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Cover Page Footnote

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Middle Management Role in Informally Managing Conflict, Incivility, and Bullying in Higher Education Institutions

At the highest administrative leadership level in higher education institutions (HEIs), harmonious interpersonal dynamics between middle managers and subordinates depend on trust, honesty, and transparency (Branson et al., 2016; Kok & McDonald, 2017). Without these values, HEIs are prone to experience disruptive conflicts that damage relationships and impact productivity (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Within the next level of administration, middle-level managers are tasked with providing stability for college and university infrastructure within departments (Gonzales, 2019), while balancing interpersonal dynamics. Yet, the HEI workplace consists of ongoing strife and overall incivility stemming from perceived differences in job duties and organizational management.

Stability at the department level is affected by stress-related conflicts that manifest as arguments, intimidation, and incivility (Akella & Eid, 2020). Within HEIs, a middle-level manager's responsibilities include providing high-quality campus services, building a cohesive and robust management team to serve the organization and its students, maintaining excellent time-management, and prioritizing tasks using organizational skills (Kok & McDonald, 2017). An additional responsibility is maintaining civil, collegial relationships with faculty, students, staff, and administrators. When not effectively managed, the stress-related conflicts escalate into incivility, bullying and civil litigation (Akella & Eid, 2020; Bradley et al., 2015; Van Gramberg et al., 2020), which prove difficult for middle managers to resolve (Akella & Eid, 2020).

Due to mismanaged workplace conflicts, HEIs spend millions of dollars on hiring, retraining employees, and civil restitution. Common conflicts, such as ghosting, polarization,

miscommunication, and bullying contribute to 58% of subordinates leaving the institution or considering leaving because of adverse work environments (Akella & Eid, 2020; Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2019; Nel & Coetzee, 2020; Van Gramberg et al., 2020; Your best employees, n.d.). These four types of conflict indicate incivility in the workplace and place greater responsibility on the middle-level manager to discern types of conflict and apply tactics and skills to defuse situations of disruptive conflict and rebuild harmony among staff (Bradley et al., 2015).

Purpose of the Study

In this qualitative design study, I described conflict management from the perspective of HEI middle-level managers and manager-to-subordinate relationships. I explored the common sources of conflict as experienced by deans and nonacademic department chairs. This included how middle-level managers resolved conflict and the conflict management training they received.

Methodology

The study utilized a basic qualitative study approach to explore conflict as experienced by middle-level management in HEIs. This approach, supported by constructivism, was integral to the scope and my investigation (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). I accomplished this by selecting a purposive sample of middle-level managers working in HEI academic districts and college systems in North Texas. The sample included middle-level managers working at HEIs with at least two years of experience managing faculty and staff as a dean, director, or nonacademic chair and managing one or more subordinates. Managers in the sample had worked in HEIs for over 10 years, were representative of a diverse workforce both in gender representation and ethnicity, and were assigned pseudonyms for the study.

From the larger selection pool, the sample included the first 10 respondents. I contacted them via email to obtain their consent and request their availability to participate in semi-structured interviews via an online platform. I offered participants information regarding my role as researcher, the study's purpose, a clear understanding of the research problem, and confidentiality. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any moment. I obtained IRB approval, and all participant information remained confidential throughout the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

I designed the interview questions to extract common academic conflict management trends. I interviewed each participant in hour-long, audio-video recorded sessions. I then transcribed the data and coded, question-by-question through NVivo. I analyzed responses using a comparative, inductive approach to identify themes related to sources of conflict, incivility, and bullying. After extracting statements from all the interview transcriptions, I then descriptively coded the statements and grouped them into themes.

Results

Interpersonal Sources of Conflict

As identified by the 10 participants, the main sources of conflict in the HEI workplace were interpersonal and structural. Participants identified a variety of personal behaviors exhibited by managers and subordinates that hurt workplace relationships, including poor communication, and power differential. These nonverbal and verbal behaviors contributed to workplace stress, tension, incivility, and bullying. Team members exhibiting these behaviors became a central part of the conflict in the workplace, disrupting the normalcy that should prevail in a workplace environment.

Poor Communication. Emerson recalled how the proximity and closeness in her department contributed to disorder because “everyone was in everyone’s business.” She recalled how communication in her department was “a part of a gossip train that went amongst the subordinates and quickly reached a manager level.” Lynden expressed similar issues with poor communication, especially during the pandemic. She recalled how “the pandemic reduced the capacity to communicate with one another because it was harder [for managers and subordinates] to keep in touch.” Lynden concluded that “COVID-19 raised the anxiety, worry, stress, and tension while reducing the methods for effective communication.”

