Constructive Conflict Management in Organizations: Resolution Strategies, Goal Achievement, and Psychological Changes After Conflicts

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The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship of resolution strategies and positive conflict aftereffects in organizational conflicts among Japanese business people and to examine if the achievement of goals mediated the relationship. We asked 154 respondents to recall a recent conflict with their supervisor and to rate it in terms of their resolution strategies, achievement of goals, and aftereffects. Factor analysis generated three clusters of goal achievement: group, personal, and performance goal achievement. The path analysis indicated that conciliatory strategies (persuasion and negotiation) were more effective than the other types of strategy in producing positive conflict aftereffects, that is, affective change (reduction of negative emotions) and attitudinal changes (increase in organizational commitment). It was also suggested that this effect was caused by that the conciliatory strategy was able to contribute to achievement of the group and performance goals with which the Japanese business employees were concerned.

Key words: conflict management, organization, resolution strategy, goal achievement, changes after conflict

Introdction

Avoidance of Conflict

Most people do not like conflicts. It is because conflicts engender stress and negative emotions for participants and conflicts sometimes give destructive aftereffects on their social relations. Japanese people have a particularly strong tendency to avoid the situation that potentially involves conflicts (Burnlund, 1975; Ohbuchi, Hayashi, & Imazai, 2000). Japanese business organizations have developed both formal and informal institutions to prevent conflicts or to suppress the expression of them (Ohbuchi, 1998). However, avoidance of conflict is not found only among Japanese people or organizations, but researchers have reported that western people often attempt to do it in both organizational and interpersonal situations (Bircher, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Brown, 1983; Kolb & Bartunek, 1992; Peterson & Peterson, 1990). Motives for avoidance of conflicts are fear of retaliation or group pressure toward consensus (De Dreu, 1997), group coherence or interpersonal maintenance (Ohbuchi et al., 2000), or lack of confidence for

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conflict coping skills (Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994).

While avoidance of conflict is sometimes practical to take time for the emotional excitation to attenuate or the situation to change, researchers noted its negative aftereffects. Pressure toward consensus often generates group think and leads to risky group decision (Turner & Pratkanis, 1994, 1997). Avoidance of conflicts impairs personal independence and individuality, and shrinks creative and innovative potentiality of organizations (De Dreu & De Vries, 1993). It is a non-functional way of dealing with conflicts because a problem cannot be resolved and sometimes escalate the conflicts (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991).

Positive Aftereffects of Conflict and Their Determinants

Because of harmfulness of avoidance of conflict, researchers have been interested in how conflicts can be constructively resolved (e.g., De Drue, 1997). Research have empirically found that appropriate management of conflicts produces lots of positive aftereffects: For example, facilitation of communication and mutual understanding between participants (Putnam, 1994), stimulation of flexible and creative thinking of group members (Borñstein & Erev, 1997), and enhancing their organizational commitment (Ohbuchi & Suzuki, 1999).

Among determinants of positive conflict aftereffects, De Drue (1997) attended to type of conflict and resolution strategies. Research on organizational conflict by Jehn (1997) and Amason (1996) found that the cognitive or task conflict was more likely to promote the quality of group decision and performance than the emotional or relational conflict. Research on resolution strategies, on the other hand, has demonstrated that conciliation (integrative strategy or problem solving) more often assists participants to have constructive interactions and to reach agreement than other strategies such as assertion, aggression, or avoidance (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994: Ohbuchi & Kitanaka, 1991; Tjosvold, 1997). However, the social psychological processes by which conciliation strategy leads to positive conflict aftereffects has not been explicated. The first purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship of resolution strategies and conflict aftereffects in organizational conflicts among Japanese business people.

There are the objective and subjective measures of positive conflict outcome: the former includes the changes in the quality of group decision and group performance after conflict and the latter includes cognitive, affective, and attitudinal changes of participants after conflicts. The cognitive changes include an increase of knowledge concerning tasks and group works, affective changes include a decrease of negative emotions, and attitudinal changes include an increase of job motivation and organizational commitment. In the present study, we focused on affective and attitudinal changes as the subjective measures of positive conflict aftereffects.

