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## Leading Teams Through Productive Conflict Engagement

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania

Advisor: Stephen G. Hart

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# Leading Teams Through Productive Conflict Engagement

## Abstract

Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life. Depending on how leaders handle conflict, it is either an opportunity to improve work outcomes or a challenge that has negative effects on organizational productivity. Through a qualitative study on 14 leaders, this capstone explores strategies for helping teams engage in productive conflict. In the organizational behavior framework, conflict is often discussed in terms of resolution. Engaging in conflict shifts the focus on accepting its challenges without assuming that there is a need for resolution. This paper explores the dynamics of conflict through the participants' personal reactions, past strategies, relationships within their workplace, and the organizational culture that they have experienced. The capstone benefits leaders, organizational development professionals and executive coaches who want to look at intervention strategies for teams and organizations dealing with the negative effects of conflict.

## Keywords

Teams, Leadership, Productive Conflict Engagement, Organizational Productivity, Organizational Behavior

## Disciplines

Business Administration, Management, and Operations | Organizational Behavior and Theory

## Comments

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by

Tirth V.A. Manek

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College of Liberal and Professional Studies  
in the School of Arts and Sciences  
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Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the  
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Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2020

# LEADING TEAMS THROUGH PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT ENGAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life. Depending on how leaders handle conflict, it is either an opportunity to improve work outcomes or a challenge that has negative effects on organizational productivity. Through a qualitative study on 14 leaders, this capstone explores strategies for helping teams engage in productive conflict. In the organizational behavior framework, conflict is often discussed in terms of resolution. Engaging in conflict shifts the focus on accepting its challenges without assuming that there is a need for resolution. This paper explores the dynamics of conflict through the participants' personal reactions, past strategies, relationships within their workplace, and the organizational culture that they have experienced. The capstone benefits leaders, organizational development professionals and executive coaches who want to look at intervention strategies for teams and organizations dealing with the negative effects of conflict.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Personal Background and History**

As a coach and organizational development professional, I see conflict in almost every situation. Whether it is at the workplace or at home, conflict is everywhere. My relationship with conflict started early in my adolescence. I was surrounded with diametrically opposing views on conflict, my family either avoided it to a fault or argued incessantly over a simple issue. Which, for me, meant that I had to hear my family members complaining about each other behind closed doors or I was playing the role of a mediator when people were arguing at the top of their voices. Having experienced the extreme ends of conflict, I found myself leaning more towards avoiding it. Even in my professional life I rarely engaged in conflict not because I was uncomfortable, but I did not prefer the negative emotions that came with engaging in conflict.

In the first week of my first job after college, I was yelled at by a senior in the organization for “wasting his time” by presenting an irrelevant solution. I was upset, hurt and angry. So naturally, I wanted to quit the job immediately. My leader, at the time, heard what happened, sat me down and had a conversation with me. She explained that I was going to experience a lot of heightened emotions at the workplace which was natural because we were dealing with people. She added that everyone came to the workplace with their own unique values and beliefs that made them human. In essence, conflict is human. This was my first step in being cordial with conflict.

While I learned to empathize with people who reacted negatively during conflict, I found myself being more averse to conflict than ever. Conflict, for me, meant to quickly find a resolution before somebody started getting angry or upset. It also meant that I acted as a mediator to resolve negative conflict in situations. I would rarely disagree with people in my workplace just to maintain the peace.

Through my graduate coursework in organizational consulting and executive coaching, I found myself surrounded by conflict. As a cohort, we were exposed to simulations and projects around group dynamics, which is the most natural place for conflict to occur. This time, I was not playing the role of the mediator, I was a part of the conflict. I had disagreements with how a project should be approached or what the outcome of a simulation should be. It was a difficult process, but my relationships with my cohort taught me that conflict could be a good thing. I began exploring the benefits conflict had in group dynamics. Through further reading, I found that I had more questions than answers. What made me averse to conflict in the first place? How could I get better at conflict? How do leaders help their teams with conflict engagement? How could I help leaders get better at conflict engagement? These questions seeded the idea for this capstone. In an attempt to discover ideas and find strategies to help my clients (leaders, organizations) get comfortable engaging with conflict, I hoped I would learn something that would help me too.

## **Overview**

Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life (Runde & Flanagan, 2010). A study by Chan et al. (2008) found that leaders spend 20% of their time dealing with conflict or its aftermath. If conflict is not handled well, it can have negative effects on individual wellbeing and organizational productivity (Dijkstra et al., 2012). On the contrary, if handled well it could lead to innovation in teams, improved relationships, and higher job satisfaction (Gallo, 2018). These opposing viewpoints suggest that the right amount of conflict is beneficial for teams. Therefore, for leaders, conflict is either an opportunity or a challenge depending on how they handle it.

This capstone aims to examine strategies for leaders to help their teams engage in productive conflict which could lead to better work outcomes. For some teams, it could mean moving away from conflict avoidance and getting comfortable engaging in conflict, for others it may mean reducing negative conflict within their teams. Conflict management interventions that are not facilitated by leaders or specialists, rarely address the real issues at stake (Gerardi, 2015a). The focus for this capstone, therefore, is to help leaders, organizational development specialists, and executive coaches to lead teams through productive conflict engagement.

Conflict is a vast topic that has roots in politics, psychology, and organizational behavior. When discussing conflict in the organizational behavior context, it is often discussed in terms of resolving or managing conflict. Conflict engagement, however, describes the

notion of accepting the difficulties of conflict without assuming that there is a need for a resolution (Mayer, 2004).

Using a qualitative research methodology based on interviewing 14 leaders in the workforce, I intend to explore the dynamics of conflict and discuss a potential framework for teams to engage in conflict productively. The capstone benefits leaders, organizational development professionals and executive coaches who want to look at intervention strategies for teams and organizations dealing with the negative effects of conflict.

### **The Road Map**

The capstone is divided into five chapters, each leading up to a foundation for helping teams engage in productive conflict. In Chapter One, I dive into an overview for this capstone and explore my personal background and history for this particular topic.

In Chapter Two, I discuss and review the relevant literature for this capstone the main topics: what is conflict? Leadership and conflict, existing strategies and conflict as a complex adaptive system. 'What is conflict?' understands the definitions of conflict in the literature and builds the case for conflict as a process. This chapter also discusses the ideas of 'productive conflict' and 'engagement. 'Leadership and conflict' describes the role of leaders in conflict within teams and expands on the case for why leaders are better suited to facilitate conflict within their teams. 'Existing strategies' explores three key concepts for conflict engagement presented by Gerardi (2015b), Runde & Flanagan

(2010) and Heifetz, Grashow & Linksy (2009). Finally, using the works of Olson & Eoyang (2001) on complexity science, the capstone examines conflict as a complex adaptive system that reacts to its environment based on self-organizing patterns. The literature review serves to lay the groundwork for the data collected from the interviews with 14 leaders.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used for this capstone, it covers a brief background on the participants in this capstone, the rationale for the questionnaire, limitations, and the qualitative research methodology that analyzes the broad themes captured in the data.

In Chapter Four, I delve into the analysis of the collected data by checking the validity of the findings against the literature. This chapter is divided into five parts. In their personal reactions, participants describe their meanings of conflict, how they react to conflict, their mechanisms to sort through productive or destructive conflict behaviors and the potential benefits for them to better manage conflict. The second part analyzes the strategies that the participants use for helping their team members get comfortable engaging in conflict. These strategies include using coaching tools, seeking feedback and creating a psychologically safe environment. The third part examines the relationship of the participants with their direct managers, peers, and other senior leaders within their workplace ecosystem. These relationships provide an additional perspective to productive conflict engagement strategies that made the participants comfortable or uncomfortable engaging in conflict with their direct managers, peers, and other senior leaders.

The fourth part in this chapter explores aspects of organizational culture that inspire people to engage in productive conflict. It further reveals strategies for leaders to enable a system wide culture for productive conflict engagement. And finally, the fifth part discusses the data interpretation describing the broad themes in the data and their validity against the literature.

