

WORKPLACE CONFLICT: A STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

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ABSTRACT

People must interact and communicate with each other in order to accomplish organizational and personal goals. Ideally, these interpersonal relationships would be productive, cooperative, and satisfying. However, the reality is that they are not always this way. Conflict is an inevitable fact in personal and professional lives. Conflict has been defined, described, and classified in various ways, including the extent to which the conflict is functional or dysfunctional. This study addresses conflict functionality as well as triggers/ causes and results of conflict and the perception that conflict is inherently negative. In addition, the proposed conflict model allows people to systematically diagnose, manage and resolve conflict.

Keywords: Conflict, dysfunctional conflict, functional conflict, conflict management, conflict resolution

INTRODUCTION

According to a survey by Pace (2008), “85% of employees deal with conflict to some degree, 49% believe that the primary causes of workplace conflict are the personality clashes and warring egos between employees, 34% (believe that the conflict is) related to stress and 33% (consider it to be) due to heavy workloads” (p. 15). Therefore it is important to study workplace conflict, conflict management theories, and how organizational leaders can harness conflict as a stimulus to creativity which causes their organizations to thrive.

Conflict is a natural consequence of interactions with family, friends, and colleagues, as well as between managers and their direct reports (Suppiah & Rose, 2006). In other words, conflict is inevitable whenever human element is involved. Robbins (1978) defines conflict as “any kind of opposition or antagonistic interaction between two or more parties” (p. 67). He describes a conflict continuum with no conflict at one end of the continuum and behavioral opponent destruction at the other end, with the intensity of most conflicts existing in the middle of the continuum (Robbins, 1978).

Thomas (1992, p. 273) noted that he had earlier “needed a . . . precise definition of conflict (when he) defined conflict as “the process which begins when one party perceives that another has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his” (Thomas, 1976, p. 891).

Suppiah and Rose (2006) noted that “there is (still) no one comprehensive definition of conflict” (p. 1905). They go on to say that definitions may vary depending on one’s perspective as well as one’s discipline such as psychology, sociology, etc. (Suppiah & Rose, 2006). The authors of this study suggest that definitions would also differ depending on the realm of volatility, or perceived volatility, in the conflict. In the least volatile realm, the word conflict implies dissent, disagreement, opposition, and lack of consensus among two or more people. In the most volatile realm, the implication includes associated animosity, anger, antagonistic words and/or behavior, and increasing levels of frustration. In both cases, those involved in the conflict (and those associated with them) need to understand (1) the difference between functional and dysfunctional conflict and (2) whether, and the extent to which, conflict management and conflict resolution theories and tools are needed.

PILOT STUDY

The impetus for this study was to determine from an organizational perspective the extent to which junior- and senior- level Business students believe that conflict is positive or negative (i.e., functional or dysfunctional). This is an important issue since on a daily basis, students, business employees, and others must determine the extent to which conflict should be managed or resolved. A twelve-question survey was offered via Survey Monkey to 96 students in three management classes. Forty-five students responded to the survey. However, two surveys were discarded because they were not complete. The results of the study are presented in the Findings section of this paper and in Charts 1 and 2.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Guttman (2009) suggests that “The biggest misconception . . . about conflict is that it is intrinsically bad” (p. 33). He goes on to say that there is a negative side to conflict that can be very destructive, but the positive side of conflict is often a stimulus for creativity (Guttman, 2009). Conflict has been described and categorized in various ways, some of which are: cognitive versus relationship or affective conflict (Flanagan & Runde, 2009); task versus relationship conflict (Anderson, 2009; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003); fighting versus defending the status quo (De Dreu, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2008); chaos versus conflict (Guastello, 2008); intra-team conflict versus inter-team conflict (Flanagan & Runde, 2009; Kaye, 1994; and Tekleab, Quigley & Tesluk, 2009); virtual versus non-virtual team conflict (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001; Furumo, 2009) and functional/healthy (Guttman, 2009) versus dysfunctional (Guttman, 2009; Porath & Pearson, 2009a; Porath & Pearson 2009b; Porath & Erez, 2009) conflict. This article primarily discusses functional and dysfunctional conflict and their respective triggers and results.

