MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS OF TASK CONFLICT: THE ROLE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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Intragroup conflict research has shown that task conflict can improve group outcomes, but it has not addressed how groups ensure that the positive aspects of task conflict are realized. This study examines the influence of group conflict management on group effectiveness, as well as the moderating role of group conflict management on task conflict— group outcome relationships. Results of a field survey of 96 business school project groups indicated that the use of agreeable conflict management in response to task conflict was associated with greater group satisfaction. Results examining group conflict management as a moderator showed that the relationship between task conflict and group performance was positive when conflict was actively managed and negative when it was passively managed. Similarly, task conflict improved group satisfaction when managed with agreeable behavior, and harmed satisfaction when neutral or disagreeable behaviors were used. Results from this work provide an important first look at how group conflict management behaviors directly impact group outcomes and affect task conflict—group outcome relationships.

Organizations are becoming increasingly dependent on groups as the central unit of work. While groups have the advantage of pooling their collective resources, their interdependent nature inevitability creates conflict. A wave of recent literature has indicated that some types of conflict may actually be less detrimental (and even beneficial) to group performance (Amason, 1996; Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Amason & Schweiger, 1994; Cosier & Dalton, 1990; Jehn, 1995; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Simons,

Pelled, & Smith, 1999). In fact, several studies have shown that task-related conflict improves group performance (Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Amason & Schweiger, 1994; Jehn, 1995).

Even so, this literature has only begun to explore how groups effectively manage task-based conflict. It is reasonable to expect that groups—like individuals—attempt to manage conflict when it surfaces. The manner in which groups handle emergent conflict may play a critical role in whether or not the conflict situation has a positive or negative impact on group outcomes. Small group research has provided initial support for this idea (Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, in press; Murnighan & Conlon, 1991; Simons et al., 1999), where the manner in which disputes were handled or communicated was found to be an important predictor of group performance. We further this line of research by examining the *joint* impact of task conflict and conflict management on the task effectiveness of work groups and member satisfaction with those groups.

Specifically, we examine how conflict management behaviors directly impact group effectiveness, as well as moderate the relationship between task conflict and group effectiveness. Group conflict management involves responses to conflict that are directly within the control of the group's members, and thus are of particular importance in understanding and directing the behavior of group members. By extending an interpersonal conflict management typology from a dyadic setting to a group context, we were able to investigate the role of group conflict management in resolving task conflicts.

Literature on Group Conflict

Conflict has been defined as a "process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party" (Wall & Callister, 1995, p. 517). Conflict can occur between individuals, groups, organizations, and even nations. This study, however, focuses on *intragroup* conflict, defined as conflict occurring among group members *within* a group. Most researchers recognize two broad classes of group conflict. *Task-related* conflicts occur when group members argue over alternatives related to the group's task, whereas *relationship* conflicts result over interpersonal clashes not directly related to achieving the group's function (Amason, 1996; Guetzhow & Gyr, 1954; Jehn, 1992; Pinkley, 1990; Priem & Price, 1991).

While researchers agree that the emergence of relationship conflict negatively impacts team outcomes such as performance and satisfaction, the impact of task conflict is less clear. Task conflict has been shown to be beneficial in some circumstances (e.g., Jehn, 1995), yet harmful in others (e.g., Lovelace et al., in press). In this study, we explore the role of conflict management as a key factor that explains why task conflict can have either helpful or detrimental effects, depending on how group members manage it.

Task Conflict and Group Performance

Intragroup conflict research has produced findings linking task conflict to group performance in a variety of settings, including laboratory groups, manufac-

turing firm work groups, and top management teams. The effects of task conflict on group performance have not been straightforward. Jehn (1992) found that the relationship between task conflict and group performance was moderated by task type, such that task conflict was beneficial to groups performing non-routine tasks, and harmful to those performing routine tasks. Consistent with this finding, both laboratory groups and top management teams that engaged in complex tasks were shown to make better decisions with more task conflict (Amason, 1996; Shah & Jehn, 1993). Yet in groups performing motor tasks, task conflict was harmful to performance (Shah & Jehn, 1993).

Given that task conflict has been shown to have sometimes positive and sometimes negative effects on group performance, the next step in advancing our understanding of how conflict relates to performance is to explore other factors that may potentially explain these somewhat contradictory findings. The literature has shown conflict management to play an important role in determining group outcomes (Murnighan & Conlon, 1991; Simons et al., 1999), but has only begun to explore conflict management as a moderating factor in task conflict-performance relationships (see e.g., Lovelace et al., in press).