In Chapter Five, based on the data analysis, I make a case for a model for productive conflict engagement that synthesizes the recurring themes present within the data and the literature. The chapter refers to conflict as a complex adaptive system by drawing parallels between the productive conflict engagement model and complexity science. The capstone concludes with future research possibilities and a personal reflection on my learnings.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an overwhelming amount of research on conflict which covers international, intranational, marital, geopolitical and workplace conflicts. While it is a broad field of study, this capstone focuses on conflict which occurs within the workplace and does not involve labor relations or union disputes. Within this category, there is a variety of research which ranges from resolving workplace conflict to its effect on employee well-being. With that in mind, it is important to focus on defining conflict and to review literature about ideas for engaging in productive conflict. Since the focus of the capstone is to help leaders, the next step is to look at the relationship between leadership and conflict. Finally, this chapter will examine previously researched strategies which leaders can use to help their teams.

#### **What is Conflict?**

Conflict has numerous definitions and there is a lack of consensus over a generally accepted definition. Rahim (2015) notes that the tremendous variance in defining conflict is a result of specific interests by scholars in different disciplines. A simple definition is by the creators of the Conflict Dynamics Profile, which is an assessment that provides feedback on individual behaviors before, during and after conflict. They define conflict as:

*“Any situation in which people have incompatible interests, goals, principles or feelings.” (Capobianco, Davis and Kraus, 1999).*

This straightforward definition helps us understand the basics of conflict but is narrow and simplified. It does not discuss the internal perception of conflict which is an important aspect. Therefore, I looked at a study by Tidwell (1998), which identifies two groups of conflict definitions - 1. *Objective* definitions which elaborate observable factors such as language and behavior; and 2. *Subjective* definitions which focus on individual perception and meaning making.

This study defines conflict as:

*“A state experienced by one or more individuals as dissonance between them. It may be expressed verbally, non-verbally or experienced internally. It may involve 1) negative perceptions, feelings or assumptions about the other(s) and 2) past, imagined or anticipated threats to status.”* (Tidwell, 1998).

This definition creates a better understanding of how someone can experience conflict internally. Also, the subjectivity provides an additional layer especially regarding perceived conflict between a team member and their manager. Although Tidwell’s definition is more comprehensive, it could be argued that conflict is not a *state*, it is a process. The concept of conflict as a process was defined by Rahim (2015):

*“An interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e. individual, group, organization, etc.)”* (p. 16)



Conflict as an interactive process is a stronger definition and better suited for this capstone since my focus is to explore productive conflict engagement strategies. Defining conflict as a *situation* (Capobianco, Davis and Kraus, 1999) or a *state* (Tidwell, 1998) reduces it to something that occurs as opposed to an iterative process in which one can productively engage.

### Productive conflict

Early research suggested that conflict would negatively impact an organization's efficiency and should be avoided at all costs (Weber, 1947; Marx, 1967; Taylor, 1911). Deutsch (1973) changed that perception by arguing that conflict can be constructive and enhance productivity at the workplace if handled appropriately. However, it can also be destructive if left unmanaged. He also argued that in a destructive conflict, individuals compete. Whereas, in a constructive conflict, they co-operate which allows for more open and honest communication.

Individuals whose workplaces have high levels of conflict are found to have weaker morale and job satisfaction, lower productivity and more sick leave (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Ayoko et al., 2003, Dijkstra et al., 2012). But there is also prevailing research which suggests that engaging in conflict at work can lead to better work outcomes, innovation in teams, improved relationships, higher job satisfaction and a more inclusive work environment. (Gallo, 2018; Gerardi, 2015a; Lou, Zhou & Leung, 2011). Hence, while there is a benefit to engaging in conflict, too much conflict can lead to negative results.

The changes to modern workplace practices have increased conflict triggers such as working remotely which is common and tends to increase the potential for conflict (Van Oort and Meester, 2012). Unfortunately, conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life (Runde & Flanagan, 2010). It is therefore essential that we learn to engage in conflict productively. To understand this better, I explored the ways in which we engage in conflict.

There are three categories of conflict: Task conflict (what should be done), Process conflict (how to do it) and Relationship conflict (personality clash) (Jehn, 1997). Moderate levels of task conflict enable better innovation amongst teams (Lu et al., 2011) and most high-performing teams demonstrate little or no relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995). However, it is important to note that the converse is not a reliable measure for team performance.

Thomas & Kilmann's (1975) widely cited study about conflict handling styles have two dimensions - cooperation and assertiveness. These two dimensions result in five styles of conflict handling: 1. Avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative); 2. Competing (assertive and uncooperative); 3. Collaborating (assertive and cooperative); 4. Accommodating (unassertive and cooperative); 5. Compromising (assertiveness and cooperativeness)<sup>1</sup>.

According to their approach, it is better to participate in conflict through engagement by either competing, compromising or collaborating rather than avoiding the conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Compromising has the same dimensions as collaborating, however, it is defined as an intermediate assertiveness and cooperativeness.

Hence, we can characterize productive conflict as the following:

1. Conflict which is constructive and allows for open and honest communication (Deutsch, 1973).
2. Good communication leads to better work outcomes, innovation in teams, improved relationships, higher job satisfaction and a more inclusive work environment (Gallo, 2018; Gerardi, 2015a; Lou, Zhou & Leung, 2011).
3. An inclusive work environment has moderate levels of task or process conflict (Jehn, 1997).
4. These types of conflict should be engaged in rather than avoided (Thomas & Kilmann, 1975).

This helps us to understand what productive conflict can look like, however, the idea of engaging in conflict is something different all together.

### Conflict Engagement

Bernard S. Mayer, a leader in the field of conflict, explains:

*"Engaging in conflict means accepting the challenges of a conflict, whatever its type or stage of development may be, with courage and wisdom and without automatically assuming that resolution is an appropriate goal."*

(2004, p. 184)

In her study of addressing conflict in complex organizations, Gerardi (2015a) presents that most of the literature about conflict focuses on methods for *resolving* conflict. She further

adds that, although not all conflict can be resolved, resolution is rarely possible without engagement as a first step. Resolution of conflict places focus on the outcome and does not consider the importance of engaging in conflict.

Effective conflict engagement has a lot of parameters but perhaps the most important one is understanding that engagement is an ongoing process and not a one-time conversation (Gerardi, 2015a). The other aspect usually requires that a third-party, trained in conflict, is involved in the process. The third-party must be able to facilitate negotiation and even more importantly, create a safe space for constructive combat and confrontation (Mayer, 2012). In organizations, leaders typically fulfill an informal role of a third-party in employee conflict (Pinkley et al., 1995). But often, leaders are not adept in conflict engagement (Gerardi, 2015a).

To further understand what role a leader can play in conflict engagement, I examined the relationship between leadership and conflict.

### **Leadership and Conflict**

A typical leader spends 20 percent of their time in the workplace dealing with conflict or its aftermath (Chan et al., 2008; Schermerhorn et al., 1998). A study by Jit et al. (2016) discusses that the onus of managing conflict between team members may often be on the leader who could intervene and harness it as the primary strength of the team to enhance organizational effectiveness.

Another study by Römer et al (2012) posits that there are three types of conflict intervention behaviors of leaders — problem solving, forcing, and avoiding. “Problem solving” is defined as searching for the underlying concerns of the parties and seeking to come to a solution which addresses all parties' concerns. “Forcing” occurs when the leader imposes a solution on the disputants which he or she prefers or pushes for any resolution that will end the dispute. “Avoiding” occurs when the leader chooses not to get involved in the conflict. The study further adds that when leaders engage in problem-solving behavior it has positive effects on employee well-being and morale. On the other hand, when leaders engage in forcing or avoiding behavior it has been observed to create feelings of unfairness, confusion, frustration and is unlikely to resolve the conflict. This, in turn, has a negative effect on employee well-being (Way et. al.,2016). Typically, leaders respond to conflict by avoiding and/or using their power or authority (Gerardi, 2015a). When leaders fail to manage conflict, the conflict is likely to intensify and escalate which overall has a negative effect on organizational effectiveness (Dijkstra et al., 2009).

In many organizations, there are systems in place that help employees navigate conflict. This can be formal grievance processes, compliance hotlines, and other legal processes. However, these often escalate a situation and rarely address the real issues at stake. This is counterproductive as it prevents people from speaking up or engaging in productive conflict. Hence, processes which are facilitated by leaders or conflict specialists, work better since they create a safe space for team members to take risks and be vulnerable (Gerardi, 2015a).

In summary, the literature suggests that leadership has an important role in conflict engagement when it comes to their teams. Therefore, the central focus of my capstone is on leaders and the strategies they can use to help their team engage in productive conflict. There already exists a plethora of strategies for leaders to use for conflict intervention.