Functional Conflict

While it is often viewed as a negative aspect of business, conflict is necessary and in some cases even desired. However, it must be managed so that it will not hinder performance or corrode individual or team spirit. Conflict can be considered functional when its results are positive and when the people with divergent views intend their disagreement to have positive results. Flanagan and Runde (2009) emphasize that “Disagreements may signal the emergence

of innovative, novel concepts as yet unrealized” (p. 22). Guttman (2009) indicates that the functionality of conflict depends on the extent to which (and how rapidly) individuals and teams move through the four stages of development which he describes as “testing, infighting, getting organized and high performance” (p. 34). He suggests that the alignment of key factors is essential. Those key factors include “business relationships/ mutual expectations, protocols/rules of engagement, individual roles/accountabilities, and goals/business priorities/focus” (Guttman, 2009, p.35).

Dysfunctional Conflict

When conflict is destructive with negative results, it is classified as dysfunctional. The results of dysfunctional conflict may be wasted time (Kaye, 1994; Dana, 2001; Bacal, 2004; Suppiah & Rose, 2006), lower employee’s motivation (Dana, 2001), lower productivity (Kaye, 1994), strained relationships (Tamam, Hassan, & Yaid 1997) and negative impacts on individual well being (De Dreu, Dierendonck, & Dijkstra, 2004). If conflicts are not resolved in a proper way, then it leads to a low level of well being in the work place and poor health. At the same time, functional conflict stimulates problem solving, innovation and creativity and has a positive impact on an organization and its employees. Functional and dysfunctional conflicts do not necessarily exist separate from each other. Organizations may typically have varying degrees of both functional and dysfunctional conflict. As a result, it is imperative that organizational leaders understand not only different types of conflict, but also different conflict management and conflict resolution theories.

TRIGGERS OR CAUSES OF CONFLICT

As previously mentioned, there are two types of conflict in an organization based on degree of functionality, i.e., functional versus dysfunctional conflict (Bacal, 2004). Therefore, organizational leaders should understand the nature of conflict in order to know whether the conflict should be managed effectively or resolved/eliminated. If managed appropriately, functional conflict leads to organizational innovation and productivity. However, the answer for dysfunctional conflict is elimination because it can lead to many negative results as it impacts relationships, productivity, and other key performance indicators. See Figure 1.

Hastings (2007) noted that workplace conflicts can be caused by a variety of issues, such as: (1) Different work methods where employees have the same goal but different approaches to achieve the goal; (2) Different goals that are inconsistent with each other; (3) Differences in personalities where people annoy each other because of who they are or how they act; (4) Biases that people have against different groups of people; (5) Issues, actions, or comments that cause stress; (6) Different viewpoints or perspectives about various issues that may relate to people’s upbringing, gender, age, or other such characteristics; (7) Different levels of interpersonal skills and verbal and/or written communication capabilities; (8) Competition for financial or other resources; and (9) unique subcultures that establish “us vs. them” situations. Starks (2007) noted that conflict results when a person’s or group’s behavior or action negatively affects another. These negative behaviors or actions may result when beliefs, values, attitudes, ideas, needs goals, perceptions, expectations, or interests differ. Conflicts may also arise when the behavior or actions of people, teams, or departments violate the rules, regulations, or social norms of an organization (Starks, 2007).

Depending on the intentions of the people involved, the causes of functional conflict and dysfunctional conflict may be very different as shown in Figure 1. This new model depicts the functional/dysfunctional conflict continuum as well as conflict triggers, impact, and management or resolution. Based on analysis of conflict results, various decisions can be made, such as how functional conflict triggers can be managed as well as which (and how) dysfunctional conflict triggers can be eliminated.

The triggers of functional conflict may result from (1) differences in opinions, personalities, knowledge, education, and experience; (2) natural results of diversity based on such characteristics as age, ethnicity, gender, etc. (3) project or process differences; (4) virtual and/or self-managed work teams, or (5) rapid change. When organizational leaders establish a culture that encourages innovation, involve people in improvement initiatives, and support positive, contributing people, those elements also trigger functional conflict.