Social unrest in the nation also created opportunities for poor communication. Lynden added that the tragic death of George Floyd during lockdown impacted her subordinates and student assistants. She remembered how her subordinates and student assistants were “disappointed, frustrated, deeply troubled by what had happened.” She recalled the impact of virtual meetings and noted that “virtually, you could not feel or readily read the facial expressions of those you were working with to bring them out of pain.”

Azary recounted an incident in which subordinates were not respectful to each other and the incident included a racial stereotype. Azary said, “An African American employee was furious that a meal they had collected to eat at their office after an afternoon event was mistaken for collecting it to be taken to their family because the food was chicken.” Azary had to meet with the subordinates to discuss this incident and the uncivil behavior. She engaged the subordinates in a conversation regarding their hurtful words. Azary said she wanted the subordinates to follow her example: “I needed to respect everyone regardless of race or ethnicity.”

Power Differential. Participants in the study referenced the power disparity between managers and subordinates that morphed into incivility in the workplace. Minor differences that would unnerve subordinates could become significant differences that affected an institution's operational structure and productivity. The power differential went beyond gender and inclusion. Emerson explained that “[conflicts] could be something as big as directly making someone feel small, be condescending toward somebody, or making them feel insignificant.”

Lynden described a supervisor who was “dismissive and intimidating, was taller, was larger, so all of the unwritten rules of power were in his favor.” She shared that positional power and hierarchies were harmful, resulting in job loss, especially in Texas, a contractual at-will state. Lynden perceived that “the power dynamic was the biggest struggle in higher education.” Tory referenced years of service as an example of when two, long-standing faculty members undermined his authority, acknowledging that “they had more experience and better perspectives on how to lead the department.” He understood that “employees can use their title or positional authority or their longevity at the institution to bully and manipulate certain systems or outcomes.”

Structural Sources of Conflict

Participants experienced a variety of negative management experiences within a framework of reporting structures. Various structural challenges impacted the middle-level management positions of the participants and often resulted in conflict. These included oddities in reporting structures and in organizational realignment.

Reporting Structures. Middle-level management positions in HEIs may include a dotted-lined reporting structure. An HEI middle-level manager may report to an academic department while at the same time reporting unofficially to a nonacademic department, a

community-based workforce department, or to higher-level administrators. Seven of the 10 participants shared their departmental reporting structures and illustrated how dotted-line configurations added tension and stress.

Azary and Charlie shared how dotted-line responsibilities to other managers and departments made it challenging to establish rank and order immediately with their subordinates. Similarly, Charlie shared that in her experience, tension arose from “inquiries regarding external corporate partnership contracts” and questions regarding “accountability.” She stated that those inquiries caused friction with other managers. Wrigley recalled his management responsibilities within the dotted-line alignment. He remembered advice a former manager had given him: “One of my old mentors told me years ago, ‘You know when you move into a position, then you start to manage and supervise people, the most difficult part of managing and supervising people is people.’” Participants noted that structural challenges and the dotted-line reporting structures created stress that took time and energy away from the immediate need of collaborating with subordinates and their conflicts.

Organizational Realignment. Charlie described her experience as a new manager in her current role and within a new organizational structure: “My department is brand new; my direct supervisor is very new and very new to leading a team. So . . . very different styles.” Charlie, who had relocated from Europe with management experience, further explained that she was unsure of the ethnic identity struggles in the United States. She shared that “Probably, many years ago, there was not that much conversation [about discrimination]. I was not privy to. I was oblivious maybe to some of the inequities, how I look, my complexion, that I associate with maybe my upbringing in a certain environment.” Moreover, Charlie shared that she used her former background in corporate sales to build her management skills. Charlie recalled, “Every

job in every country I have known, I have had some management leadership training.”

Consequently, she used her leadership skills in working with partners to create consensus.

Halen had a similar experience as part of a system-wide restructuring process. She shared the strife in beginning her middle-management position in an unsteady organizational structure: “I believe that my supervisor was overworked during the pandemic. Our college district went through a transition; it overworked him. So, I think, in that situation, because he was overworked dealing with our team, all of us [were impacted].”

