action toward reaching a common goal" (p. 694, emphasis added). So, authors using the "Harvey Wallbanger" case and the "Leitch Quality Drug Company" case have studied how intragroup conflict affects strategy formulation, but have not considered whether groups actually share a common set of goals and objectives.

The second method commonly used to examine the effectiveness of intragroup conflict on group decision-making relies on responses from TMTs who have made recent strategic decisions for the organisation where they work (critical incident technique). This technique relies on respondents accurately remembering the details surrounding a recent strategic decision, but offers insight into the complexities of an actual decision-making situation. Amason (1996) provides a recent example of the critical incident technique. The CEO of each participating TMT was asked to identify 1) a recently completed strategic decision, and 2) the employees who were actively involved in making the decision. Once the decision and the participants were identified, each member of the TMT answered survey questions about (among other things) the type and degree of conflict that occurred during the decision-making, and the perceived quality of the decision that the team made. The instrument used to measure conflict demonstrated reasonable validity and reliability, but focused only on the process of conflict rather than the topic of conflict. Namely, respondents were asked how conflict emerged as strategy was discussed but were not asked whether their organisation's goals and objectives were appropriate.

Menon, Bharadwaj, and Howell (1996) also used the critical incident technique and measured conflict using Likert scale items such as "During the development or formulation of the new product strategy, opinions or feelings were freely expressed" and "During the implementation of the new product strategy, there was consultive interaction and useful give and take" (p.308). While these items do not preclude the possibility that respondents might have debated group or organisational goals, they generally focus on formulating and implementing the strategy to launch a new product. Furthermore, the specific instructions asked respondents to consider activities such as market study, target market definition, and product positioning rather than whether the group's or organisation's goals were appropriate and consensual.

The norm for authors in the field appears to favour the narrow view of strategy. Regardless of whether the case study or critical incident technique is used, authors examine intragroup conflict as it applies to formulating strategy, but not as it applies to setting goals for the organisation or the group. Ultimately, authors have concluded that TMT conflict enhances group decision-making but they have ignored the possibility that the TMT members might have incongruent goals for the group or the organisation. By focusing only on how groups craft strategy (and ignoring how goals are established prior to strategy), authors have allowed a potential confound to the conclusion that conflict facilitates performance. As organisations become increasingly globalised and as TMTs follow the trend toward diversity and heterogeneity, the automatic assumption of shared, consensual goals seems less plausible.

Assumption Three: TMTs Use Only Constructive Conflict

Initially, researchers advocating DA and DI have implicitly assumed that conflict is a unidimensional construct. There have been numerous approaches to classifying different types of conflict that occur within groups (Wall, Galanes, and Love, 1987; Tjosvold and Deemer, 1980; Pace, 1990; Pondy, 1967). Pace (1990) has argued that group members must be able to classify or "differentiate" conflict within the group, where differentiation is defined as the "process of identifying and understanding the parameters of conflict between group members" (p. 80) and suggests that one dimension of differentiation is clarity. Clarity of differentiation allows the group to distinguish whether conflict is personalized or depersonalized and whether it is competitive or cooperative. Pace's (1990) data suggest that an imperative quality of effective groups is that they are able to accurately differentiate conflict among group members.

The personalized vs. depersonalized nature of conflict has been called task vs. people conflict (Wall, Galanes and Love, 1987) or substantive vs. affective (Priem and Price, 1991), or task vs. emotional (Jehn, 1992). The key to this aspect of conflict differentiation is that each member must recognize that an attack on his or her ideology is not an attack on his or her person, and must not resort to personal retaliation out of frustration or anger. Pace (1990) equates competitive vs. cooperative conflict with the familiar win-lose vs. win-win outcomes. When one or more group members advocate their opinion simply to prevail over the minority opinion, this competitive (rather than cooperative) group conflict will be more harmful than helpful. Similarly, Tjosvold and Deema (1980) investigated the effect of controversy on group decision-making based upon similar assumptions that cooperative controversy induced "security, openness, [and] positive expectations" but competitive controversy induced "insecurity, closed-mindedness, and failure to reach an agreement" (p. 590). In short, Pace (1990) concluded that members of effective decision-making groups were able to make good use of constructive conflict while avoiding destructive conflict.