Any conflict that is not managed appropriately can degenerate into dysfunctional conflict. However, there are specific triggers of dysfunctional conflict that include: dysfunctional teams, stress, systems problems, favoritism, warring egos, heavy workloads, unclear job requirements, a culture that is disabling and disempowering, stifling bureaucracy, and obnoxious people. To avoid increases in negative key performance indicators and decreases in positive key performance indicators, dysfunctional conflict must be resolved expeditiously.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT THEORIES AND RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

Conflict is a natural consequence of daily interactions. Workplace conflicts may arise because of: (1) lack of open or adequate communication between employees or between employees and bosses; (2) power struggles between departments with conflicting objectives or reward systems; (3) the incompatibility of personal goals, social values, or personality characteristics; (4) role behavior required by employees' jobs that conflict with their personal values; or (5) leadership styles (particularly authoritarian and laissez faire styles).

Because of its prevalence in the workplace, it is important to understand how conflict can be resolved or managed more effectively. When contemplating conflict management strategies, the following questions may need to be answered: (1) How can we get the conflict out in the open so that we can deal with it? (2) How can we ensure that people are able to understand each other's points of view? (3) How can we develop trust so that conflicts that occur are more functional than dysfunctional? (4) How can we get people with different abilities in dealing with conflict to teach each other?

Conflict management is a coping response to conflicting relationships and situations. These situations may either strengthen or weaken relationships, depending on the type of conflict (i.e. functional or dysfunctional) and the way it is managed by organizational leaders and other employees in the organization. Interpersonal conflicts can be resolved by using the systems perspective (i.e. organizational leaders should consider the relationships rather than the individual as the locus for behavior). This approach focuses on the analysis of the relationships and interlocking behaviors that work against effective conflict management (Bliese & Jex, 1999; Knapp, Putnam, & Davis, 1988). Many studies conducted on conflict management focused on two-dimensional theoretical models. For example, Blake and Mouton's (1964) Managerial Grid relied on two-dimensions i.e. concern for people and concern for production which led to the five

corresponding styles of conflict management. Riggs (1983) also gave two additional dimensions: activity, the degree of involvement with a conflict, and flexibility, the range of movement that an individual is willing to make. Researchers who adopted the systems view of conflict management gave two additional dimensions to resolve conflicts, i.e. cohesion, the degree of connectedness in a relationship, and adaptability, the ability to respond to changing conditions (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979). The competence model of conflict (Spitzberg, Canary, Cupach, 1994) discussed styles of conflict in terms of their effectiveness and appropriateness with more competent conflict styles leading to positive outcomes.

Conflict management theories are as varied as the definitions of conflict. Some of the earliest conflict management theories were developed by Follett (1940), Blake & Mouton (1964), and Thomas (1976). Follett (1940) suggested that five conflict management styles: domination, compromise, integration, avoidance, and suppression. Blake and Mouton's (1964, 1970) conflict management approaches were aligned with their Managerial Grid concept which was based on two dimensions, concern for people and concern for production. Blake and Mouton (1964, 1970, 1981) described conflict management styles as: (1) *avoiding*, 1 on people concern and 1 on production concern; (2) *accommodating*, 9 on people concern and 1 on production concern; (3) *compromising*, 5 on people concern and 5 on production concern; (4) *competing*, 1 on people concern and 5 on production concern; and (5) *collaborating*, 9 on people concern and 9 on production concern. Collaboration, the most effective method of dealing with conflict, includes direct confrontation which brings conflict out in the open so that it can be managed or resolved (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

Dual Concern Theory (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986) is similar to Blake and Mouton's (1964) Managerial Grid Theory. Dual Concern theory is a function of high or low concern for self combined with high or low concerns for others and includes five conflict management strategies. These strategies are: (1) *forcing*, high concern for self and low concern for others the style which forces their interests on others; (2) *yielding*, low concern for self and high concern for others who give more importance to others interests over themselves; (3) *avoiding*, low concern for self and others as well; (4) *problem solving*, high concern for self and others; and (5) *compromising*, intermediate concern for self and for others and willing to search for middle ground (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert, 1997).