Multiple Goals and Their Achievement in Conflict Resolution

How does a certain type of resolution strategy lead to positive conflict aftereffects? We assumed that conflict aftereffects depend on the outcomes produced by resolution strategies. The conflict is a situation in which an individual's need or expectation is interfered by the other's action, and therefore, the individual may attempt to satisfy the initial need or expectation. In the process of conflict resolution, however, additional concerns are usually evoked, for example, the individual may want to maintain social relationships, to restore fairness, or to protect his or her public identity. Ohbuchi and Tedeschi's (1997) multiple goals theory posited that participants in

conflicts are concerned with multiple goals in the process of conflict resolution and their choice of resolution strategy is determined by the goals. In a factor analysis, Ohbuchi, Tyler, Tanaka, and Sugawara (1999) found that they were clustered into two categories, that is, personal and group goals. Personal goals consist of individual performance, power, and personal identity, and group goals consist of group performance, fairness, relationships, and group coherence. The second purpose of the present study was to examine how achievement of these goals mediated the relationship between resolution strategies and conflict aftereffects.

Method

Participants

By mail, we distributed our questionnaire to 300 Japanese non-managerial business persons and obtained 154 respondents (85 men, 58 women, and 11 unidentified). The respondents' mean age is 27.0, ranging from 19 through 41. Among them, 46.1% were from manufacturers, 24.7% service providers, 15.6% distributors, 4.5% mass media, and 2.1% financial service.

Measurement of Organizational Conflicts

In the questionnaire, we asked each participant to recall a recent conflict with his or her supervisor, which included disagreement regarding the participant's status or job, and to rate it in terms of their attempted resolution strategies, achievement of goals, and aftereffects. Table 1 shows all the items to measure them.

Resolution strategies. To measure 5 different types of strategies (conciliation, confrontation, third party intervention, avoidance, and compliance), we asked the participants to indicate what they attempted to resolve the conflict by rating each of the items included in Table 1 on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (1) to *Definitely* (7). Since alpha coefficients for confrontation and the third party intervention were relatively high, averaging the item scores made the scores of these strategies. Because of low alpha of conciliation, however, we treated each item for conciliation as discrete strategy (persuasion and negotiation).

Goal achievement. In order to measure achievement of eight goals (personal performance, power, independent identity, interdependent identity, group performance, relationship, and group cohesiveness), we constructed two items for each goal (see Table 1). We asked the participants to indicate the degree to which these goals were finally achieved by rating each item on a 7-point scale raging from *Not at all* (1) to *Perfectly* (7). Because alpha was satisfactorily high for all the goals, each score of the goal achievement was the average of the item scores.

Conflict aftereffects. In order to measure positive conflict aftereffects, we used three items in Table 1: One was to measure the affective change (reduction of negative emotions) and the other two items were to measure the attitudinal change (increase in organizational commitment). We asked the participants to indicate how they responded to the outcomes of conflicts by rating these items on a 7-point scale raging from *Not at all* (1) to *Definitely* (7). The score of positive attitudinal change was the average of the two items because its alpha was high.

Table 1. Items used in the conflict questionnaire and reliability coefficients (Alpha).