Task Conflict and Group Satisfaction

Researchers have also examined the effects of task conflict on member attitudes towards the work group. As with group performance, the effects of task conflict on group attitudes have been mixed. Task conflict has typically shown a negative relationship with attitudinal outcomes for a variety of management and work groups (Jehn 1992; 1997). However, Priem, Harrison, and Muir (1995) found that task conflict actually improved both member acceptance of group decisions and overall group satisfaction. As with performance, the investigation of conflict management may offer insight into these seemingly discrepant findings. In this study we explore the potential for conflict management to play a central role in buffering the negative impact of conflict on group satisfaction.

Group Conflict Management

At the interpersonal level, *conflict management behavior* has been defined as an individual's reaction to the perception that one's own and another party's current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously (Deutsch, 1973; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). At the intragroup level, *group conflict management* describes the responses of members to conflicts internal to the group. Whereas conflict type refers to the source or origin of the disagreement, conflict management refers to strategies implemented by group members aimed at reducing or solving conflict (e.g., collaboration, confrontation, avoidance).

The interpersonal conflict management process has been studied extensively. Much of the research in this domain has built upon Blake and Mouton's (1964) typology of management styles. Researchers inspired by this typology have suggested that there are five styles which individuals use to manage conflict: accommodating, avoiding, compromising, collaborating, and competing (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Rahim, 1983a, 1983b).

Other researchers have offered alternative conceptualizations and classifications of conflict management behavior (cf. Sternberg & Dobson, 1987; Thomas, 1976). Resulting confusion over the appropriate classification and labeling of the dimensions underlying conflict behavior led Van de Vliert and Euwema (1994) to construct a metataxonomy incorporating several of the extant conflict management typologies. Their effort resulted in the development of a metataxonomy, which subsumed Blake and Mouton's (1964) five styles under two higher order categories, termed agreeableness and activeness. The *activeness* dimension describes "the extent to which conflict behaviors make a responsive and direct rather than inert and undirect impression" (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994, p. 676). The *agreeableness* dimension describes "the extent to which conflict behaviors make a pleasant and relaxed rather than unpleasant and strainful impression" (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994, p. 676). Groups using active conflict management openly discuss differences of opinion, exchange information to solve problems together, and firmly pursue their own sides of disagreements. Groups low on the active dimension accommodate one another's wishes and generally avoid open discussion of differences. Agreeable conflict management is typified by integrating one another's ideas and trying to satisfy all group member expectations. Conversely, groups low on agreeableness might use influence to get their own ideas accepted and might also avoid disagreements altogether. Agreeableness and activeness have been used to represent underlying dimensions of behaviors individuals use in response to conflict (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994).

Using this two-dimensional structure has two primary advantages. First, it allows researchers to examine conflict behavior along a continuum as opposed to restricting investigation of conflict management behavior to five distinct (and presumably independent) styles. Secondly, by demonstrating how other typologies of conflict behavior map onto the two dimensional structure, Van de Vliert and Euwema (1994) enable the integration of past research on conflict management with future research using the two dimensions. In their study, trained observers watched videotaped conflict episodes and evaluated the conflict behaviors used along both the two dimensions of agreeableness and activeness and the five styles. Correlations between observer ratings of Blake and Mouton's five styles of conflict management and the dimensions of activeness and agreeableness showed the five styles could be described in order of increasing activeness: avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating and in order of increasing agreeableness: competing, compromising, avoiding, accommodating, and collaborating (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Chanin and Schneer (1984) provide a method for representing the assertiveness and cooperative dimensions of conflict behavior that are conceptually linked to the activeness and agreeable dimensions. This allows for a more parsimonious investigation of conflict management by collapsing the five styles into the two dimensions that underlie them.