Conflict management involves a wide range of activities, including communication, problem solving, dealing with emotions, and understanding positions of the people involved (Behfar, Mannix, Peterson, & Trochim, 2008). Since conflict is an integral part of any organization, leaders should ensure that conflict is built on healthy dialogue and positive interpersonal skills. Gross, Guerrero & Alberts (2004) noted that integrative strategies are more useful than distributive or avoidance strategies and referenced Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001; Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, 1989, and 1990. Integrative strategies (also called social-oriented, collaborating, and problem-solving strategies) are used for open communication, information sharing, and problem solving. Gross, Guerrero & Alberts (2004) also discussed distributive strategies which include controlling, dominating (Canary & Cupach, 1988; and Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001) and contending as well as avoidance strategies, i.e., non-confrontational, inactive, and withdrawal strategies which the conflicting parties use to shut down communication or distract from conflict issues (Bacal, 2004; De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001).

Perewe and Ganster (1989) emphasize that "jobs perceived as being highly demanding (with limited control) lead to both dissatisfaction and psychological anxiety . . . , both of which

have been shown to lead to turnover and health problems” (p. 225). Jex & Bliese (1999) and Hobfoll, London and Orr (1988) go on to say that mastery, self-efficacy, and locus of control which helps in the ability to manage life’s demands and decreases situations which cause conflict at work. Additionally, active problem solving can improve interpersonal relationships (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta 2001; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994); and appropriate communication through which conflicts are expressed, recognized, and managed (Canary, Cupach, Serpe, 2001). Andrade, Plowman, and Duchon (2008) emphasized that conflict resolution is a requirement for organizational leaders. They also noted that the ability to listen impartially to all sides of a conflict, help develop “win win” solutions, and make a decision are essential skills.

When the conflict is dysfunctional, Phillips and Cheston (1979) provide a four-step conflict resolution model which includes: (1) facing up to the conflict, (2) planning the resolution, (3) implementing the plan and (4) following up to determine whether, or the extent to which, the conflict has been resolved. Bacal (2004) offers information about good/positive conflict, bad conflict which should be avoided and “ugly” strategies, i.e., “the situation where conflict is allowed to eat away at team cohesiveness and productivity” (pp. 21-22). Bacal (2004) notes that “ugly strategies (are) Non-action, Administrative Orbiting, Secrecy, and Law and Order” (22). Non-action is the most common conflict management strategy because people are uncomfortable with confronting the conflict. In fact, they may pretend there is no conflict. Administrative orbiting is when supervisors and others acknowledge the conflict, but they avoid addressing it by postponement actions such as asking for more data, documenting more problems, etc. The strategy of secrecy is a means of avoiding conflict by repressing, and causing others to repress) it. This simply delays the conflict until it eventually causes far more negative consequences. The law and order strategy is used by people who think they can command people to not be in conflict. This causes people to repress conflict, but it does not resolve it. The “ugly strategies” offered by Bacal (2004) are all conflict avoidance strategies. Such strategies can diminish or shut down creative thinking and actions which negatively impacts individuals and organizations. However the “ugly strategies” are particularly harmful when the conflict is dysfunctional and its results are current stress for the people involved as well as stress that results from the impending future negative stress.

Andrade, Plowman, and Duchon (2008) emphasized that confrontations are awkward for everyone, so people tend to dread and postpone them. However, confronting issues and giving feedback, whether in an informal situation or in a more structured performance evaluation, is necessary to get work done. Dealing with disruptive behavior involves many skills, including listening, confrontation, negotiation, conflict management or resolution, and giving feedback. Not dealing with dysfunctional conflict can have serious repercussions for an organization. It sends a message that the behavior is acceptable, and, as a result, dysfunctional conflict may spread in a manner similar to a contagious disease. Managing functional conflict and resolving dysfunctional conflict are essential for people and organizations. Liberman, Levy, and Segal (2009) indicate that a needs assessment may be necessary when designing an internal organization system for conflict management and resolution. Samoilenko (2008) cautions that we must remember that organizations are complex systems, and they offer suggestions for managing conflict environments as well as conflict situations.

FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

For the pilot study on Conflict in the Workplace, a survey was administered in Survey Monkey. The forty-three respondents were students in junior- and senior-level Management classes. The survey results were analyzed from the perspective of functional and dysfunctional conflict (i.e., the extent to which the students perceived conflict to be positive or negative for an organization). The results are depicted in Charts 1 and 2. From 65.5% to 84.4% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with statements that suggest that conflict can be advantageous to an organization. See Chart 1. From 48.7% to 92.3% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statements that suggest that conflict is inherently negative. Those results are shown in Chart 2. Taken together, the results depicted in Charts 1 and 2 indicate that the respondents view conflict as being very negative.

