CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE
AND PERCEPTIONS OF LEADER EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between follower perceptions of the leader using a cooperative conflict
management style and follower perceptions of leader effectiveness, satisfaction with the leader,
and willingness to exert more effort at work are studied. The findings suggest significant
relationships between a cooperative conflict management style and follower perceptions.

Keywords: conflict management styles, leader effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have identified a variety of factors that contribute to conflict in organizations. For
example, management’s failure to provide clear expectations, individual differences in goals and
values, and differing ideas about specific actions that should be taken to solve problems (Rahim,
Antonioni & Psenicka, 2001; Rahim, 2002). More recently, conflict in organizations is further
enhanced by considerable uncertainty and change in technology, financial markets, and the
global economy (Darling & Walker, 2001). Effective managers recognize that although conflict
can be detrimental to an organization, it can also create opportunities for growth and
development for individuals and the organization. Thus, instead of avoiding conflict, many
managers today try to manage conflict in order to enhance effectiveness, motivation and
satisfaction.

Rahim (1983) and others suggest that conflict arises from disagreements or incompatibilities
within or between social entities, and conflict management styles are the strategies managers use
to respond to these incompatibilities. The most widely used model of conflict strategies is the
five factor interpersonal conflict management styles identified by Rahim (1983). His framework
describes five conflict resolution styles based on various levels of concern for self and levels of
concern for others – integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising. These
styles have been associated with a variety of outcomes such as job satisfaction and job burnout
Papa & Canary (1995) and Spitzberg, Canary, & Cupach (1994) suggest that a key component to successful leadership is effective conflict management because of the effect conflict style has on subordinates’ perceptions of leader competency, effectiveness and follower satisfaction. That is, if subordinates perceive the leader to be appropriate in handling a conflict, the leader will also be perceived as competent and followers will be more satisfied with the leader and work harder for her/him. These researchers also argue that leader effectiveness is probably best judged from the subordinate’s point of view because the person knows best if his/her outcomes are achieved. Few studies, however, have looked at the relationship between conflict management styles and attitudinal outcomes from the perspective of the follower. This study attempts to build on past research in conflict management by investigating the relationship between follower perceptions of the leader’s conflict management style and subordinate perceptions of leader effectiveness, satisfaction with the leader, and follower willingness to exert more effort at work.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

Rahim’s (1983, 1985, 1986) model of conflict management styles uses a theoretical bases similar to Blake and Mouton (1964) where the styles of conflict were differentiated on two different dimensions, concern for self and concern for others which depicts an individual’s motivation during conflict situations. The integrating style involves a high concern for self and a high concern for others. It is often referred to as the problem solving style by reducing organization conflict through collaboration, openness, fairness, and exchanging information to uncover the real issue (Rahim, 1983). Research has supported the positive relationship between an integrating style and perceived leader effectiveness and satisfaction (Gross & Guerrero, 2000; MacIntosh & Stevens, 2008). The obliging style is more of an indirect approach to conflict management that involves a high concern for others and a low concern for self. Leaders using this style tend to emphasize common views and downplay differences. Friedman, Tidd, Currall & Tsai (2000) and Rahim (1983) suggest that there is an element of self-sacrifice or giving in to other’s wishes in this style. This style can help maintain the peace while not challenging personal relationships. The compromising style involves a moderate level of concern for both others and self. It’s a middle ground approach that usually involves splitting the difference. This often results in neither party being satisfied completely, but attaining a mutually acceptable outcome. The dominating style involves a high concern for self and a low concern for others and is often associated with a win-lose strategy. A person who has a dominating style is competitive and tries to win at the cost of other’s needs and expectations. Although this style can result in perceptions of leader effectiveness, it’s often not viewed as being appropriate in many situations (Gross & Guerrero, 2000). Finally, the avoiding style is associated with a low concern for others and self. It involves suppression, withdrawal, and lack of any action. This style is also characterized by a lack of caring or being unconcerned with issues or other’s views. Avoiding has been linked to a lack of productivity and ineffectiveness (De Dreu & van der Vliert, 1997).