Managing Conflict Informally

The data and descriptions supported the theme of how managers and subordinates worked through behaviors that produced adverse reactions in the workplace and how those reactions produced incivility and bullying, impacting workplace relationships. The data showed that workplace incivility was common nonverbally, verbally, and in writing. The data also showed that conflict manifested daily, purposefully, and incidentally. The conflicts in HEIs manifested at all levels of organizational staffing and created tension and stress for all the research participants. Last, the data revealed an absence of formal training. Two subthemes emerged from the coded data: coping mechanisms and creative solutions.

Coping Mechanisms. Charlie, Halen, and Finley shared how they used gracefulness, listening skills, and information gathering to cope with conflict. Charlie mentioned how “the pandemic had increased the level of grace” she used when dealing with others. For instance, during the pandemic, her awareness of those who did not have the required technology to work from home increased her empathy. Charlie made sure that she communicated with grace, choosing her words carefully. Halen dedicated her time to helping others, independent of the

depth of conflict. Halen understood the importance of engagement: “You had to be a good listener. You also had to ask questions.”

Like Charlie and Halen, Finley relied on grace and empathy to engage with managers and subordinates. She asked subordinates to provide their perspective regarding conflict. Finley shared that she believed that “the truth is somewhere between everybody’s perspective.” A lesson she used with all team members was to have them consider others’ opinions to better understand the context of incivility and bullying. She said, “My truth is not everyone else’s truth, which holds for everyone.”

Emerson, who enjoyed partaking in organic conversations, would leave the office for her preferred style of engagement: a conversation as a “walk and talk” or a conversation sitting side-by-side on a courtyard bench. Skyler held breakfast meetings with her team to allow members to share in a relaxed environment while she gave them her undivided attention. She had learned from personal experience that if she wanted good interpersonal relationships, she needed to provide an opportunity to hold that engagement outside of an office. Wrigley also held conversations on benches in the courtyard, yet like Skyler, he too liked to take advantage of the campus coffee shop. He created an atmosphere of person-centeredness, displacing the importance of job titles and plaques. He desired to “have the best conversation possible” in an unstressed and unstructured environment.

Coping mechanisms for Dakota, Lynden, and Tory stemmed from prior experience and did not necessarily mean that there was a change of venue other than their offices. Their coping mechanism was choosing behaviors and practical language skills obtained through observation and mentoring. Dakota learned from her colleagues and teachers in K12. She shared, “I emulated from them how to resolve conflict between students or between students and me and then just

translated that to [working through conflict with] faculty.” Like Dakota, Lynden quickly recognized abusive language and aggressive nonverbal gestures. Like Tory, she redirected conversations through new questions and statements.

Creative Solutions. All participants had unique ways in which they resolved conflicts. This subtheme includes descriptions of approaches and best techniques used in working through conflict resolution creatively, creating space, and trusting instincts. Participants extracted best practices from past experiences or training.

Creative Solutions Through Communication. Lynden created space and time with her subordinates that allowed her to model her best behavior and communicate effectively so that she could have a positive effect. Lynden shared how she modeled her behavior and communication to subordinates:

I’ve had times where people have sworn at me and or sworn at somebody that I am supervising, and in those situations, I will shut that conversation down and basically say, “If we can’t continue this without some type of level of respectability, then the conversation is over.” I do not write emotional emails. It doesn’t mean that I don’t have the emotion, but I’m just very, very, very aware on my end that I wanted to feel civil.

Creative Solutions Through Coaching. Halen and Wrigley shared that they used their background and experience in coaching to work through conflict. Halen was a Gallup Clifton Strengths Coach and applied her coaching skills to situations that involved incivility and bullying. She used coaching to work through miscommunication: “You listen to both sides of the story and then you can decide from there what the next plan of action is.” Wrigley had faith-based pastoral training and sports training. He used his coaching skills in both areas to make observations and arrive at a creative solution to conflicts. Wrigley shared that incivility had no

place in the workplace and his experience in sports taught him the signs of distress. He also learned how to refrain from succumbing to the temptation of exposing frustration through incivility. Capturing these moments mentally allowed him to be the subdued role model for his managers and subordinates. He shared his thoughts on venting anger:

I know I try not to show up that way [angrily]. I know that there have been times I think I've been frustrated . . . but I wouldn't slam a table or chair. It may be that you are tense, or you look away . . . So, I try to be very cautious.

Creative Solutions Through Tasks. Dakota and Finley observed incivility and grouped the uncivil behaviors into categories to learn how to resolve conflict. Both managers worked through each situation as individualized tasks. Like Dakota, Finley checked on subordinates to create a grouping of behaviors that she could then readily identify to help resolve conflict. This organic manner of working through conflict stemmed from her personality and the fact that she described herself as “kind of a taskmaster”:

Whenever we were in meetings, I didn't spend a lot of time dilly-dallying in conversations because our to-do list was so long. One of the things that I was really intentional about during COVID was just spending time every week . . . to check in to see how people [subordinates] were doing. That happened during grouping, and I think we had conversations that in a lot of ways during COVID brought us together.