Items	Alpha
Strategies	
Conciliation	.202
To calmly and patiently attempt to persuade the supervisor (persuasion).	
To bargain or compromise with the supervisor (negotiation).	
Confrontation	.674
To show anger towards the supervisor.	
To criticize the supervisor.	
Third party intervention	.831
To ask the third party to help you.	
To ask the third party to resolve the conflict.	
Avoidance	
To avoid confrontation and restrain yourself.	
Compliance	
To comply with the supervisor.	
Goal achievement	
Personal performance	.755
To increase productivity or quality of your work.	
To enhance or maintain evaluation of your work.	
Power	.837
To punish the supervisor.	
To defeat the supervisor.	
Independent identity	.759
To be seen by others as an independent or assertive individual.	
To avoid to be seen by others as a yes man.	
Interdependent identity	.739
To be seen by others as a friendly fellow.	
To avoid to be seen by others as an aggressive person.	
Group performance	.801
To contribute to the team or section.	
To contribute to the company.	
Relationship	.794
To achieve mutual understanding with the supervisor.	
To maintain a good relationship with the supervisor.	
Group coherence	.760
To keep harmony in your work group.	
To keep unity of your work group.	
Fairness	.703
To reach a fair solution.	
To be treated by the supervisor more fairly.	
Conflict aftereffects	
Affective changes	
You were satisfied with the outcome of conflict.	
Attitudinal changes	
Your motivation for work became stronger after the conflict.	.869
After the conflict, you more strongly wanted to contribute to the company.	

Results

The participants were relatively young (Me = 26), and so, we divided them into two age classes (26 or younger than 26 vs. older than 26). Table 2 indicates the overall means of all the

Table 2. Overall means, those broken down by gender and age, and Fs of ANOVA.

Variables	Overall means	Gender	Age		Fs of ANOVA		
			<=26	>26	Gender	Age	Interaction
Strategies							
Persuasion	3.475	Male	3.406	3.365	1.018	0.323	0.530
		Female	3.500	3.933			
Negotiation	2.427	Male	2.719	2.333	1.213	3.359+	0.469
		Female	2.579	1.733			
Confrontation	2.971	Male	2.859	2.769	5.859*	4.740*	5.927*
		Female	2.856	4.200			
Third party	2.336	Male	2.344	1.827	8.310**	0.217	4.217*
		Female	2.605	3.400			
Avoidance	3.778	Male	4.063	3.880	2.371	1.065	0.312
		Female	3.684	3.067			
Compliance	2.927	Male	2.813	2.923	0.042	0.083	0.387
		Female	3.079	2.786			
Goal achievement							
Personal perfromanc	2.577	Male	2.924	2.618	5.963*	2.106	0.000
		Female	2.408	2.100			
Power	1.675	Male	1.718	1.539	1.044	0.009	0.928
		Female	1.724	1.933			
Independent identity	3.584	Male	3.591	3.392	0.352	2.784+	0.704
		Female	3.934	3.333			
Interdependent iden	3.117	Male	3.379	2.696	0.262	18.204**	0.685
		Female	3.645	2.633			
Group performance	3.234	Male	3.470	3.030	2.370	5.010*	1.458
		Female	3.382	2.467			
Relationship	3.336	Male	3.333	3.510	3.317+	2.486	5.146*
		Female	3.447	2.467			
Group coherence	3.843	Male	3.803	3.804	0.333	5.978*	5.999*
		Female	4.197	3.167			
Fairness	3.339	Male	3.333	3.431	1.969	3.082+	4.742*
		Female	3.513	2.600			
Conflict aftereffects							
Affective changes	3.555	Male	3.576	3.628	1.819	3.975*	4.713*
		Female	3.816	2.600			
Attitudinal changes	2.496	Male	2.773	2.657	8.591**	0.931	0.164
		Female	2.250	1.967			
N		Male	33	51			
		Female	38	15			

注)** p<.01, * p<.05, + p<.10.

variables, and also those broken down by gender and age class. We analyzed these scores by ANOVA using gender and age as independent variables. As a total, the participants most frequently chose avoidance and relatively more frequently chose persuasion than the other strategies, and they least frequently chose negotiation and the third party intervention (F (5, 705) $= 15.63$, $p < .01$). The significant interaction effect means that the older female participants more frequently used confrontation and third party intervention.

The participant generally rated the group goals (group coherence, relationship, fairness, and group performance) as highly achieved, and among the personal goals, they rated independent identity as highly achieved (F (7, 1008) $= 58.67$, $p < .01$). The male participants rated the personal performance as more achieved than the female participants, and the older participants rated group performance and interdependent identity as more achieved than the younger participants. The older female group rated relationship, group coherence, and fairness as less achieved than the other groups. The positive attitudinal change was larger among the male participants than the female ones, and the positive affective change was smaller among the older female group than the other groups.