Two studies provide initial support for the active dimension of conflict management as an important predictor of group effectiveness. Murnighan & Conlon (1991) found that effective string quartets accepted conflict as positive, and incorporated one another's concerns into the final product, whereas less successful quartets typically avoided conflict. Simons et al. (1999) found that *debate*, defined

as the "open discussion of task-related differences" (p. 663), moderated diversity-performance relationships. Further, Lovelace et al. (in press) provide support for the importance of the agreeable dimension by showing that the communication of conflict in contentious or collaborative terms negatively moderated the relationship between task disagreement and team effectiveness. Specifically, task conflict was less harmful to team effectiveness when it was communicated in collaborative terms. The current study expands this stream of research by examining both the direct and interactive relationships between task conflict and agreeable and active conflict management in predicting the performance and satisfaction of work groups (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Overview of Research Model
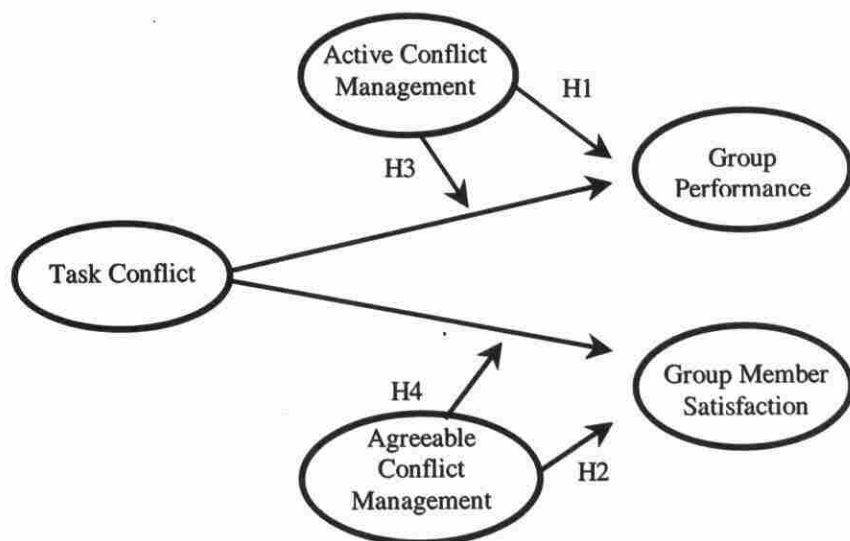
Hypotheses

Findings from prior research have shown that open norms (Jehn, 1992, 1997) and debate (Simons et al., 1999) positively influence work group performance. Central to both constructs is the idea that when it surfaces, task conflict will be actively handled. Extending these ideas, we expect it is the active component of conflict management that leads to its positive effects, and so the use of conflict management that brings disagreements to the surface and resolves them should improve group performance, while conflict management that passively ignores disagreements should harm it. While we do not specifically test this mechanism, it may also be the case that in groups using passive conflict management member working relationships are impaired by the unresolved conflict and thus groups are unable to proceed with task accomplishment effectively.

Hypothesis 1:   The use of active conflict management will enhance group performance, and the use of passive conflict management will detract from group performance.

We expect that conflict management will influence satisfaction similarly to the way it impacts attitudinal outcomes in interpersonal contexts. Van de Vliert, Euwema, and Huismans (1995) found that accommodating and problem solving (key components of agreeableness) were positively related to relational outcomes like mutual trust and the quality of the personal relationship, while forcing and avoiding (disagreeable behaviors) were negatively related to relational outcomes. The more agreeable the conflict management used, the more effective it was at both resolving the conflict and maximizing the quality of the relationship between the parties. In a small group comprised of multiple interpersonal relationships, the impact of agreeable conflict management on resulting relationships and hence satisfaction should also be positively related to its level of agreeableness.

Hypothesis 2:   The use of agreeable conflict management will enhance group satisfaction, and the use of disagreeable conflict management will detract from group satisfaction.

In light of the research on conflict types, "effective" conflict management is likely to be in part a function of the specific type of conflict being addressed. Utilizing Van de Vliert and Euwema's (1994) framework, the agreeableness and activeness dimensions underlying the styles of conflict management behavior may provide some insight towards an understanding of the differences in effectiveness of the different components in response to task conflict.

We expect a positive relationship between task conflict and performance to occur *only when active conflict management is used*. Active task conflict management occurs when group members voice their concerns and try to integrate one another's suggestions while passive task conflict management occurs when group members give in to one another and make frequent concessions. Task-related differences can only benefit performance when they are directly incorporated into the group's ultimate product (i.e., are managed actively). Hence, a positive relationship would be expected between task conflict and group performance in groups whose overall conflict management pattern is high on the active dimension and low on the passive dimension. Essentially, groups with high amounts of task conflict which report using passive conflict management behaviors are those whose members have a variety of ideas, opinions, and suggestions, and yet these differing perspectives are not incorporated into the final product. Additionally, when group members avoid and accommodate one another in the presence of differing ideas, they are foregoing the opportunity to develop novel ideas and solutions that could provide another mechanism by which task conflict can ultimately benefit performance.