### Existing Strategies

Leaders have access to an array of resources to help their teams engage in productive conflict such as facilitating, training and coaching (Mayer, 2012). Other processes which encourage engagement include mediation, dialogue and collaborative problem solving (Gerardi, 2015b). Figure 1 represents a summary of some processes for engaging in conflict:

Figure 1: Description of Processes for Conflict Engagement (Gerardi, 2015b)

Process	Description
Individual or group coaching	Use of a peer or professional coach to develop a plan for addressing specific goals related to work situations, personal development, and transitions.
Face-to-face conversations	Direct conversations between those involved in a conflict situation is the preferred approach for building conflict competence among coworkers.
Facilitated meetings and collaborative problem-solving sessions	Using a skilled facilitator to define the purpose and agenda for bringing a group together for collaborative problem solving, strategic planning, team building, and other collective activities.
Facilitated dialogue	A process for sharing with others the perspectives, values, and experiences related to difficult issues that may divide the group; the emphasis is on building understanding and clearing the air.
Informal mediation	Use of a third person (such as an organization leader, ombudsman, or conflict specialist) to help parties negotiate to resolve differences and continue to work together.
Story circles	Traditional storytelling used to move from personal experience to broader issues and to negotiate group conflict and tension.
Formal mediation	Use of a professional mediator (external to the organization) to help parties negotiate and find ways to resolve differences and develop workable solutions; may be in the context of a lawsuit or before any legal claims or actions are initiated; results are not binding.

Two other strategies that are relevant to this capstone are conflict competence and orchestrating the conflict.

### Conflict Competence

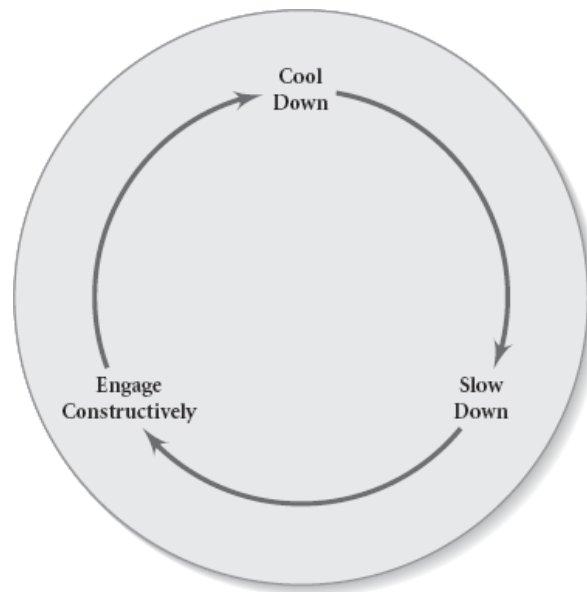
This term was developed by Runde & Flanagan (2010) and is defined as:

*The ability to develop and use cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills that enhance productive outcomes of conflict while reducing the likelihood of escalation or harm. The results of conflict competence include improved quality of relationships, creative solutions, and lasting agreements for addressing challenges and opportunities in the future (Runde & Flanagan, 2010).*

Conflict competence focuses on how leaders can develop their conflict competence by understanding the cognitive and emotional side of it before learning to engage constructively. According to the authors, leaders first need to develop their individual conflict competence and then shift their focus to include team and organizational competence.

In their series of books on conflict competence (Runde & Flangan, 2008, 2010, 2012) they have described models for conflict competence on an individual, team and organizational level.

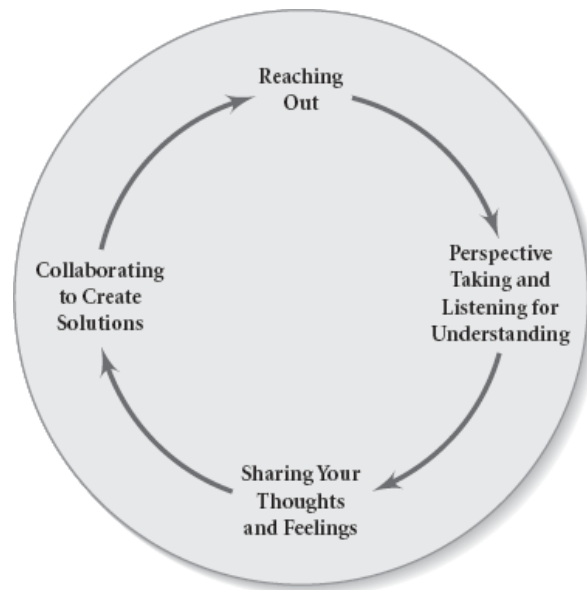
Figure 2: Individual Conflict Competence Model (Runde &amp; Flanagan, 2010)



*Cool down* refers to strategies which help regulate emotions such that a person can maintain or regain emotional balance before approaching the conflict. These include awareness and understanding of one’s own trigger responses in conflict, otherwise referred to by the authors as “hot buttons” (situations or behaviors which can trigger strong reactions in people). *Slow down* refers to strategies that help regulate emotions. These include reflecting on your own thoughts, emotions and interests in the conflict as well as reflecting on another person’s thoughts, emotions and interests. *Engaging Constructively* is possible once an individual has gained a more balanced state by cooling down and slowing down. After this, the authors advise engaging in constructive behaviors with the other person by reaching out; perspective taking and listening for understanding; sharing thoughts and feelings; and collaborating to create solutions. See figure below:

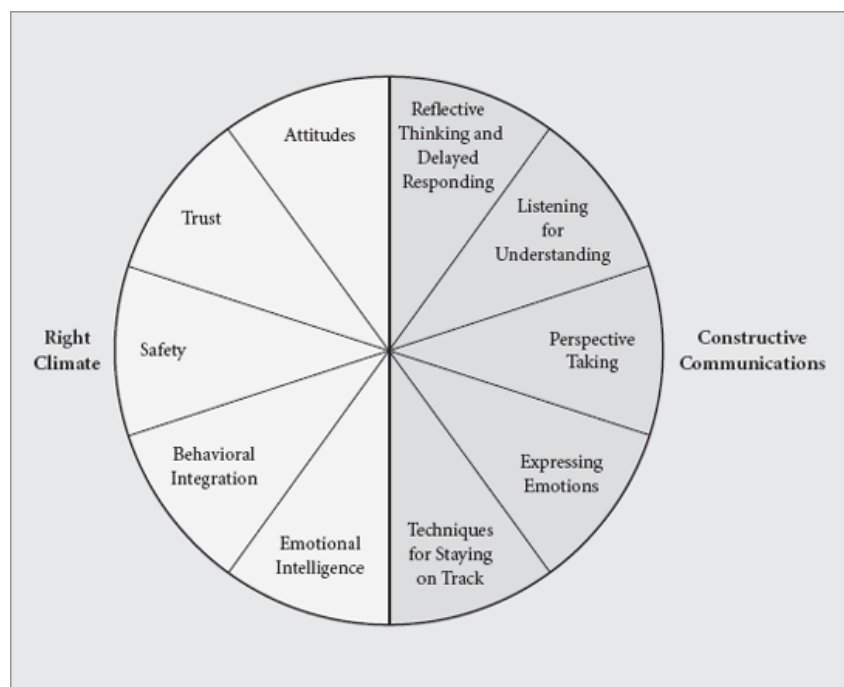


Figure 3: Engage Constructively Model (Runde & Flanagan, 2010)



The team conflict competence model describes the two pillars for helping teams engage as creating the right climate and using constructive communication techniques. See figure below:

Figure 4: Team Conflict Competence Model (Runde & Flanagan, 2010)



The right climate describes five elements: Changing *attitudes* towards conflict; creating *trust and safety* amongst team members; *behavioral integration* to create a collaborative spirit and finally; and improving a team's *emotional intelligence*. Once the right climate is set, team members can use constructive communication techniques which include *reflective thinking and delayed responding*, *listening for understanding* and *perspective taking*, *expressing emotions* as well as thoughts, and using *techniques for staying on track*.

Organizational conflict competence describes an adapted model by Lynch (2001), which refers to creating organizational support by enabling individuals to develop their conflict competence as well as setting a system in place that includes mediation, fact finding and any other process which requires the involvement of a third party to resolve conflict.