The integrating, obliging and comprising conflict management styles show a moderate to high level of concern for others, and have been referred to as “cooperative conflict management
styles;” while the avoiding and dominating styles show little concern for others, and have been referred to as “uncooperative” styles (Rahim, Magner & Shapiro, 2000).

**RESEARCH ON COOPERATIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES**

Although there are some inconsistent research findings pertaining to the effect that cooperative and uncooperative conflict management styles have on follower’s perception of leader effectiveness, as well as their own satisfaction and motivation, previous research has generally supported the notion that cooperative styles produce positive outcomes at work (Barbuto, Phipps & Xu, 2010; Chan, Huang, Ng, 2008; Friedman et al. 2000; Gross & Guerrero, 2000). Conversely, uncooperative styles often produce negative outcomes (Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995). For example, in a study that examined how the five conflict management strategies are perceived differently in terms of interpersonal communication effectiveness and appropriateness, Gross & Guerrero (2000) found the integrating strategy was perceived as the most appropriate and effective strategy because it focuses on both the other and the self. Thus, both parties collaborate and participate in decision making in order to reach a mutually beneficial result. Conversely, the avoiding style was least effective while the dominating style was somewhat effective but not necessarily appropriate. Similarly, Barbuto, Phipps & Xu (2010) found the integrating style to be the best predictor of leader effectiveness in a study of the mediating effects of the Big Five Personality Factors and Barbuto & Xu (2006) reported the dominating and avoiding styles, to be negatively related to leader effectiveness.

Other researchers argue that the integrating style can lead to reduced stress (Friedman et al. 2000), while the integrating, compromising, and obliging styles may be viewed as effective due to their positive influence on work performance and satisfaction (Rahim et al. 2001). Janssen & van de Vliert (1996) suggest that the dominating style can actually lead to increased conflict that escalates over time, while Gross and Guerrero (2000) found it to be moderately effective, but inappropriate. The avoiding style appears to be the most ineffective style due to the lack of attention given to the issues, and the absence of any real decisions being made (Carnevale & Isen, 1986). Thus, in general, previous research has found the cooperative conflict management styles (integrating, obliging, and compromising) do lead to more positive attitudes among followers such as increased job satisfaction, motivation and perceptions of leader effectiveness.

As a result, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a positive relationship between follower perceptions of their leader using a cooperative conflict management style and the follower’s willingness to exert extra effort at work.

H2: There is a positive relationship between follower perceptions of their leader using a cooperative conflict management style and follower’s satisfaction with the leader.

H3: There is a positive relationship between follower perceptions of their leader using a cooperative conflict management style and perceptions of leader effectiveness.
METHODS

Sample

A sample of 121 individuals enrolled in a leadership certificate program at a mid-size Southwestern University participated in the study. Fifty-three percent of the sample was male and 47% was female. The age of respondents ranged from 18 – 67 years of age with 46% of the sample falling in the 23 to 30 year range, 16% in the 31-39 year range, and 20% in the 40-55 year range. Approximately 34% of the respondents indicated they had 1 – 5 years of work experience while 46% had between 6 – 20 years of experience. Forty-one percent of respondents indicated that they had a 4-year college degree and 32% had completed a Master’s degree. Eighty percent of the sample was Caucasian, 40% listed their occupation as management, professional, or related, and about 53% of the respondents indicated they currently worked for an establishment that employed fewer than 100 workers.

The surveys were administered over a one year timeframe to students enrolled in a Leadership Certificate Program. The researcher explained that participation in the study was voluntary and assured confidentiality. All students enrolled in the Leadership Certificate Program opted to participate in the study, and the surveys were completed by the participants during a portion of one class period.

Measures

Study measures were generated through established measurement scales for each of the variables. The reliability of the scales was assessed by computing Cronbach alpha coefficients, and all of the scales were well within the acceptable range according to Nunnally’s (1978) criterion of .70 except for the extra effort scale (.65). The reliability coefficients for the measures were .96 (cooperative CMS), .65 (extra effort), .92 (leader effectiveness), and .90 (satisfaction). A summary of the scales used to measure each construct follows.