Hypothesis 3:   The use of active conflict management will moderate the relationship between task conflict and group performance, such that task conflict will have a positive relationship with performance in groups that use more active conflict manage-

ment, and a negative relationship with performance in groups that use less active (more passive) conflict management.

While the active dimension of conflict management is predicted to maximize performance, we predict that the agreeable dimension of conflict management will be central in minimizing the negative impact of task conflict on group member satisfaction. Agreeableness, unlike activeness, describes the impression of the conflict behavior on others, as opposed to the openness of the discussion of issues. While past research has shown task conflict to have a negative relationship with group member satisfaction, we propose the use of more agreeable conflict management behaviors has the potential to mitigate this effect. It is expected that the negative effects of conflict on satisfaction will be reduced by the use of more agreeable conflict management, and strengthened by the more disagreeable conflict management. In other words, increasing amounts of task conflict may lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, unless group members utilize agreeable conflict management by valuing one another's differing viewpoints through either collaboration or accommodation.

Hypothesis 4: The use of agreeable conflict management behaviors will moderate the relationship between task conflict and group satisfaction, such that conflict will have a weaker (negative) relationship with satisfaction in groups using more agreeable conflict management behaviors than those using less agreeable conflict management behaviors.

Method

Sample

Participants included undergraduate business administration students currently enrolled in an introductory business course at a large southeastern university in the U.S. As a part of their course requirements, students were assigned to small groups and completed a group project over the course of 12 weeks. Group size ranged from three to eight members. Surveys were administered to 517 students arranged into 101 project groups across ten course sections. Three hundred ninety-one students returned usable surveys for a response rate of 76%. To be included in the sample, at least two members of a project group had to return usable surveys. Five groups did not meet this criterion and so 96 groups were included in the analyses. Fifty-three percent were male, forty-seven percent were female, forming predominantly mixed-sex groups. Most groups were ethnically diverse as well; the sample consisted of 222 Hispanics, 98 White/Anglos, 39 African-Americans, 16 Asians, and 16 "other." The average participant age was 23.5 ($SD = 4.18$), and 61% reported working full-time for at least one year.

Procedure

Though the precise nature of the group project assignment varied across the 10 sections, all course instructors were interviewed by the first author to determine the appropriateness of the project for the study. All groups worked together for the

duration of a semester on a group project where performance was assessed at the group level. All projects required synthesis and application of course material, and to be included, they had to allow for group member creativity to be represented in the evaluation. The specific types of projects ranged from the identification and critical analysis of an existing behavioral problem in an organization to the design and development of a marketing plan for a new product. All project assignments were similar in magnitude and difficulty, and required the same member skill sets for completion.

Demographic variables, task conflict, group conflict management, and group member satisfaction were measured using a survey instrument administered one to two weeks prior to the due date for the project. This time was chosen in order to allow the groups as much time as possible to interact and experience conflict. The survey instrument was completed individually by participants and returned to the experimenter during the class period. Performance data were collected from the course instructors at the end of the semester.

Measures

Task Conflict. Jehn's (1992) 4-item Intragroup Conflict Scale was used to assess the amount of task conflict present in each group. A sample item is, "How much disagreement has there been in your group about your project?" All responses were made on five-point Likert scales ranging from "None or Hardly Any" to "A Great Deal." Measurement was made at the individual level, and scores were later averaged within each group to comprise the level of perceived task conflict for the group.

Conflict Management. Group conflict management was assessed using the 28-item Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI–II) (Rahim, 1983a, 1983b). All items were reworded to reflect the project group, rather than the individual, as the referent. Some items were reworded slightly to reflect task conflict specifically. The instructions at the top of the page read:

> Task conflict occurs in work groups when there are disagreements over ideas and alternatives related to your group's project. How have the members of your group handled differing opinions, ideas, and alternatives related to your group's task in the past? For these questions, think only about task-related issues your group has faced.

The 28 ROCI–II items followed these instructions. Two sample items are, "We have avoided open discussion of our differences of opinion," and "We have generally negotiated so that a compromise could be reached." Responses were made on 5–point scales ranging from "We Have Almost Never Done This" to "We Have Almost Always Done This." These responses were employed to capture the recall of past behavior of the group's members in response to conflicts.

While group conflict management was measured by individual group members' responses, items were all worded to reflect the group. Responses within groups were then averaged to represent the average perception of the group's task conflict management behavior.