Conflict competence by Runde & Flanagan (2008, 2010, 2012), provides a comprehensive guide on principles that leaders, managers, teams and third-party facilitators can use to help themselves and others engage in productive conflict. Their detailed study broadly covers most concepts discussed in conflict literature.

### Orchestrate conflict

This concept was first formed by Heifitz & Linsky (2002) and later developed by Heifitz, Grashow & Linsky (2009). The concept describes a practice which leads to adaptive change by surfacing and managing conflict. The authors believe that surfacing relevant conflicts is essential for an organization to reach its espoused aspiration. This

approach of orchestrating conflict teases out differences in perspectives by acknowledging competing visions, values and views that may exist in the organization.

The authors describe seven steps for leaders to orchestrate conflict (Hefitz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009, ch.11). These steps provide a framework to start surfacing conflict which can be applied as a tool for a single event or for making progress over time. The steps include: 1. Preparing, 2. Establishing ground rules, 3. Getting each view on the table, 4. Orchestrating the conflict, 5. Encouraging to accept and manage losses, 6. Generating and commit to experiments and 7. Instituting peer leadership consulting.

The authors add that in order to orchestrate conflict effectively leaders must be able to “regulate the heat”. This means, being able to maintain the intensity of the disequilibrium which is created by discussing the conflict. Regulating the heat can be done by raising the temperature or lowering the temperature. This analogy is explained through examples. For raising the temperature leaders could – draw attention to tough questions, give people more responsibility than they are comfortable with and/or tolerate provocative comments. For lowering the temperature leaders could – address the aspects of the conflict that have the most obvious and technical solutions, provide structure and/or temporarily reclaim responsibility for the tough issues.

Orchestrating conflict, however, is not possible without creating a holding environment and selecting the right participants for the conflict. A holding environment consists of ties that bring people together to provide safety and structure in order for the conflict to

surface. Leaders play an important role in creating this environment (Heifitz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009). This particular framework could be useful for leaders struggling with recurring conflict at the workplace and or driving adaptive change and innovation.

A lot of the literature is focused on looking at conflict as a complex adaptive system which reacts unpredictably to different stimuli or new situations and for which no particular approach can work in every situation (Runde & Flanagan, 2010; Mayer, 2004; Heifitz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Mayer, 2012; Gerardi 2015a).

### **Conflict as a Complex Adaptive System**

Olson & Eoyang (2001), discuss complex adaptive systems as models for organizational change. They describe that complexity science provides a comprehensive and integrated explanation of how complex organizational systems adapt to uncertain environments.

In a traditional model of organizational change relationships are directive, decisions are based on facts and data, and leaders act as experts and authority. However, in the complex adaptive model – relationships are empowering, decisions are based on tensions and patterns, and leaders act as facilitators and supporters (Olson & Eoyang, 2001). We could look at conflict in a similar way, a complex adaptive system where the system adapts to deal with the tensions and patterns that emerge from conflict where leaders act as facilitators and supporters while relationships between team members are empowering.

Olson & Eoyang (2001) further discuss that change in a complex adaptive system occurs through self-organizing dynamics. Self-organizing is the tendency of an open system to generate new structures and patterns that emerge from the interactions of the agents in the system (Olson & Eoyang, 2001). Three conditions influence self-organization a *container*, *significant differences* and *transforming exchanges*. Similar to a “holding environment” by Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky (2009), a *container* sets the boundaries for the self-organization to occur. It is a bounded space to incubate thoughts before new patterns can emerge. *Significant differences* are primary patterns that emerge which in turn establish a system-wide pattern. *Transforming exchanges* are how resources flow within the system, for instance, face-to-face meetings or e-mails (Olson & Eoyang, 2001). It could be argued that conflict behaves in a similar way where it self-organizes. based on how it is handled within a *container*, while the interactions form the *significant differences*. And through *transforming exchanges* it permeates through the members within a team or an entire organization.

In summary, the literature review captures the main themes of this capstone by defining conflict, productive conflict and what it means to engage in conflict. It also examines, the relationship between leadership and conflict, and reviews some of the existing strategies for productive conflict engagement. Finally, the review looks at the idea of conflict as a complex adaptive system.

In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology for this capstone study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to explore what strategies existing leaders use to help their team members engage in productive conflict. In order to gain an in-depth insight into the understanding of this topic, I chose to do a qualitative study. With that in mind I conducted personal interviews to capture the data.

As a coach in training, I have used personal interviews to collect 360 feedback data on my clients based on Wilkinsky's 9-Step coaching model (Wilkinsky, 2018). The 360-feedback collection based on this model focuses on a semi-structured interview, where the interviewees are chosen by the client to answer the feedback questions. The coach may ask clarifying or follow-up questions to allow for a dynamic conversation. Similarly, for this study, I replicated this model to allow for a deeper understanding of conflict engagement strategies. Using a personal interview technique allowed me to ensure clarity of my questions, build a rapport with the participant and helped pull-out real-world examples of any vulnerable moments my interviewees faced with conflict.

#### **Participants**

To understand how leaders help their team members engage in conflict, it was essential that the participants have leadership experience and have people reporting to them. To allow for rich data the participants for this study were selected using the following criteria; A person working in an organization with a minimum of five years of leadership experience and having four or more direct reports.

Through personal networks and a mass email to The University of Pennsylvania Liberal and Professional Studies Organizational Dynamics community, comprised of current students, faculty and alumni, 19 participants were contacted to request their participation, out of which 14 took part in the personal interview process.

Each participant was asked preliminary demographic questions on current title (business function), work experience, number of direct reports, type of industry and size of organization in terms of number of employees, and level of education.

The average work experience of the 14 participants was 24 years and they had an average of seven direct reports. The participants were from various industries which covered: data information services, financial services, pharmaceuticals, government, higher education, chemicals, professional sports and lifestyle. They worked in companies with an average of 45,300 employees. Out of the 14 participants, 56% have a master's degree, 30% are mid-way through their master and 14% have a doctorate. Six out of the 14 participants held a title in the human resources function of their organization, they were chief human resource officers, strategy and planning heads, learning and organizational development specialists, and talent acquisition specialists. The other participants held titles in finance, project management, technology and transformation, and clinical programs.

The interviews with all participants were recorded through Zoom (video conferencing software) and averaged 39 minutes.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was developed to gather multiple perspectives in the participants' workplace ecosystem, and to examine what role, if any, did that have while looking for conflict engagement strategies. This gave a broader perspective to the capstone by allowing me to look at the different strategies the participant's managers and peers have used rather than limiting it to only what strategies the participants themselves have used. The participants were asked 17, open-ended questions that I developed. The questionnaire was divided into parts to ask about self-reflection, direct reports, direct managers, peers, and organizational culture.

The self-reflection questions allowed me to create a rapport with the participants and get them in the conflict framework by asking them about their personal beliefs on conflict. The relationship between the participants and the direct reports were the crux of the study by examining how they have used strategies in the past to help their team members engage in conflict, however, it only provided a one-sided perspective. Hence, to enhance understanding of conflict engagement strategies, I further examined the participants' relationship with their direct managers and peers. Examining how the direct manager and peers interacted with the participants on conflict engagement shed light on valuable insights relevant to the findings in this capstone. Finally, the questions about organizational culture help understand an added perspective from a systems standpoint



and how it influenced conflict engagement. For the complete questionnaire used for this capstone please see appendix.

Using a semi-structured interview format allowed for deeper discussion and conversation.

I was able to ask for examples and clarify understanding during the interview process.

Although all participants were asked the same questions, some of them, depending on their response, were also asked: Could you tell me more about that? Can you provide an example of..? What was your key take away from this interaction? Am I correct in assuming that...?

The aim was to have the participants react instinctively to the questionnaire, hence the questionnaire was not shared with the participants in advance. At the end of the interview participants were asked for their feedback on the questionnaire. I asked them what could be added or changed. Out of 14 total participants, ten noted that it helped them view conflict through multiple perspectives and not preparing for the questions also helped. It is important to note that four participants said it would be helpful to them if they received the questions in advance. Some participants also gave feedback that the questionnaire helped them reflect on how they personally engaged in conflict, which could be a potential conversation with their current manager or coach.

The conversation with the participant was recorded with their consent. Participants were also assured that the conversation was confidential, and that no personally identifiable information would be used in the capstone.