Lang (2009) cautions that gaps exist in business curricula in terms of conflict management and that these gaps negatively impact students' capabilities for managing and resolving conflict. Our study suggests that other gaps exist as well in that people do not understand the differences between functional and dysfunctional conflict or the extent to which functional conflict can be valuable to people and organizations.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

Several limitations of this study should be considered. Survey respondents were not randomly selected. The survey was administered to students in three Management classes at a major public university. The questions have not been validated, and this increased the potential for non-replicable survey results. In addition, the respondents were not segmented according to demographics such as age, gender, or work experience so it is not known the extent to which various demographics impacted the survey results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the literature review and empirical study, recommendations are:

- (1) All people should learn about functional and dysfunctional conflict and their respective triggers and potential results as well as conflict management and resolution strategies. Such learning opportunities should be presented in families, religious organizations, kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) schools, university courses, workplace training, and other venues. Learning opportunities should teach people conflict theories and tools, but they should also include concept applications to strengthen their knowledge retention.
- (2) Since it is a necessary ingredient for personal and organizational creativity, organizational leaders should create the appropriate culture for functional conflict to exist. However, since many people perceive conflict to be inherently negative, changes should be made as needed in college courses and organizational management training programs in order to ensure that more organizational leaders understand, and are able to apply, strategies that are necessary for managing functional conflict and strategies that are necessary for resolving dysfunctional conflict.

- (3) Studies should be conducted to determine what types of learning opportunities exist on the subject of conflict in various educational organizations, including K-12 schools and universities (particularly colleges of business) as well as businesses, healthcare organizations, and other places that people work.
- (4) Another potentially beneficial study would be to determine how the conflict management styles of organizational leaders impact the types of conflict learning opportunities in their organizations.
- (5) Finally, this study (with appropriate demographic questions) should be replicated in additional Business courses at several universities to determine the extent to which the current survey results are replicable.

Conflict exists in all organizations, including families, workplaces, religious institutions, political organizations, governmental entities, etc. Therefore, understanding functional and dysfunctional conflict and how to manage or resolve it should be an integral part of what and how people learn. Such understanding is essential for the personal well being and success of individuals as well as the long-term success of organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

The potential for conflict exists whenever two or more people interact with each other. The extent to which the conflict is functional or dysfunctional depends on: (1) the intentions, and perceived intentions, of the actors in conflict scenarios; (2) whether the actors and others are knowledgeable about, and capable of using, conflict management and resolution theories and tools; and (3) the extent to which an organization's leaders and culture support functional conflict as a normal part of creativity and innovation. Conflict exists on a continuum from mild disagreements or diverse opinions with little volatility to extremely destructive, dysfunctional conflict with intense, excessive volatility. Therefore, it is often difficult to manage, diffuse, and/or resolve conflict. The model proposed in Figure 1 can assist with diagnosing, managing, and resolving conflict. The students in our study perceived conflict to be negative and not a necessary part of an organization's culture, and to some extent, this view is substantiated in the literature (i.e., people perceive conflict to be inherently negative). However, the literature substantiates the concept that functional conflict is not only unavoidable, but that it is a healthy, necessary ingredient for innovation and long term organizational viability.