We factor analyzed the goal achievement scores by principal component analysis and oblimin rotation, and obtained three factors in Table 3. Three group goals loaded on the first factor, three personal goals on the second factor, and two performance goals on the third factor. They were interpreted respectively as "the group goal achievement," "the personal goal achievement," and "the performance goal achievement." In the following analysis, we used these factor scores as goal achievement.

Table 3. Factor analysis of goal achivement.

Variables	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Relationship	**0.870**	-0.154	0.086
Fairness	**0.858**	0.001	0.201
Group coherence	**0.647**	0.544	-0.088
Interdependent identity	0.220	**0.846**	-0.035
Independent identity	-0.170	**0.686**	0.158
Power	-0.309	**0.492**	0.189
Personal performance	-0.053	0.076	**0.912**
Group performance	0.264	-0.012	**0.819**

Note. Correlations were .037 between Factor 1 and 2, .098 between 1 and 3, and .352 between 2 and 3. Cumulative contribution was 71.4%.

Table 4 shows correlations between the scores of strategies, goal achievement factors, and conflict aftereffects. There was no direct relationship between strategy and conflict aftereffects

Table 4.   Correlations between the variables used in the path analysis.

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Persuasion	0.092	-0.007	0.117	-0.110	0.114	0.209	0.141	0.066	0.026	-0.001
2. Negotiation		0.146	0.158	-0.174	-0.081	0.080	0.255	0.186	0.090	0.105
3. Confrontation			0.346	-0.278	-0.244	-0.477	0.095	-0.021	-0.242	-0.277
4. Third party				0.013	-0.016	-0.154	0.278	0.117	-0.020	-0.045
5. Avoidance					0.401	0.105	0.114	0.065	0.002	0.066
6. Compliance						0.146	-0.069	0.000	-0.024	0.063
7. Achievement of group goals							0.037	0.098	0.518	0.427
8. Achievement of personal goals								0.352	0.192	0.173
9. Achievement of perfromance goals									0.274	0.529
10. Affective changes										0.391
11. Attitudinal changes										

Note. r > .215, p < .01; r > .165, p < .05

except that confrontation negatively correlated with affective and attitudinal changes. Expecting that goal achievement would mediated the relationship, then, we attempted a path analysis by two sets of regression analysis: In the first set, each of the three goal achievement factors were dependent variables and the six strategies were independent variables, and in the second set, the affective and attitudinal aftereffects were dependent variables and the 3 goal achievement factors and 6 strategies were independent variables. Figure 1 shows the resultant path diagram that was composed based on significant betas. Persuasion increased the group goal achievement and, thereby, indirectly increased the positive affective and attitudinal aftereffects. Negotiation increased the performance goal achievement and, also, indirectly increased the positive affective and attitudinal aftereffects. In contrast, confrontation decreased the group goal achievement, meaning that this strategy indirectly decreased the positive affective and attitudinal aftereffects. Further, persuasion and the third party intervention increased the personal goal achievement, which did not influence the aftereffects. Neither avoidance nor compliance contributed to goal achievement and conflict aftereffects.

Discussion

Practical books teaching how to cope with interpersonal conflicts advise readers to listen to the other party's say, to friendly talk with the other party, and to make a trade-off offer. All of these are conciliation strategies, and empirical research has found that these are more effective in conflict resolution than other types of strategy (Ohbuchi & Kitanaka, 1993; Tjosvold, 1997). What is the effectiveness of a strategy in conflict resolution? Is it to be able to get the other party's compliance or to reach consensus? Rather, the effectiveness of strategy seems to vary depending on the perspective from which people evaluate the conflict outcomes or aftereffects.