## **Limitations**

The overall sample size of the participant is small, however, this could serve as an opportunity for future research. The capstone does not focus on cultural and/or demographic impact of conflict. (eg. race, gender, sex, nationality). Conflict is referred to as a conflict that occurs in an organizational or workplace setting. All other conflicts i.e. international, marital, interpersonal are excluded.

## **Qualitative Research**

For this capstone I used a qualitative method to represent the participant responses and analyze them to identify broad themes and patterns. All responses were transcribed and coded to look for these themes. The data was then compared with the literature to find similarities and to review its validity.

The question I wanted to answer was: Was there any evidence in the literature of the conflict engagement strategies that were observed?

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA ANALYSIS

The participants of the study provided many insights that were concurrent with the literature, but there were a few ideas that were different. Several themes emerged from the interview data such as personal reactions to conflict, helping team members get comfortable engaging in conflict, the relationships with direct managers, peers and other senior leaders, and organizational culture that inspires productive conflict. These broad themes give an in-depth exploration in how leaders viewed conflict and what strategies they used to comfortably engage in it.

#### **Personal Reactions**

Conflict had similar meanings to most participants. All the participants viewed conflict as a disagreement or a difference of opinion. At the core, both the ideas are similar as they demonstrate a lack of consensus between the involved parties. Although conflict meant the same thing to the participants, some ideas differed. One participant said:

*“Conflict is when people have different opinions, but each person involved wants to stick to their own opinion.”*

This idea describes that people involved in the conflict are reacting to their personal interests. The participant further describes that this happens usually because people refuse to understand where the other person is coming from and/or they perceive the

other person as a threat. This is similar to Tidwell's (1998) definition of conflict as a perceived threat to status.

One participant mentioned conflict as:

*“An engaged discussion with opposing points of view.”*

This idea of an engaged discussion is concurrent with conflict as a process, i.e. interactive and manifested in incompatibility between social entities (Rahim, 2015).

The participants' personal reactions to conflict ranged from disliking conflict to moving towards conflict (conflict engagement). Nine out of 14 participants had a neutral view on conflict and viewed it as a natural part of organizational life; these participants neither avoided nor engaged in conflict actively, but they reacted to the situation they were in.

For example, one participant said:

*“I certainly do not shy away from conflict. Part of my job is to resolve conflict between people every day and make sure that there is a way forward for everybody. Conflict is a part of my life and career at this point. It happens everyday in some shape or form, it's just a matter of tackling it as it comes.”*

All of the nine participants had similar views, they described their personal reaction as dealing with it as it occurred. The other two out of the 14 participants disliked conflict and said that they avoid conflict for the most part but even they agreed that conflict is a natural part of life:

*“For me personally, I do not enjoy conflict. I do like hearing diverse points of view, but conflict usually means it becomes more than that, the emotions start to run higher. Generally, I do not like it although I understand that it is a part of everyday life.”*

This was similar to Runde & Flanagan (2010) explaining that conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life that can not be avoided.

Three out of 14 participants saw conflict as energizing, they described their reaction to conflict as an opportunity to learn more about the topic (of conflict). They further described that their reaction to conflict depended on their relationship with the person they were engaging with:

*“I am competitive, so I am energized by it (conflict). Unless it is a personal conflict, in which case I tend to avoid it”.*

This may point the difference between relationship conflict and task conflict (Jehn,1995).

Avoidance of conflict based on the relationship with the person was concurrent with another participant who said:

*“It(conflict) depends on the relationship with the person, if they are rigid the conflict is usually dragged and turns negative, after a point I do not engage in further conflict with that person.”*

In summary, the definition of conflict for the participants was similar to the ideas presented in the literature, however, only one participant describes it as a process. On the personal reactions to conflict, participants presented a generally neutral view agreeing that it was a part of everyday life and they have to deal with it as they come. An interesting data point was the correlation between how participants changed their view on conflict based on the person with whom they were engaged.

### Productive conflict

Personal reactions to conflict demonstrated that leaders do not always view conflict as negative, although they may have positive or negative reactions to it on certain situations:

*“Conflict can be a healthy or unhealthy friction caused between people with opposing points of view.”*

*“...it(conflict) is not necessarily bad, more than ever it brings out different opinions and challenges your assumptions.”*

Similarly, Deutsch (1973) describes that conflict can be constructive or destructive, based on how it is handled. The participants noted that the following were the signs for productive conflict:

- Conflict that leads to a conversation about the issue, rather than a conversation about the person.

- Listening to what everyone in the room has to say and understanding where they are coming from.
- Diverse viewpoints that drive innovation.
- Trying to take a step back and look at the whole picture.
- Conflict without raised temperatures.
- People are fighting over a problem.
- Reaching a common solution.
- Talking through the issues and asking the right questions, what is the most important thing to achieve right now? What other solutions can exist?

These signs for productive conflict are parallel to those described in the literature review of this capstone study.

There can also be destructive conflict. The signs for destructive conflict were described by the participants as the following:

- When people involved get personal.
- There are raised temperatures, people get angry.
- Unhealthy interest in being right, rather than finding a way forward.
- Voices are loud and people get emotional.

Destructive conflict had an innate characteristic of being emotionally charged. Runde & Flanagan (2010) theorized that at the core all conflict is emotional, however, managing one's emotions and understanding other's emotions is what leads to productive conflict

behaviors. Self - management and social awareness of emotions are aspects of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006). People with high emotional intelligence have shown a positive correlation with Thomas & Killman's (1975) *collaborating* and *accommodating* conflict handling styles (Morrison, 2008).

Although participants of the study believed that conflict could be destructive, all of them had unanimously agreed that it was always beneficial to engage in conflict to get new ideas, overcome challenges or get consensus on a topic. One participant noted:

*“Conflict results in innovation and must be something that leaders embrace. No conflict means there is no energy, there is no movement.”*

Another participant in the study practiced using conflict as a process regularly to drive innovation. They did it by assigning one team member the role of devil's advocate. The role of this team member was to always disagree on a topic and present a counter argument to challenge the team. This is a prime example of productive conflict engagement in action.

#### Benefits to managing conflict better

Participants were also asked about the potential benefits of better managing conflict, they noted that it would help them in the following ways:

- Build better relationships.
- Build good teams and help them get more successful.
- Become better leaders.



- Business would run smoother.
- Overall benefits to professional and personal life.

These responses indicate that better conflict management would lead to overall better work outcomes, similarly described by (Gallo, 2018; Gerardi, 2015a; Lou, Zhou & Leung, 2011).

In summary, engaging conflict was viewed as a beneficial tool which helped teams achieve better work outcomes. Moreover, emotional intelligence was described as an important pillar for productive conflict. And finally, there are also inherent personal benefits to leaders who better manage conflict in the workplace.

### **Helping Team Members Get Comfortable Engaging in Conflict**

When it came to their direct reports, the participants described avoiding conflict as a natural tendency. They noted that conflict usually triggers a fight or flight response in many people and that it was a natural response. The participants noted that conflict avoidance in team members had typical signs as below:

- Resorting to blaming others.
- Agreeing to everything.
- Constantly involving the leader to solve problems.
- Using the leader's name as a tool to get the work done.
- Physical signs of being uncomfortable when there is a conflict in the room.
- Always sharing positive feedback when asked.
- Expressing disagreement to everyone else but the person involved.
- Speaking up after the meeting is over.

Runde & Flanagan (2010) explored conflict avoidance in people and found that usually people have more experiences with relationship conflict, which is focused on interpersonal differences rather than solutions. Lencioni (2005) argued that people fear relationship or personal conflict, even though there are extremely rare situations where people attack each other on a personal level and even when they do, it is relatively mild. Although that may be true, relationship conflict is known to cause increased stress, decreased creativity, lower morale, poorer decision making, and avoiding people (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). When people describe negative words associated with conflict, they are usually describing relationship conflict (Runde & Flanagan, 2010). Task conflict

or process conflict requires an understanding that even though there are irreconcilable differences, people can stay focused on solving the problem (Runde & Flangan, 2010). To effectively put aside differences and stay focused on the problem requires that people view that conflict can be positive. Therefore, one of the first steps that leaders could take is to encourage team members to get comfortable engaging in conflict.