The 28 scale items mapped back to Blake and Mouton's (1964) 5-style typology of conflict management; thus we first computed scales to capture these. We then formed active and agreeable conflict management dimensions by computing indices according to the procedure introduced by Chanin and Schneer (1984). For each group, a dimension score was computed for agreeableness and activeness using the group behaviors as follows:

Activeness = (Competing + Collaborating) − (Avoiding + Accommodating)
Agreeableness = (Collaborating + Accommodating) − (Competing + Avoiding)

Though their research questions differed, both Chanin and Schneer (1984) and Volkema and Bergman (1995) demonstrated the effectiveness of these formulas in capturing the two underlying dimensions of the five conflict management styles.

Group Outcomes. Group performance was measured using the course instructor's evaluation of the group project. Five instructors participated in this study, and served as the performance evaluator for his/her project groups. The instructors based their overall project evaluations on five criteria: creativity/originality, presentation, organization/completeness, depth of research and analysis, and application of course concepts. For comparability across instructors, each instructor's evaluations were first converted to z-scores and then combined into a single variable representing group performance. The resulting group performance variable thus had a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Group member satisfaction was measured using the two-item scale introduced by Priem et al. (1995). These items read "Working with this group has been an enjoyable experience" and "I would like to work with this group in the future." Responses were made on five-point Likert scales ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Item scores were then averaged across members to form an index of average group member satisfaction (item correlation = .94).

Results

It is important to emphasize that although survey responses were collected from individual participants, the conflict management and conflict type scales used in this study refer to *aggregate* group processes and states (Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994). Thus, as discussed by Sirotnik (1980), the psychometric properties of this scale should be examined at the aggregate level of analysis using a *between groups* matrix that contains item averages computed within groups. To justify aggregating participants' responses within groups, however, it was first necessary to demonstrate that they exhibited reasonably high levels of agreement. James, Demaree, and Wolf (1984) advanced an interrater agreement index (r_{wg}) for such purposes. James et al.'s (1984) multi-item r_{wg} formula contrasts the average observed item variance across respondents within a group, against that which might be expected from a random response pattern. Low r_{wg} values indicate a lack of agreement between individuals in a group, whereas high r_{wg}'s suggest that individuals within a group agree on some target variable (Kozlowski & Hattrup, 1992). Across conflict, conflict management and satisfaction scales, median r_{wg}'s ranged from .86 to .98 (see Table 1). Thus, students within each group evidenced high agreement and their responses *per item* were averaged within each group. Finally,

to calculate a reliability for the aggregated variables, Cronbach's α was computed based on the item averages ($N = 96$; see Table 1). These composites were then used in all remaining analyses.

Correlations

Table 1 presents the group level variable intercorrelations for task conflict, conflict management styles and dimensions, and group performance and satisfaction. Task conflict correlated −.17 (*ns*) with group performance, and −.47 ($p \leq .01$) with group satisfaction. The correlation between group performance and active conflict management was .10 (*ns*), and −.06 (*ns*) between group performance and agreeable conflict management. The correlation between group performance and group member satisfaction was .10 (*ns*). Also notable, the agreeable and active conflict management dimensions were correlated .05 (*ns*), which is consistent with prior work specifying the orthogonality of these two dimensions (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994).

Group member familiarity was examined as a potential covariate. A two-item scale was used asking participants, "How well did you know the other members of your group (on average), at the time your group was formed?" and "How much interaction had you had with the other members of your group (on average), at the time your group was formed?" Responses to the first item ranged from, "we had never met one another before" to "we were close friends." Responses for the second item ranged from, "none or hardly any" to "a great deal." Correlations with each key study variable were all small and non-significant (see Table 1), and so familiarity was excluded from subsequent analyses.

Hypotheses were tested using hierarchical regression where task conflict was entered in step one, conflict management in step two, and the interaction term in step three. The direct relationships (Hypothesis 1 & Hypothesis 2) between the conflict management dimensions and group outcomes were examined using step two results so that the amount of task conflict was controlled. The joint impact of task conflict and conflict management (Hypothesis 3 & Hypothesis 4) was examined using step three results.