In DA and in DI, the primary vehicle for communicating disagreements is feedback. Each subgroup must critique the assumptions and rationale offered by the other subgroup. Authors prescribing DA and DI assume that group members will inherently make constructive use of conflict and will provide constructive feedback to each other. While research indicates that there are appropriate and inappropriate techniques of delivering criticism, Baron (1988) discovered that the subjects in his experiment demonstrated an unfortunate tendency to deliver destructive feedback within the group. He found that when negative feedback was delivered inappropriately, the supposed benefits of intragroup conflict were overwhelmed by the dysfunctional reactions to the negative feedback. When he compared subjects receiving constructive criticism with those receiving destructive criticism, the latter were significantly more angry and tense, and were more likely to avoid the offensive critic in the future.

Since criticism is a recurring aspect of conflict groups, there are multiple opportunities for criticism to be misunderstood. Even when groups are able to use only constructive conflict at the outset of a decision-making episode, Baron's (1988) research indicates that constructive conflict might not last. The term "conflict migration" might describe situations when constructive conflict wanes, only to be replaced by destructive conflict. When our ideas are criticized publicly, we find it difficult to detach our egos from our creations and can be prone to "kill the messenger". To the extent that group members perceive criticism as destructive rather than constructive, we would expect a deterioration of the group's effectiveness. Individuals who perceive destructive and personal criticism respond with avoidance. In a TMT setting, however, avoidance represents a barrier to communication and violates the requirement for integration of members. Thus, members of a decision-making group who have become angry and evasive are forced to work with their critics. This produces a lingering dysfunction and increases the likelihood of displaced conflict. By assuming that conflict is unidimensional, DA and DI researchers have ignored the destructive aspects of intragroup conflict which operate concurrent to the constructive aspects of intragroup conflict. The ramification of this assumption is more dramatic when considered with the first assumption discussed earlier (effectiveness of conflict is retained over the long run). Consider the following scenario: A TMT employs multiple conflict episodes (over several months), and a subset of the group assumes that all members share common goals. The debates continue, but they never address whether individual members are actually pursuing the same ends. Rather than resulting in a high-performance group, this scenario seems likely to generate protracted obstinateness or misunderstanding among group members.

Assumption Four: There is No Gender and Conflict Interaction Effect

Assuming that no one is harmed by "beneficial" conflict may be based upon another assumption that is embedded in the beliefs concerning the composition of decision-making groups in organisations. Recent research has shown that there are many intervening variables that impact the benefits of intragroup conflict. In other words, conflict does not always result in improved performance, even in the short run. For example, Jehn (1992) and Tjosvold, Dann, and Wong (1992) found that the degree of interdependence within a group determines how beneficial conflict will be. Furthermore, psychologists agree that people have different thresholds for engaging in conflict as well as different

styles of managing interpersonal conflict (Berkowitz, 1962). This section of the paper highlights the drawbacks of intragroup conflict that may occur due to gender differences. Individual differences based on gender are not the only factors that could moderate the effectiveness of intragroup conflict, but previous research has identified important differences in how men and women manage and engage in conflict.

As women continue to comprise the fastest growing portion of TMTs, assumptions of gender in our theories of organizations becomes critical. Morgan (1986:178), for example, exposes male bias in the 'classic' conceptualization of management theory, pointing out that:

The links between the male stereotype and the values that dominate many ideas about the nature of organizations are striking. Organizations are often encouraged to be rational, analytical, strategic, decision-oriented, tough, and aggressive, and so are men.

Given the gender differences on interpersonal conflict, it seems likely that the literature on intragroup conflict is vulnerable to an indictment of a similar "male-only" perspective.