### Comfortable engaging in conflict

The participants followed a wide range of strategies to help their direct reports who displayed signs of conflict avoidance to get comfortable engaging in conflict. These strategies were used by the participants in the past. They are categorized as the following:

- Using coaching tools and techniques to ask the right questions.
- Building their confidence by creating a safety net.
- Building relationships

More than half of the participants described using coaching tools and techniques to ask the right questions to tease out the conflict or help the team members reflect on the conflict. For example, one participant stated:

*“I usually tend to push back and ask basic questions such as ‘have you spoken to that person (you have a conflict with)?’. Sometimes I engage in actual roleplay and take on the persona of the other person, this helps them prepare for the conversation they are going to have.”*

This is described in Figure 1 by Gerardi (2015b) under engagement strategies to use individual coaching. Coaching often uses role-playing as one of the techniques to help

clients prepare for the conversations they might have. Bachikrova et al. (2016) describes role playing in coaching as rehearsal and enactment, which is a popular technique in practice. The authors present an argument for enactment to encourage a desired change in the client.

To help get team members comfortable engaging in conflict, participants also discussed helping them build their confidence. They described a few techniques that has worked for them in the past. One participant describes their technique:

*“I help them build their social capital by asking them to take feedback from people they work with. I tell them to ask questions such as, what they do well and what they do not. This helps them create impact and influence, which in turn helps them gain confidence.”*

Chandler (2019) posits that when people seek feedback it helps build trust and deepens the relationship. It can be argued that this mechanism allows trust to be created and hence help team members gain the necessary confidence to engage in conflict.

In a similar way, another participant uses their one on one time with the team member to ask for feedback on how they are doing as a leader. The participant notes that this helps build trust between them and their team member which further enables comfort for both of them to engage in conflict with each other. A common theme that also emerged was that of building *psychological safety*. Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmonson, 1999, p. 354).

Perceptions of team psychological safety derives from members feeling trust and respect for each other. A team with higher level of psychological safety feels safe sharing different perspectives, seeking feedback and discussing mistakes (Edmonson, 1999). A participant described that they build psychological safety with their team member by having frequent one on one meetings, which are sometimes informal in nature. This allows them to develop a relationship with the team member and therefore establish trust. Psychological safety is also related to creating the right climate in the team conflict competence model by Runde & Flanagan (2010).

A study by Bradley et al. (2012) found that psychological safety allows for task conflict to improve team performance. They summarized that teams could benefit from task conflict if they created a psychological safe environment in which team members felt secure. On the contrary, Johnson & Avolio (2019) found that higher levels of relationship conflict resulted in lower levels of sense of belonging to a team even though the team had perceived high levels of psychological safety. They suggested that if there was increased relationship conflict within the team, even in a psychologically safe environment, it had negative effects on members of the team.

Another participant described establishing a norm that they do not want to hear about other team members unless it was unethical. This perhaps is one of the ways in which relationship conflict can be minimized while maintaining psychological safety in a team. By establishing this norm, members of the team have an innate trust that no other team members will have conversations about them with their leader.

The idea of creating norms for conflict is not new. Lencioni (2005) describes the concept for *conflict norming* which establishes rules of engagement on how the conflict should occur within a team. Similarly, one participant explains that they helped their team member get comfortable with conflict by establishing a team charter. This set the precedent for creating the right climate in which the team would engage in conflict.

In summary, the participants discussed that in order for team members to feel comfortable engaging in conflict, leaders could use coaching tools and techniques, help establish trust with people by asking them to seek feedback, and create a psychological safe environment by establishing norms and fostering relationships. One of the key themes that emerged was around building relationships.

### **Relationships with Direct Managers, Peers and Other Senior Leaders**

#### Direct Managers

Eight out of the 14 the participants stated that they were comfortable engaging in conflict with their direct manager, four of them were highly comfortable, and two of them were uncomfortable. For this section I have analyzed the data using these responses as the three categories for what the participants' managers did that made them comfortable or uncomfortable engaging in conflict with them.

### Comfortable

The following are a list of behaviors the participants' managers did that made them comfortable engaging in conflict:

- Receptive to thoughts, ideas and feelings.
- Consistently sought feedback and asked questions to open a dialogue.
- Focused on finding solutions and working together.
- Made them feel like they were valued and appreciated as a team member.
- Created an environment that was not threatening.
- Expressed their vulnerability.

Most of these themes are consistent with the literature that was discussed in Chapter Two such as building trust, creating a non-threatening (psychologically safe) environment, seeking feedback, focusing on solutions and working together (coaching, task conflict) (Runde & Flanagan, 2010; Bradley et al., 2012; Chandler, 2019; Gerardi, 2015a).

Expressing vulnerability may seem like a new theme but it is not. Nienaber et al. (2015) discuss that vulnerability is typically mentioned in relation with trust within the management and psychological literature. The results of their paper demonstrate that when leaders express vulnerability, they are able to build strong emotional relationships based on trust with their team members. Daniel Coyle, author of *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*, wrote: “Vulnerability doesn’t come after trust – it precedes it” (Coyle, 2018, p. 107).

### Highly Comfortable

Participants' managers did some of the same things as above but went one step further that made the participants feel highly comfortable engaging in conflict with them.

Some responses are below:

*“My manager will pick up the phone and call me, it is not unusual for us to debate our points of view privately. We have built that relationship over the years of working together, we have known each other for a long time. Even though, sometimes they are overly opinionated and arrogant, our relationship allows me to express my thoughts to them one on one.”*

*“We have a great relationship from our first interview together, I felt a connection. We found out that coincidentally we were reading the same book during that time which made me very comfortable with them.”*

*“We come from different backgrounds and approach things differently. I call things out early in the process saying I think I am going to piss you off because I do not agree with you and he will say things like ‘Good, what do you have?’. They also do a really good job of asking clarifying questions to keep getting at the root of the problem. Early on we co-created my job description, and one of the first things my manager said was that your job is to call things out you saw that were opportunities to improve.”*



In the first case, the relationship between the manager and the participant has been long standing that allowed for conflict to be a natural part of the relationship. Similarly, in the second case, a simple shared interest of a book created that comfort. This demonstrates that the relationship shared between people is the key to unlocking productive conflict engagement between teams. The third case had the same theme, however, it was different since it established a relationship between them by creating the norm for conflict early on. This was later encouraged whenever there was a disagreement between them. The follow through of the norm established a much stronger foundation for conflict to occur.

### Uncomfortable

Not all managers can display positive traits all the time, even the managers that made the participants feel comfortable had some aspects that made them feel uncomfortable engaging in conflict with their managers. Below is a list:

- Contradicting words and behavior.  
(Ex. No action or follow through after telling a team member that they had their back)
- Displaying stubborn behaviors and shutting down further communication.  
(Ex. Using phrases like “Because I said so”, “Just do what I am telling you to do”)
- Purposefully avoiding the issue.
- Displaying feelings of anger when there is disagreement.

- Delegating the conflict to someone else within the organization.  
(Ex. Involving human resources function for an interpersonal dispute between team members)

Capobianco, Davis & Kraus (1999) describe avoiding behaviors such as, shutting down further communication or delegating the conflict as passive destructive behaviors, and retaliatory behaviors such as feelings of anger or stubbornness as active destructive behaviors. Using these behaviors are known to prolong the tensions associated with conflict (Runde & Flanagan, 2012).

### Peers

Ten out of the 14 participants said they were comfortable engaging in conflict with their peers, three of them were highly comfortable, and one of them was uncomfortable. For the most part the themes observed between the relationship with direct managers and the relationship with peers was not very different. Participants responded as below when describing what steps their peers took that made the participants feel comfortable engaging in conflict with them.

### Comfortable

- Taking time to listen and understand.
- Direct and honest communication.
- Dedicated time to discuss issues.
- Seeking feedback and suggestions to problems.

These themes are parallel to the relationship between participant and their managers, however, the added layer of not having a hierarchy with the peers resulted in the participants using words such as “jovial”, “casual” and “informal” when describing their comfort engaging in conflict with their peer.

#### Highly Comfortable

- An underlying relationship that acts as a structure
- Establishing ground rules.
- Personal relationship outside the workplace.

Similar to the responses of the relationship with the direct manager, having an established relationship made participants highly comfortable engaging in conflict with their peers.

#### Uncomfortable

- Displaying signs of aggression.
- Speaking to someone else before approaching the person with whom you have a problem.

These signs were also similar to ones described previously and are described as active or passive destructive conflict behaviors (Capobianco, Davis & Kraus, 1999).