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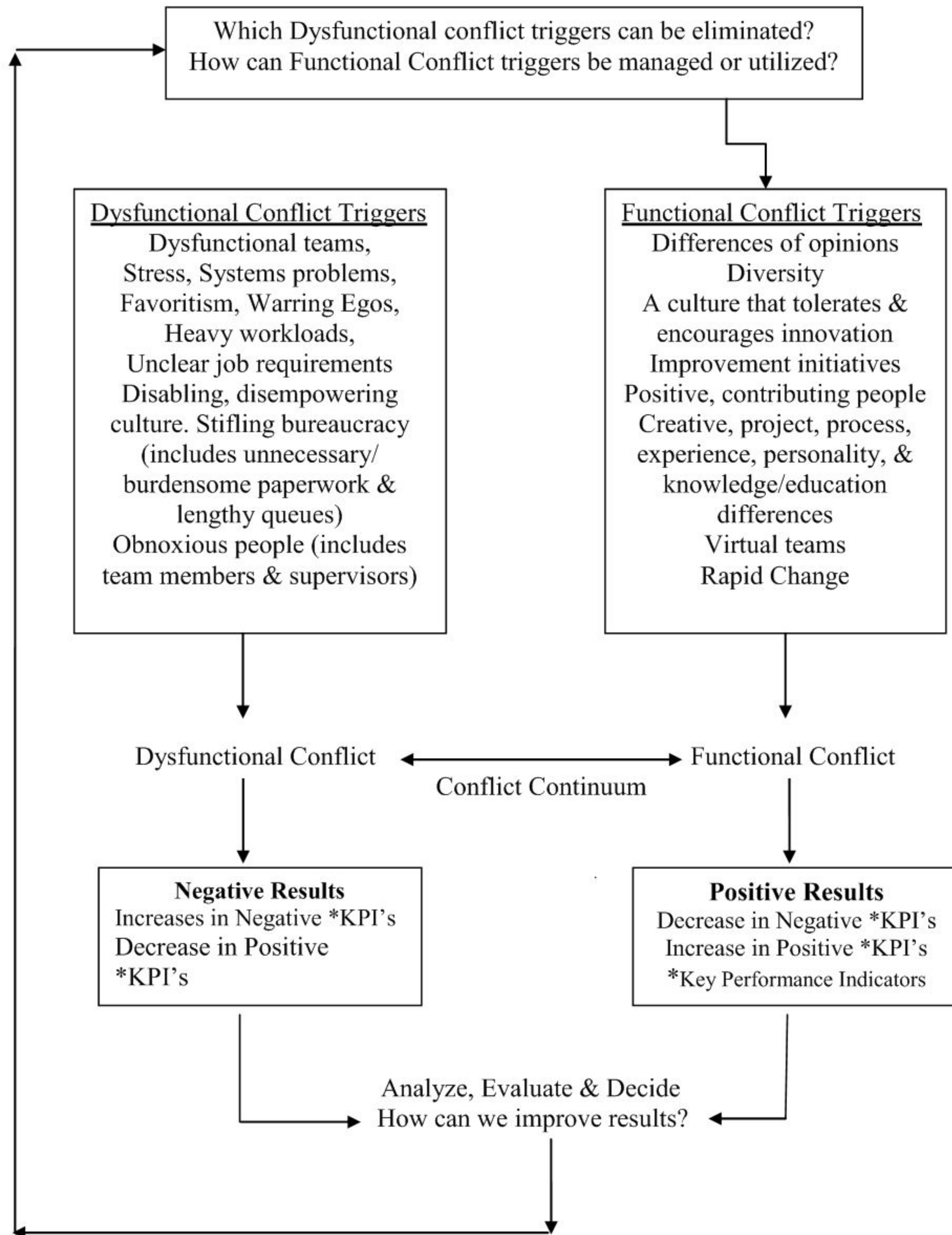
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Figure 1
Functional Versus Dysfunctional Conflict Triggers Model



Appendix A

Survey Questions and Respondents' Answers

This appendix includes the conflict survey questions. Chart 1 includes the questions that convey that conflict is a positive organizational element along with the percentages of the respondents who disagreed and strongly disagreed. Chart 2 includes the questions that convey that conflict is a negative organizational element along with the percentages of respondents who agreed and strongly agreed. Taken together, these charts indicate that the respondents view conflict as being very negative.

Chart No. 1 – Conflict as Positive

Questions	% Who Disagreed & Strongly Disagreed
Conflict is a necessary element for change	79.5%
Conflict and competition are 2 totally different things.	65.9%
Conflict is an unavoidable thing.	68.9%
Conflict can be advantageous to an organization	84.4%

Chart No. 2: Conflict as Negative

Questions	% Who Agreed & Strongly Agreed
Conflict should be avoided.	57.7%
Conflict leads to violence.	64.5
Conflict is a result of personality problems in an organization.	51.1
Conflict is dangerous for an organization.	64.4
Conflict always has a negative impact on production.	92.3
Conflict produces inappropriate reactions by persons involved.	48.7
Conflict is unnatural and should be avoided.	77.8
In conflict, at least one of the parties is a troublemaker.	64.4