To test Hypothesis 1, group performance was regressed on the active conflict management dimension after partialling the variance due to task conflict. As Table 2 shows, a direct relationship between active conflict management and group performance was not supported ($\beta = .14$; $\Delta R^2 = .05$, *ns*). Next, the direct relationship between agreeable conflict management and group satisfaction (Hypothesis 2) was examined. Regressing group member satisfaction on agreeable conflict management showed support for Hypothesis 2 (see Table 2; $\beta = .38$, $p \leq .01$). After controlling for variance due to task conflict, the use of agreeable conflict management explained an additional fourteen percent of the variance ($p \leq .01$) in group member satisfaction.

Next, the moderating effect of active conflict management on the relationship between task conflict and group performance was examined (Hypothesis 3). When group performance was regressed on the interaction of task conflict and active conflict management, support for Hypothesis 3 was found (see Table 2). The task conflict by activeness interaction led to a significant increase in the variance

Table 1

Median Within-Group Agreement ($r_{wg(j)}$) Coefficients and Group-Level Variable Means, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations, and Internal Consistency (α) for Task Conflict and Task Conflict Management ($N = 96$)

Variable	M	SD	Medianr_{wg}	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Task conflict	1.86	.46	.97	(.87)										
2. Familiarity	1.97	.63	.75	.09	(.64)									
3. Avoiding	2.91	.47	.96	-.15	-.01	(.72)								
4. Accommodating	3.65	.38	.97	-.40**	-.06	.37**	(.78)							
5. Competing	2.52	.49	.94	.07	-.09	.38**	.10	(.80)						
6. Collaborating	4.03	.43	.98	-.22*	.02	.05	.67**	-.11	(.84)					
7. Comprising	3.55	.48	.92	-.22*	-.11	.35**	.73**	.24*	.47**	(.77)				
8. Activeness[a]	-.01	.67	na	.24*	-.01	-.64**	-.33**	.38**	.14	-.18	(na)			
9. Agreeableness[b]	2.26	1.00	na	-.21*	.03	-.46**	.45**	-.64**	.71**	.20	.05	(na)		
10. Group performance[c]	.00	1.00	na	-.17	-.09	-.04	-.15	.02	-.03	-.07	.10	-.06	(na)	
11. Group satisfaction	3.94	.74	.86	-.47**	.08	-.09	.45**	-.07	.51**	.26*	.07	.46**	.10	(.94)

*$p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. (two-tailed)

[a] Possible range -8 to 8, Observed range -2.10 to 1.76.

[b] Possible range -8 to 8, Observed range .47 to 5.71.

[c] For comparability across projects, Group Performance consists of standardized scores for each professor.

accounted for ($\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p \leq .05$) in performance. We plotted the interaction using Cohen and Cohen's (1983) procedure for graphing interaction effects (see Figure 2). Task conflict enhanced performance in groups who actively managed the conflict, and detracted from it in groups who did not actively manage the conflict.

Figure 2
Interaction Between Task Conflict and Active Conflict
Management in the Prediction of Group Performance.
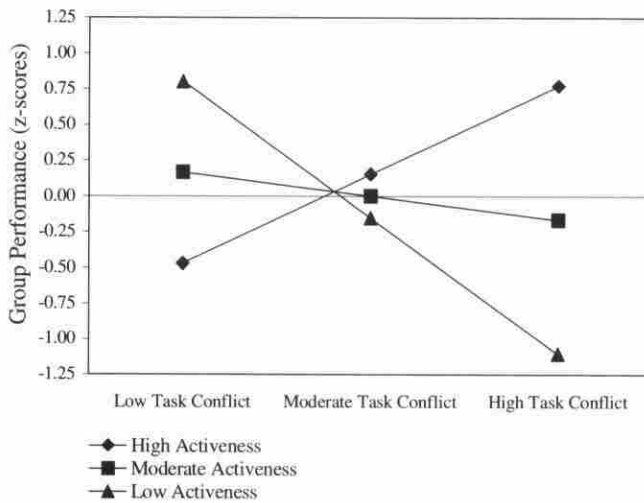
Finally, the moderating effect of agreeable group conflict management on the relationship between task conflict and group member satisfaction was examined (Hypothesis 4). The task conflict by agreeableness interaction did add significantly ($\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p \leq .01$) to the prediction of group member satisfaction above that accounted for by task conflict and agreeable conflict management, in support of Hypothesis 4 (see Table 2). The plot of this interaction (see Figure 3) shows a positive relationship between task conflict and group satisfaction in groups that use agreeable conflict management, and a negative relationship between conflict and satisfaction in groups that do not use agreeable conflict management. In addition to testing hypothesized relationships, linkages from the model that were not predicted and therefore should not be significant were also examined and lend further support to the research model.[1]