Miller (1991) estimates that women are more likely to prefer integrative, compromising, and tactful strategies of conflict management while men have greater preferences for competitive, unyielding, and aggressive strategies, based on her examination of various studies. Similar findings were reported by Shockley-Zalabak and Morley (1984) in a study of conflict resolution styles of college students. They found that men were more likely than women to employ the competitive style and women were more likely than men to use the cooperative style. Interestingly enough, their description of women's conflict resolution strategies closely parallel the behaviours that small group researchers classified as being constructive applications of conflict. For example, Race (1990) argued that conflict will be constructive when it is depersonalized and/or cooperative but it will be destructive when it is personalized and/or competitive. Similarly, Tjosvold and Deemer (1980) noted the merits of "cooperative controversy" and the problems associated with "competitive controversy." There is some debate as to whether gender differences in resolving conflict is congenital or learned behaviour. Regardless of the explanation, there is evidence that these differences begin early in a person's life. Peirce and Edwards (1988) studied children's methods of conflict resolution in written fantasy stories and discovered that boys used more violent solutions and girls imagined solutions based more on analysis and reasoning.

Thus, research on gender differences suggests that the typical male response to interpersonal conflict is competitive rather cooperative. By designing DA and DI as the prototypical technique for instigating intragroup conflict, researchers have modelled the male style of conflict management. While we would expect a male member of a DA or DI group to thrive, a female member would be practising an unfamiliar style of conflict management. By assuming that men and women manage interpersonal conflict identically, intragroup conflict advocates have counteracted the very role that conflict is purported to fill. If conflict is to be an equalizing function, it should encourage and allow all members of a TMT to participate fully in the group's purpose. The issue of gender differences should not be misconstrued as an author's 'political agenda' but rather a demonstration that individual differences are an important consideration when TMTs are encouraged to employ constructive conflict. According to Nkomo

Race, gender, and class can form interlocking bases of domination in social relations. Although each part may be manifested in its own peculiar and distinct way, the common factor is domination based on notions of inferiority and superiority (1992:507).

A group decision-making technique that accommodates most members of the TMT and which is sustainable over the long-run will probably result in better performance than one which is familiar only to a few members and which loses its effectiveness quickly.

Conclusion

By identifying four assumptions made by the advocates of intragroup conflict, this paper depicts the use of intragroup conflict as dubious, given the incomplete knowledge of interpersonal conflict mechanisms and the residual effect that people-conflict may have during and after task-conflict has been resolved. While researchers claim that intragroup conflict serves to legitimize and equalize all TMT members, these inquiring systems may generate unexpected byproducts that compromise the group's long-term effectiveness.

While the purpose of this paper has been to deconstruct the literature that prescribes TMT intragroup conflict, there are implications for this deconstruction that can serve to improve the future research in this area. Deconstruction does not necessarily call for the abolition of a topic but rather a reinterpretation of it. The likelihood that intragroup conflict abolishes some problems while creating others within TMTs highlights our ignorance of how we define the TMT. Rather than focusing on the TMT as it is defined by an organizational chart, researchers should realize that "some players without titles may have a role in the team, and others with titles may be marginalized" (Pettigrew, 1992: 176). A TMT boundary may be difficult to define for many of the same reasons that an organizational boundary is difficult to define. For example, do TMTs have "boundary spanners" (Thompson, 1967) who are important sources of information but who are not technically "top managers"? Or, are management consultants part of the TMT? These questions suggest that different TMTs may be responsible for different strategic decisions within the same organisation. While the organisational chart may identify certain employees as members of the TMT, other factors may determine who is actually included and excluded.

The children's book titled "The King, the Mice, and the Cheese" tells of a cheese-loving king who complains about the mice in his palace. He commands his advisors to solve the problem, so they import cats to drive away the mice. Soon the cats become more bothersome than the mice ever were, so dogs are recommended as the next solution. Ultimately, mice are the means to rid the palace of elephants, and the king is quite content to have such a small and manageable problem. By examining the assumptions underlying the literature on intragroup conflict, this paper has questioned whether conflict-stimulating techniques cause more problems than they solve. In an effort to chase away the mice infesting our practice and theory of strategic decision-making, we might unknowingly invite the elephants instead. The field of management has become notorious for recommending a management "fad of the month" before all the details are known. If this paper encourages us to investigate our prescriptions more thoroughly, it has served its purpose.

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