#### Other Senior Leaders

When describing their comfort engaging in conflict with a senior leader in the organization that they do not necessarily report to, 12 out of 14 participants said that they were comfortable. They noted that it depended on the topic of conflict, but for the most

part they had no issue in approaching a senior leader to engage in ethical issues. The remaining two participants described that they were uncomfortable engaging in conflict with senior leaders in the organization since they are less receptive to disagreement. They added that the hierarchy and title played a role in their comfort level. My assumption was that comfort with engaging in conflict with senior leaders would be indicative of an organizational culture that inspired conflict, however, the data showed no correlation between the two aspects.

In summary, although the responses are similar, there exists an inherent difference between the participants' relationship with their direct manager, peers and other senior leaders which is attributed to their role, power and authority in the organization. At this point, this capstone does not explore the influence of power and authority on conflict and could be a future research possibility.

### Relationships

The idea that relationships are important for conflict to occur is discussed consistently throughout the data. One participant made an important note:

*“It is worth engaging in a conflict if you want to have a relationship with that person. If you do not want to have a relationship you are not going to work on resolving the conflict.”*

Gerardi (2015c) describes that creating a ‘connection’ helps to build trust and creates space for the conversations that can lead to resolution of issues. She further adds that

when there is a connection between two people it lowers defenses and a feeling of safety is created to share vulnerabilities and fears.

Engaging in productive conflict requires an underlying relationship as a foundation but the corollary that can be derived from the data is, if there is no desire to form a relationship with another person there is no need to engage in conflict with them. This was a crucial point in understanding productive conflict engagement.

### **Organizational Culture that Inspires Productive Conflict Engagement**

Organizational culture refers to a perceived pattern of basic assumptions that are invented, discovered or developed by a group as it copes with problems (Schein, 1992). The aspects of the culture that determine how people may react in conflict is based on these underlying assumptions. Participants describe various elements of culture that encourage or inspire people to engage in conflict with one another, these are systems or unwritten norms that exist. They are divided into the categories below:

#### Systems

- *“We have a credo in our organization, each time there is conflict or any disagreement we always refer to it, this is deeply ingrained within the culture and is often brought up during moments of conflict.”*
- *“Our organization promotes productive conflict by creating formalized committees and competition, this allows for healthy conflict to occur naturally.”*

- *“We have a system of doing retrospectives (after action reviews), this enables us to focus on what did not go well in a structured way.”*
- *“In our performance feedback mechanism, individuals are rated on how well they can provide and receive feedback. We also have a lot of training on difficult conversations.”*

Lynch (2001) describes the above systems as support structures that enable how conflict is viewed by providing a safe atmosphere where people feel confident raising their issues. These include: formal dispute resolution processes, feedback mechanisms, large format trainings, alignment of vision and mission that integrate conflict management, and incentivizing systems that encourage people to become conflict competent.

### Unwritten Norms

- *“We have a high-performance culture where people are responsible and accountable for the end to end task. This enables authority and empowerment towards our processes and therefore people are comfortable engaging in conflict with each other.”*
- *“We have a concept of putting an idea through the wash, which means that usually people will throw an idea out there for people to battle it around. Which makes conflict natural.”*
- *“Everyone in my organization has a growth mindset, this requires us to try to learn and grow from every situation. This in turn promotes differing points of view.”*

- *“Leaders role model the behaviors, they will ask clarifying questions and seek feedback often.”*
- *“We place a lot of focus on hiring the right person, if they are not calm and cannot control their temper, we generally do not onboard them.”*

These unwritten norms mostly refer to the creation of a safe space for conflict to occur describing psychological safety as a driver for productive conflict engagement (Bradley et al., 2012). Also, the leader behaviors have a direct effect on conflict cultures (Gelfand et al., 2012). Finally, hiring of the person who is calm may reflect prevention of destructive conflict behaviors to occur.

#### Cultures that discourage conflict

Participants also described aspects of an organizational culture that discouraged people to engage in conflict with one another. Some responses:

- *“When you ask your team member to accomplish a task without empowering them.”*
- *“Formally reprimanding an employee or team member.”*
- *“HR (Human Resources) mitigating the conflict. Leaders should help mitigate conflict. If HR intervenes it will discourage anyone from engaging in conflict”*

These responses are fairly consistent with the literature. Gerardi (2015b) argues that formal grievance processes and reprimands often escalate the situation and rarely address

the real issues at stake. A team member not empowered to accomplish a task will rarely take interpersonal risks, referring yet again to psychological safety.

In summary, organizational culture aspects played an important role in promoting healthy conflict engagement behaviors. A systems approach is essential for leaders to help teams engage in productive conflict.

## **Discussion**

Overall, the data provided an in-depth view on participants beliefs about conflict engagement through their workplace ecosystem and organizational culture. The participants' personal reactions on conflict revealed emotional intelligence as an important pillar to productive conflict engagement. Their relationships with direct managers, peers and other senior leaders as well as organizational culture gave insight into psychological safety and relationships as the other two pillars within the productive conflict engagement framework. Themes of emotional intelligence, psychological safety and building relationships were consistently spoken about through the data. For the most part, emotional intelligence and psychological safety are mentioned extensively in the literature. However, only a small amount of literature exists on a relational approach to engaging in conflict. With that in mind, the final chapter of this capstone discusses a model leaders can use to help their teams engage in productive conflict.



## CHAPTER 5

### RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The data presented recurring themes that had a fairly strong standing in literature. 1. Awareness of our own personal reactions to conflict; 2. Building the relationship; 3. Creating a safe environment and; 4. Enabling systems. Therefore, I make an argument for a model that encompasses all these elements.

#### **A Model for Productive Conflict Engagement**

##### Self-awareness to personal reactions

Leaders' personal beliefs and reactions to conflict shape how they will act in conflict. Leaders who avoid the conflict, react aggressively in a conflict or delegate the conflict will make their team members uncomfortable engaging in conflict. Furthermore, these leaders are less likely to see any benefits to engaging in conflict. Therefore, shifting their attitudes and understanding how they react to conflict becomes the first step in helping teams engage in productive conflict. Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life, and hence for leaders it is imperative to develop their conflict management style. First, leaders must understand that engagement is the first step to resolving conflict. Second, by viewing conflict as an interactive process (see Rahim, 2015), leaders can create the idea that conflict is a series of actions or steps to take. Leaders can begin the journey to change their perspective on conflict by simply asking the question, what does conflict mean to them? Finally, emotional intelligence can be used as a tool to help build self-awareness and social awareness of how to better

understand and develop their conflict competence. Self-awareness forms the core of the productive conflict engagement model.

### Building relationships

Building a genuine connection creates a foundation for productive conflict engagement. This theme runs consistent within the data and demonstrates the importance of how relationships promote better conflict engagement. Therefore, for leaders it is important to spend time building relationships with their team members. By doing this they are creating a safe space for expression of vulnerabilities and fears and creating an environment for engagement to occur (Gerardi, 2015c). There are several ways for leaders to build genuine relationships with their team members. Some simple suggestions from the data include, finding common interests, informal conversations, and regular one on ones. Since building relationships creates a sense of trust it also minimizes the chance of relationship conflicts to occur, which is shown to have negative effects (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). The data also suggests that one of the leaders should actively seek feedback from their team members. This behavior creates trust and deepens the relationship between them and their team members (Chandler, 2019).

Engaging in conflict can also lead to improved relationships (Gallo, 2018; Gerardi, 2015a; Lou, Zhou & Leung, 2011). This suggests that conflict is a cyclical process; building a relationship helps engage in better conflict which in turn helps build better relationships. This was highlighted eloquently in the data by a participant who said that it

was worth engaging in conflict if you want a relationship with that person. Building relationships forms the first pillar of the productive conflict engagement model.

### Creating a safe environment

Leaders hold an inherent responsibility to empower their team members and help them build the necessary confidence to engage in productive conflict. The role of the leader is to create a psychologically safe space for the team members. Building relationships creates security for one on one situations, but a safe and secure environment involves the group feeling secure with each other. To build a safe environment within the team, the data suggests *conflict norming*, which is described as rules of engaging in conflict (Lencioni, 2005). Examples of conflict norming in the data suggest setting up rules where team members do not discuss other team members, unless the issue is ethical one or involves threat to personal safety, and forcing team members to confront each other by asking the question “Have you spoken to the person (you have an issue with)?”. Setting up ground rules allows for conflict to happen in a safe environment. Heifetz, Grashow & Linksy (2009) describe establishing ground rules as one of the seven steps to orchestrate appropriate conflict. Leaders should also intervene in mitigating destructive conflict between team members if required. Leaders must do this without delegating the conflict or formally reprimanding team members (the only exception being violation of ethics or threat to personal safety involving legal implications). Leaders’ facilitation of conflict engagement are better since they create a safe space for team members to take risks and be vulnerable (Gerardi, 2015a). Creating a safe environment forms the second pillar of the productive conflict engagement model.