The integrating, obliging, and compromising subscales from the ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983) were used to measure Cooperative Conflict Management Style (CCMS) (Rahim, Magner, & Shapiro, 2000; Song, Xie, & Dyer, 2000). The subscales were combined into one 17-item, five-point scale. The average sum of the item responses were used to indicate level of CCMS. Sample questions include “My leader tries to work with me to find solutions to a problem,” “My leader goes along with my suggestions,” and “My leader tries to find a middle course to resolve an impasse.”

The followers’ willingness to exert extra effort in their work was assessed using the extra effort subscale in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ – 5X; Bass and Avolio, 1994). The subscale is a 3-item, five-point scale. A sample question includes “My leader gets me to do more than I expected to do.”

The followers’ satisfaction with leadership style was assessed using the satisfaction subscale from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ – 5X; Bass and Avolio, 1994). The subscale consists of two items to measure satisfaction, rated on a five-point scale. A sample question includes “My leader works with me in a satisfactory way.”
The followers’ perceptions of leadership effectiveness was measured using the effectiveness subscale from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ – 5X; Bass and Avolio, 1994). The subscale consists of four items to measure leadership effectiveness, rated on a five-point Likert-scale. Sample questions include “My leader is effective in meeting my job-related needs,” and “My leader is effective in representing me to higher authority.

Analyses

Before analyzing the data, the reliability of the scales was assessed by computing Cronbach alpha coefficients. Regression analyses were utilized to test the hypotheses.

Results

The results of this study are presented next. A review of the reliabilities of the measures used indicates that all were well within the acceptable range according to Nunnally’s (1978) criterion of .70 except for the extra effort scale (.65).

Hypothesis 1 predicted that there would be a positive relationship between follower perceptions of their leader using cooperative conflict management style and the followers’ willingness to exert extra effort in their work. Results of regression analyses provide support for the positive relationship between cooperative CMS and extra effort. Cooperative CMS explains 31.5% of the variance in extra effort (F = 4.83, p < .01) and produces a significant final beta weight (β = .689, p < .01). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that there would be a positive relationship between follower perceptions of their leader using cooperative CMS and follower satisfaction with leadership style. Approximately 48.3% of the variance in satisfaction with the leader is explained by cooperative CMS (F = 12.43, p < .01). Cooperative CMS was also a significant predictor in the final model (β = .828, p < .01). Thus, support was found for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that there would be a positive relationship between follower perceptions of their leader using cooperative CMS and perceptions of leader effectiveness. The results from regression analyses indicate that cooperative CMS is a significant predictor of perceived leader effectiveness. Cooperative CMS explained 57% of the variance in perceived leader effectiveness (F = 22.03, p < .01) and was a significant predictor in the final model (β = .90, p < .01). Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that conflict management strategies can support subordinate motivation and attitudinal outcomes. Conflict management is a process that can be acted on through training and coaching. Training methods focused on conflict management strategies that show a moderate to high level of concern for the other party have the potential to enhance motivation and satisfaction. These findings suggest the importance of leaders being highly aware of CMS styles and displaying behaviors that lower follower perceptions of competition and dominance.
during conflict. This suggests a need for supervisors to use conflict behaviors that improve problem solving by calmly discussing issues, searching for areas of agreement, and exploring possibilities for mutual agreements. This should be incorporated into training programs along with more training opportunities for managers to promote more other-oriented behaviors in the areas of leadership and conflict management.

Our study, like most, had some limitations. The size of the sample was somewhat modest, although adequate to test the relationships here, and considerable variance was explained after the relevant control variables were entered. An additional caveat might involve common method variance due to the use of a single collection of questionnaire data from one source and from one point in time. This, in turn, might have inflated the correlations among the variables of interest. Finally, our participants were involved in leadership training and it’s difficult to say whether or not these findings are generalizable. Thus, future research that employs multiple data points and multiple data sources could help alleviate these concerns. A promising area of research might be to include the impact of both cooperative and uncooperative conflict management styles on outcomes, as well as studying moderating and mediating relationships. To conclude, since conflict will always be prevalent in organizations, any additional insights in how to manage it appropriately and effectively will most likely lead to improved subordinate performance and success.

REFERENCES