Creative Solutions Through Authority. Emerson, Tory, and Skyler looked at conflict through the lens of a manager and presenting oneself as the authority, whether through a title, degree, or mission for the institution. Emerson saw conflict mired in the levels of authority, and she explained it in this manner:

I think incivility is just a lack of tact and professionalism and a lack of kindness. Bullying really comes into play a lot when we talk about hierarchy, and because I think it's much harder to feel bullied from somebody who is on your same level . . . I think bullying really tends to come from a higher level.

Tory saw authority as something that subordinates were unwilling to take into consideration. As a middle-level manager, one of the expectations is respect for the manager's authority. Tory explained the lack of respect in how subordinates approached him:

[In this conflict] that individual did not approach it professionally by pre-scripting words by saying, "Can I schedule a meeting with you? I'd like to bring something to your attention?" It was more of a direct, in your face, "I'm going to walk right up to you and say this is wrong, you're not paying me correctly, I can't believe this, you're allowing this to happen." It's along the lines of blame and "I'm strongly considering giving my resignation because this is unacceptable" without allowing me the opportunity to have a formal meeting, to have a congruent conversation. It is just all dialogue; there's no hard evidence to go back and forth over visually.

Skyler understood that authority was necessary, especially if one could use it to model behavior so that subordinates could see that an exemplary work ethic was an excellent personal trait. She described it as follows:

Getting promoted meant having that person [who is in conflict] report to you, . . . then the conflict compounds itself. So, I got promoted with tasks and duties that needed to be done or decisions that were made that were coming back to me. . . . I'm into my position because I'm good at my job and my two teams know that. They take into account my hard work ethic and how I treat other human beings.

Analysis and Discussion

Informal On-The-Job Conflict Management Training

The data revealed instances in which the participants used the words “trial and error,” “trial by fire,” to describe the informal way in which they obtained conflict-management training. Azary, like other participants, shared that she had not received training in conflict management nor training in effective strategies for conflict management. Instead, she learned conflict management through various situations at work. Before working in her current position, she had obtained institutional, emotional intelligence training provided by the HR department, and she had also participated in external training for improved communication. Azary shared that those types of training were insufficient for her needs.

When I asked Dakota about her conflict management training, she shared that her K-12 teaching experience was the foundation on which she built her tools for managing conflict in the workplace. She added the following explanation to put her informal learning into context:

There was no formal [conflict-management] training, and I never received any formal administrative training in conflict management. It was either trial and error, asking veteran administrators, directors of HR, or even LinkedIn Learning sessions. I kind of learned on the fly.

Like Azary and Dakota, Emerson reported that she collected experiences from previous jobs, previous managers, and external experiences to manage conflict:

Trial by fire. In lots of ways. I feel like most of my higher education jobs leading up to this one, that I’ve used several examples from, were great because I could learn from the outside how a particular manager handled something in a particular way that was either successful or not successful. So, I could witness how things were handled; [I] figured out

what people responded to, and what people didn't respond to. So, I think that learning by experience was helpful.

Emerson also acknowledged that institutional training hosted by HR was favorable to the institution but wasteful to the manager. She explained that participating in supervisory training was not a requirement for her middle-management position:

I did attend a handful of sessions and those were usually hosted by HR. In some cases, I feel like those trainings were helpful, not necessarily for conflict resolution specifically, but just how to handle different types of supervisor situations. I think one of the harder parts when you have HR hosting something . . . is that HR is protecting the institution . . . and not necessarily [addressing] your personal issues.

Finley thought of her experience with training and reflected on it as “I also just think experience.” Finley shared how daily experiences helped her manage conflicts: “I think also just kind of observing through a lifetime of personal and professional experiences of who I see can kind of rally troops and get people behind them is probably the best training I've ever had.”

Halen, who was a Gallup Clifton Strengths coach, used those coaching skills as a foundation for working through incivility and bullying. She had held various management positions and had acquired management experiences that helped her establish effective communication between subordinates and managers. She explained that she complemented and strengthened her formal training through informal learning:

By taking a few courses in LinkedIn Learning and also with my 16 years of management experience. Each case I've dealt with is unique, so I kind of learn from it, take notes from it, and then I have colleagues that I keep in my back pocket because I might want to listen to what they had to handle.