### Enabling Systems

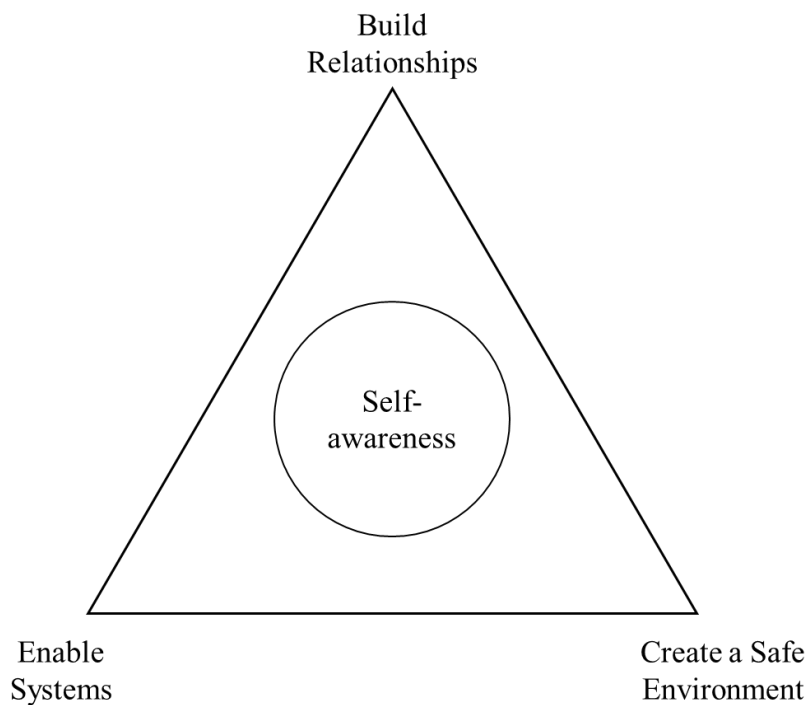
Systems provide a structure for productive conflict engagement to occur in the workplace. The role for the leader is to enable creation of those systems in a larger organizational setting. Of course, creating systems in a larger organizational setting is not the leader's responsibility alone; senior management and human resource functions play an equally important role. Leaders can enable systems by creating their own structures that could possibly permeate through the organization. The data suggests that leaders must role model the behaviors for conflict engagement and consistently seek feedback. Other systemic ideas could include after action reviews, training their team members on having difficult conversations and incentivizing productive conflict engagement behaviors. The leader behaviors have a direct effect on conflict cultures (Gelfand et al., 2012).

After creating a safe environment, leaders could enable the system by orchestrating conflict. The leader's in orchestrating conflict is to serve as a facilitator that regulates the temperature by maintaining the intensity of the conflict. To raise the temperature, leaders could draw attention to tough questions and call out differences within the group; to lower the temperature leaders could provide structure and temporarily reclaim responsibility for the tough issues (Heifitz, Grashow & Linsky 2009). Another idea suggested in the data was to appoint a team member to be a devil's advocate, whose role is to purposefully create counter arguments to team decisions.

Enabling systems forms the third pillar of the productive conflict engagement model.

Below is a visual representation of the model:

Figure 5: Productive Conflict Engagement Model



The figure describes *self-awareness* at the core while *build relationships*, *create a safe environment* and *enable systems* form the three pillars to engage in productive conflict.

### **Productive Conflict Engagement as a Complex Adaptive System**

In the literature review I discussed how conflict is a complex adaptive system, describe in detail how it can happen. Based on the work of Olson & Eoyang (2001), I argue that the productive conflict engagement model is one that is self-organized as a complex adaptive system, and the three pillars meet the conditions of self-organization. Relationships in the productive conflict engagement model act as the *container* which

forms a bounded space for new patterns to emerge. The safe environment creates *significant differences* where the primary patterns for conflict engagement emerge, that in turn influence a system-wide pattern. It could be argued that the safe environment is a container, however, the main idea of creating a safe environment is centered around the idea of conflict norming which creates a pattern for rules of productive conflict engagement. And finally, by enabling systems that allow leaders to model conflict engagement behaviors and orchestrate conflict, *transforming exchanges* are possible throughout the system. This forces us to think about the productive conflict engagement model as non-linear, meaning by following the model we will not necessarily get the same outcomes. Human interactions are nuanced within this system, so the structure will constantly re-organize and adapt itself to any new input, such as the dynamics of a team changing because of promotions, resignations, and new hires.

### **Future Research Possibilities**

The model presented in this capstone is by no means immune to flaws and criticisms, however it serves as a consolidation of my findings within the literature and participant data. As mentioned before, how the model influences gender, culture, and power dynamics can vary enormously and presents one of the possibilities for future research. The other possibility for future research which I hope to do is to test this model in the field using an action research methodology. As an organizational development professional I hope to be able to find opportunities for testing this model and presenting my findings for that in the future.

## **Personal Reflection**

In the introduction of this chapter, I mention the influence of my family and personal dynamics that shaped the idea for this capstone. In the end, my hope was to learn about conflict and possibly even implement some of those learnings into my personal life. While collecting the data and working on this capstone, I have conducted many tiny experiments on conflict engagement. Many of them involved forcing myself to engage in conflict in various situations. Although there are no drastic changes, I feel stronger about the relationships I have with people and most importantly, I am putting less energy into thinking about the conflict. This behavior frees up a lot of space in my mind that was previously occupied by negative ruminating thoughts. I believe that my journey to productive conflict engagement has just begun and I have a long way to go.

As an executive coach and organizational development professional, this capstone gave me immense insight into understanding that conflict can be a good thing and helped me see the potential benefits of engaging in it. It helped me answer some of the questions that I discussed in the introduction: What made me averse to conflict in the first place? Mainly the notion that all conflict was destructive, so when faced with extremes, I chose the easy route. How could I get better at conflict? First, changing my perceptions and attitudes to conflict. Second, fostering strong relationships rooted in trust and vulnerability. Third, creating a safe environment that allowed for conflict and finally, building a system with my friends, family and peers to begin leading myself through productive conflict engagement.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Participant profile questionnaire**

1. What is your current title?
2. What is the size of your organization in terms of number of employees?
3. How many number of direct reports do you have?
4. What is the type of industry for your organization?
5. What is your highest level of education?
6. What is your total years of experience in the workforce?

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questionnaire

#### Part 1: Self-reflection:

1. What does conflict mean to you?
2. What is your personal reaction to conflict?
3. How do you sort through destructive/productive conflict? What are some of the signs?
4. When is it beneficial to engage in conflict?

#### Part 2: Direct Reports

5. What are the signs that tell you that a team member reporting to you avoids conflict?
6. What steps have you taken to help a team member, who is conflict avoidant, get comfortable engaging in conflict?
7. What additional thoughts/observations/comments do you have on avoidance/engagement towards your direct reports?

#### Part 3: Direct Manager

8. How comfortable are you engaging in conflict with your direct manager?
9. What are some steps that your direct manager has taken that make you comfortable/uncomfortable engaging in conflict with them?
10. Can you tell me a time when you had a conflict with your manager? What were the outcomes?

#### Part 4: Peers

11. How comfortable are you engaging in conflict with your peer?
12. What are some steps that your peer has taken that make you comfortable/uncomfortable engaging in conflict with them?
13. Can you tell me a time when you had a conflict with your peer? What were the outcomes?

#### Part 5: Organizational Culture

14. What are some of the cultural aspects of the organization you work for that inspires people to engage in conflict with one another?
15. What are some of the cultural aspects of an organization that discourages people to engage in conflict with one another?
16. How comfortable are you engaging in conflict with a senior in your organization that you don't report to?

#### Part 6: Summary

17. If you could manage conflict better, what would be the benefits to you? Think about benefits both at work and at home.