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[1] For completeness, unhypothesized relationships were also tested and, as anticipated, were all found to be non-significant. The joint impact of agreeableness and task conflict did not add significantly to the prediction of performance ($\Delta R^2 = .00$, ns). Similarly, activeness and task conflict did not interact to influence group satisfaction. Finally, the interaction of the agreeable and active dimensions did not significantly add to the prediction of either performance ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, ns) or satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, ns) above that of the dimensions alone.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Examining the Joint Impact of Task Conflict and Conflict Management on Group Performance and Satisfaction ($N = 96$)

	Group Performance				Group Satisfaction		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Task conflict (TC)	-.17	-.20*	-.20*	Task conflict (TC)	.47**	-.39**	-.95**
Activeness (AC)	—	.15	-.61	Agreeableness (AG)	—	.38**	-.67
TC x AC	—	—	.79*	TC x AG	—	—	1.10**
R^2	.03	.05*	.08*	R^2	.22**	.36**	.40**
ΔR^2	.03	.02	.04*	ΔR^2	.22**	.14**	.04**

Note: The first three rows present standardized regression coefficients.
* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ (one–tailed)

Discussion

The goal of this study was to extend the conflict literature by exploring the direct and moderating effect of conflict management responses on critical group outcomes. Recent studies have focused on whether the presence of task conflict impacts group outcomes (e.g., Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995) and whether the management of conflict impacts outcomes (e.g., Simons et al., 1999). However, researchers have only begun to explore the interface between conflict types and management behaviors (e.g., DeDreu & Van Vianen, in press; Lovelace et al., in press). Here we examined how the conflict management behaviors of group members along two key dimensions affect group performance and satisfaction, both directly and by moderating the influence of task conflict. The current study suggests that relationships between task conflict and group outcomes depend in part, upon the group's handing of the conflict. Agreeable conflict management was posited to hold the key to task conflict-group satisfaction relationships, while active conflict management was posited to hold the key to task conflict-group performance relationships.

This study first examined the effects of group conflict management strategies on group outcomes. Active conflict management was proposed to maximize performance, while agreeable conflict management was thought to improve satisfaction. In the current sample, activeness did not relate significantly to performance. The use of agreeable task conflict management, however, did positively predict satisfaction. This finding extends the work of Van de Vliert et al. (1995), providing initial evidence that effective conflict management strategies are similar across the interpersonal and small group contexts. Furthermore, this finding that significant variability in group satisfaction was accounted for solely by the use of agreeable conflict management underscores the importance of using agreeable conflict management behaviors when working in collective settings.

This study also found support for the idea that conflict management moderates task conflict—group outcome relations. When considered alone, the amount of task conflict that groups experience was not related to group performance. However, when task conflict was considered in conjunction with the behaviors used to manage it, findings showed that task conflict can be either harmful or productive. Specifically, task conflict's relationship with group performance was influenced by the group's use of active conflict management. In groups that passively managed task conflict, the conflict harmed group performance, while in groups that actively managed the conflict, it was beneficial to their performance.

The current study also extends research indicating that conflict can influence affective states of group members. Agreeable conflict management was predicted to mitigate the negative effects of task conflict on group satisfaction. Not only did agreeable conflict management mitigate the negative effects of task conflict, it reversed the direction of the relationship completely. In groups that used highly agreeable conflict management, task conflict actually promoted group satisfaction. Conversely, in groups using neutral or disagreeable conflict management, the more task conflict, the lower the group's satisfaction. This finding suggests that groups

with a great deal of disagreement can still be satisfied with their working experience if the conflict is managed in an agreeable manner (i.e., with collaboration and accommodation). In light of research that has consistently found a negative relationship between conflict and affective evaluations (e.g., Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995), this has important implications for unlocking the value of task conflict (on performance) without incurring the costs (to satisfaction). In groups where task conflict is managed in an active *and* agreeable manner (i.e., collaboratively), the conflict is likely to benefit both performance and member satisfaction, while in groups where the management behavior is active but not agreeable, the full potential of the conflict is likely to be at least somewhat negated by the negative affect generated within the group.