In organizational conflicts, it should be that organizational functions is improved or participants have more positive sentiments in their organizational life after conflicts. Regarding the latter as the subjective measure of constructive conflict resolution, we assumed that it consists of

cognitive, affective, and attitudinal changes after conflicts. In the present study, we focused on the affective change (decrease in negative emotions) and attitudinal changes (increase in job motivation and organizational commitment) and attempted to examine if conciliation strategy actually produced these effects.

Well, how does the conciliation strategy produce positive aftereffects? We assumed that this strategy is likely to fulfill some important goals with which participants become concerned in the process of conflict resolution. Ohbuchi (1998) identified a set of common goals involved in organizational conflict management, and Ohbuchi et al (1999) found that they were clustered into the personal and group goals. Measuring eight goals in the present study, we attempted to examine if they mediated the relationship between strategy and conflict aftereffects.

The results of factor analysis for the eight goal achievement scores were almost consistent with Ohbuchi et al (1999), but third cluster (the performance goal achievement) was found in addition to the personal and group goal achievement. It consisted of the personal and group performance achievement, meaning that Japanese business employees perceived that personal performance were closely linked with group performance. In the path analysis, we used these three factor scores of goal achievement. The path diagram (Figure 1) clearly indicated that conciliatory strategies (persuasion and negotiation) were more effective in producing positive conflict aftereffects than the other types of strategies (confrontation, the third party intervention, avoidance, and compliance), since persuasion and negotiation increased all of the three clusters of goal achievement and, thereby, indirectly increased positive affective and attitudinal changes after conflicts. Confrontation, in contrast, was found to decrease the positive aftereffects by interfering achievement of the group goals, and the other strategies did not show any effect on the aftereffects. Consistent with the other studies (Ohbuchi & Kitanaka, 1991; Rubin et al., 1994; Tjosvold, 1997), the present study found that the conciliatory strategy was effective in production of constructive outcomes in organizational conflicts. Further, it was indicated that these positive aftereffects were caused by that the strategy was able to contribute to achievement of the goals with which the Japanese business employees were concerned.
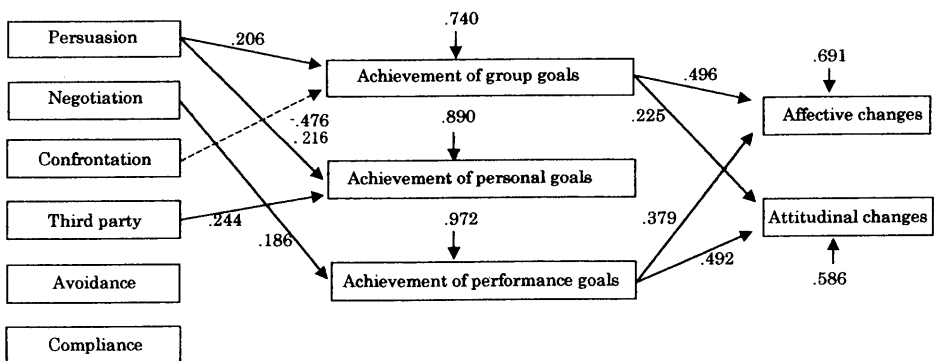

Figure 1. Path diagram of conflict aftereffects.

Analyzing motivational factors in organizational conflict management, Ohbuchi et al (2000) found that Japanese business employees had strong collectivistic concerns. The results of the present study also suggested it. The finding that the achievement of group goals produced positive aftereffects but that of personal goals did not suggests that the Japanese business employees particularly appreciated the conflict management that benefited their organizations. That the achievement of performance goals increased the positive conflict aftereffects also seems to support this interpretation, because this factor reflects the combined achievement of personal and group performance.

When we broke down the participants into four groups by gender and age, the older female group was different from the other groups in some regards. The group more frequently chose confrontational strategies, and, probably because of it, they did not rated that the conflicts produced constructive outcomes. Japanese business organizations generally have a male dominant culture, in which women have been discriminated, that is, their salary is lower than that of men and the opportunity of promotion is restricted for them. The older female participants, who have worked long in such an organizational situation, might not have a trust toward their organizations, and this may be a reason why they adversely responded to organizational conflicts.

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