Skyler shared that her training for conflict management was either incidental or informal learning. She benefited from resources and practical training recommended to her by mentors. Tory shared that he self-trained through “trial and error” and created strategies through conversations with his mentors:

I’ve had dialogue with my mentors to help me kind of re-calibrate my own thoughts of “here’s how you work through a situation.” I think there have been some professional development seminars that I’ve attended; that’s been really helpful, and last is probably, trial and error.

Participants in this study used informal learning to identify, assess, and recognize the incivility that could bring forth conflict. The informal learning opportunities served as the basis for participants learning to resolve conflict at the beginning of their careers. As reported in their interviews, participants understood that they did not possess the skills necessary to mitigate the tension and stress impacting their subordinates. Participants used their creativity to formulate steps to acknowledge the faults in communication that created misunderstandings and to recognize the negative behaviors that could produce conflicts.

Six of the 10 participants admitted that they could perceive the rise of incivility through individual behaviors. They also explained that learning to perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying stemmed from daily observations and sharing information with other managers who served as mentors. These six participants captured the nuances of minor incivility experiences, so they had to engage individuals at each opportunity. With this on-the-job experience, they had a better perception of the behaviors that could produce conflict. They learned to identify strategies to work through the tension, stress, and disagreement that lead to incivility and bullying.

For seven participants, the structural challenges they encountered meant seeking advice, training, and resources on how to resolve conflict in an academic setting. One participant shared how they used their experience in K-12 to resolve issues between managers and faculty members or between faculty members. Adult learning theory suggests the transfer of knowledge obtained through these experiences of adapting to structural challenges in the HEI since adults can apply what they learn in different contexts (Merriam & Kee, 2014). Two participants shared that visiting subordinates allowed them to learn about workplace tension and stress and the idiosyncrasies of ongoing bullying. For these participants, it was essential to understand their personality and positional power to work through workplace conflict. The introspection of attitudes and the use of cognitive strategies for learning is a part of Gagne's theory of learning (Loeng, 2020; Werner, 2017).

Three participants explained how their previous experiences outside of middle-level management or outside of the United States presented severe limitations to how they could acknowledge the presence of incivility and conflict in the workplace and then learn what was necessary to resolve it. The three participants shared that it was essential to create a network of managers and collect their experiences with conflict to learn to resolve conflict. They also shared how they kept close contact through correspondence or phone calls for immediate consultation. In addition, these participants shared how they sought training of any kind and at any level that would benefit them as they started working through conflicts in their new middle-level management positions. This serendipitous learning was ideal and presented unique intervention opportunities for the study participants (Jeong et al., 2018).

Communication

Three participants' approaches to resolving conflict occurred through clear and concise verbal and written communication. For these participants, documenting information that clearly explained how the conflict was manifesting and who was a part of the conflict helped with analyzing and understanding how to mitigate the conflict. One participant acknowledged that they executed communication with the best intention of ensuring that things were accurate and fair by formulating a checklist that included effective communication with others to work through tension and incivility. For this participant, the checklist included polite verbiage, correct personal pronouns, the correct pronunciation of surnames, and the exclusion of hurtful words and phrases. Another participant recalled checking that emails were free of emotions. For one participant, the form of communication also included sensitivity to nonverbal gestures and tone of voice because these two elements had the potential to add more strife to existing conflict especially within a diverse group of subordinates.

Coaching

Two participants in the study participated in training and certifications in personal and career coaching. They approached conflict creatively through the coaching elements they had learned to develop. For these two participants, a creative solution was using their individual experiences of athletics and workplace coaching to work on subordinates' needs. Davis et al. (2016) described this as the manager-to-subordinate relationship in which managers serve as coaches and advisors using observation and consultation to guide subordinates at work. Participants used coaching as a creative solution to help subordinates' behavior in the workplace, whether helping with miscommunication or other forms of incivility.

Authority

Three participants used their authority as middle-level managers to present a sense of decency, respect, and decorum to model the behaviors that subordinates needed to adopt in the workplace. For these three participants, establishing levels of command is crucial, primarily to mitigate bullying.

Consequences of Conflict, Incivility, and Bullying at HEIs

As noted in the literature, Thornton et al. (2018) found that middle-level management in HEIs is responsible for ensuring that there is civility among subordinates and that the absence of civility brings forth consequences that impact interpersonal relationships and employment. These consequences may be either internal or external (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). Internal consequences include low-performing HEI department subordinates who experience conflict due to their behaviors, and whose work can be interrupted by incivility (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Kok & McDonald, 2017). The participants in the study placed the consequences of conflict and incivility into three categories: personal emotional conflict consequences, interpersonal work-based conflict consequences, and institutional processed-based consequences.