Figure 3
Interaction Between Task Conflict and Agreeable Conflict
Management in the Prediction of Group Satisfaction
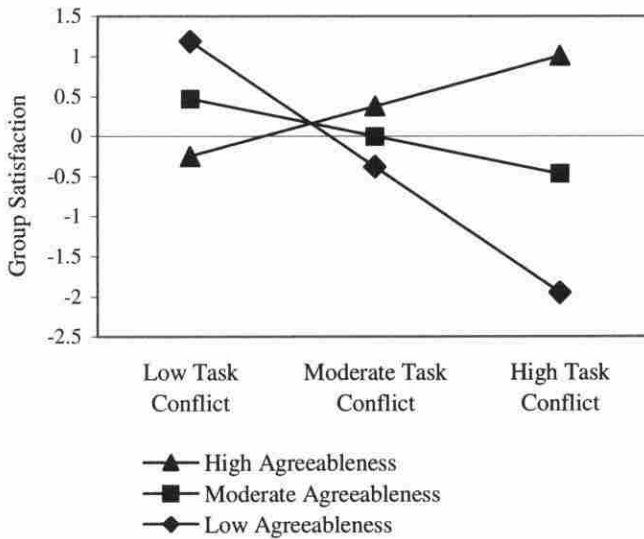
Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study makes an important and meaningful contribution to the literature on intragroup conflict, some important limitations merit discussion. One limitation of this research was the measurement of group performance. Group performance was assessed by a single rater per group, the course instructor, and so the reliability of this measure could not be assessed in this study. Future studies should examine these relationships using multiple performance criteria, though they are often difficult to obtain in field studies that utilize in tact workgroups.

Another limitation was the cross-sectional nature of the study, at least with regard to the measurement of task conflict and conflict management. Conflict is a

process that unfolds over time (Thomas, 1976; Wall & Callister, 1995). The underlying issue of a conflict and the behavior used to respond to the conflict are interdependent and cyclical. That is, conflict somewhat influences the way the conflict is handled, and the way conflict is handled influences future conflict. In the current study the reciprocal nature of these processes could not be examined, because conflict and its management were not assessed throughout the lifespan of the groups. Future research that captures the sequencing of these events would contribute to our understanding of how the emergence of different types of conflict, and the management of conflict, co-occur and influence each other. It would also be valuable to explore these relationships over time to see how conflict management at one point in the group's life cycle affects the functioning and development of the group in the future.

A final limitation was the conceptualization and measurement of group conflict management. At the interpersonal level, conflict behavior has been viewed primarily as a conglomeration of the five basic components (Van de Vliert et al., 1995). This study generalized this conceptualization of conflict management to the work group unit of analysis and employed a widely used, previously validated instrument (Rahim, 1983a; Rahim & Magner, 1995). However, it is possible that groups use additional or different strategies than individuals to manage conflicts. For instance, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) observed that effective string quartets often allowed the leader to decide disagreements. This is a strategy likely to be present in hierarchically structured teams that is qualitatively different from the accommodating style in the interpersonal context. Qualitative research examining specific strategies that groups use to manage conflicts, and how these differ or complement individual strategies, would help refine our conceptualization of group conflict management. In addition, this research might lead to the development of a measure of group conflict management more appropriate to the group level of analysis.

Future research that unveils the nature of the relationship between task and relationship conflict might also help our understanding of how conflict and conflict management impact groups. Despite their differential effects on group outcomes, task and relationship conflict have consistently been found to correlate strongly with one another. Simons and Peterson (2000) took a first look at this relationship, and found intragroup trust negatively moderated the task-relationship conflict association such that as intragroup trust increased, the two types of conflict were less related to one another. We believe that these dimensions may actually have a spiraling negative relationship where task conflict that does not receive effective management may spur the development of relationship conflict, and vice versa. However, these types of research questions must be addressed with longitudinal studies that capture the existence and management of conflict at multiple points over a group's life span. Finally, qualitative study of work groups by Jehn (1997) identified a third dimension or type of conflict, process conflict. Effective process conflict management behaviors have yet to be explored. Future research should consider examining the role of all three types of conflict and their respective management strategies.

Conclusions

The goal of this study was to explore how the agreeableness and activeness of conflict management affects the productivity or deleteriousness of the task conflict faced by small groups. Thus far, the group conflict literature has suggested that groups openly handle and even encourage task conflict. The results of this study go a step further, indicating that active conflict management promotes performance while agreeable conflict management promotes group satisfaction. The saying, "what you say isn't as important as how you say it," may be the case when it comes to managing intragroup conflict. That is, group outcomes may not be as much a function of what a group disagrees about, but more importantly how the group handles the resolution process.

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