Personal Emotional Conflict Consequences

Several participants described the positive and negative feelings and emotions managers and subordinates experienced within their positions. For example, managers and subordinates appreciated and enjoyed being in their position. However, participants described the daily pressure of constant conflict as exhausting, leaving them feeling like they were operating in a vacuum or in a black hole. Participant also described the emotional discomfort with discrimination, intimidation, and intolerance and the unintended negative result of managers and subordinates resigning from their positions.

Interpersonal Work-Based Conflict Consequences

Managers may use tactics to improve workplace interpersonal relationships (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Estes & Wang, 2008). As presented in the literature, strategies are tools that involve planning and implementation to improve and transform demanding situations in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). Participants shared that being strategic could combine their efforts with institutional protocols to create consequences that did not have to go through a specific HR procedure. However, participants shared that they relied on tactics, specific actions, or behaviors that may be serendipitous in planning and that a manager or a subordinate may engage in while working through a conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Folger et al., 2016). These tactics emerge from personal experience in dealing with conflict, which is experimented with over time and through various situations (Folger et al., 2016). In most scenarios, tactics emerge through power in manager-to-subordinate relationships independent of styles of conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Folger et al., 2016). In this study, all participants used tactics derived from their experience dealing with conflict.

In the interpersonal conflict category of consequences, participants shared that the incidents and scenarios stemming from uncivil behavior created consequences that required documentation or resolution by following a set protocol. Participants shared that on the milder side of consequences, a manager could request a visit or a meeting without sharing the details with other managers or department administrators. If the consequence required a stern approach, the consequence could involve a procedure or protocol with some input from the administration. If the incivility was egregious, the conflict merited a formal process. Thus, participants acknowledged three interpersonal conflict consequences: informal, semiformal, and formal.

Informal Consequences

Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) proposed that managers develop interest-based conflict-management systems so that they may improve communication, procedures, and interpersonal relationships. Participants noted that informal consequences included keeping the interest of the manager and the interest of the subordinate in mind. Within the departments, these informal consequences occurred in person and virtual environments. In instances in which the informal consequence was in person, participants visited subordinates to collect perceptions and information about conflicts and decide what steps to take next. In this informal process, participants would listen attentively and take notes. The tactics used by participants included behaviors that do not require rigorous planning or detailed itemization. Using such tactics helps a manager or subordinate work through conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Folger et al., 2016).

Another informal consequence participants described included using the tactic of mentoring so that the manager or subordinate could emulate exemplary behavior. One participant described assisting a subordinate with learning to complete the task of writing responses to emails to meet a specified level of performance. Had the subordinate not responded to the informal mentoring, the consequence would have been taking the task away from the subordinate and finding a new assignment within the subordinate's capability. Retaining a subordinate employed under special conditions is also a tactic a manager may use to enhance interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Estes & Wang, 2008).

Implications

An implication of the study is that middle-level managers in HEIs acquire skills in conflict management while consulting with other managers, asking colleagues questions, and delving into the reasons for conflict. These instances of daily, informal learning stem from

serendipitous attempts at solving conflict (Jeong et al., 2018). The implication being that in the absence of formal learning, obtaining skills from informal analysis of a lived experience affords a middle-level manager the essential skills for working through incivility, conflict and bullying.

Middle-level managers benefit from informal learning while they are seeking creative solutions for working in a disempowering workplace. Creative solutions are a part of a dependency on serendipitous tactics to find a way to empower individuals to have better relationships. Middle-level managers, further along in their experiences and through informal learning, create and implement conflict solution strategies that they can apply to incivility in the HEI workplace. The creation of tactics and strategies works well in the absence of formal conflict training and the formal knowledge of skills and styles related to conflict in the workplace.

Higher education institution (HEI) leaders should recognize that middle-level managers employ tactics and strategies derived from informal learning experiences, and that these managers are frequently presented with opportunities to immediately apply conflict-resolution skills (Jeong et al., 2018). HEI leaders should also recognize the role of informal learning in generating innovative solutions to address incivility, conflict, and bullying. Furthermore, HEI leaders would benefit from developing in-service training programs for middle-level managers, enabling them to disseminate the tactics and strategies cultivated through informal learning to their team members and peers.

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