Managing cross-cultural conflict in organizations

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Conflict is part of being human and thus it is a pervasive aspect of socio-cultural and professional interaction. People who have never experienced conflict at the workplace are 'living in a dream world, blind to their surroundings or are confined to solitary confinement' (Boohar, 2001).

Over the past decades there has been an increase in research on conflict and its management both internationally and at an interdisciplinary level (Rahim, 1989; Thomas, 1992). Conflict and its management have therefore been researched from different angles and disciplinary perspectives, such as psychology, behavioural sciences, sociology, communication, health sciences and anthropology (Wall and Callister, 1995; Vecchio, 2000). Despite the increase in the number of concepts and definitions of conflict, there is no comprehensive definition of conflict and conflict theory in general.

Management scientists have shared renewed interest in the subject of conflict and its management in workplaces (Jehn, 2000; Kumar and Van Dissel, 1996; Putnam and Poole, 1987; Rahim, 2002; Zapf 1999). This interest could be ascribed to the increased observation of conflict in organizations (Schermerhorn et al., 1997) and the assertion that organizations are inherently competitive and riddled with conflict (Pondy, 1992: 257).

According to Rahim (2002: 206), conflict and its constructive management are important for the optimal functioning of organizations; however, most conflict management recommendations still focus on conflict reduction, resolution or minimization, because of the negative impact it can have on organizations and individuals. Conflict management should rather be focused on continuous transformation. It can lead to distress and distraction from work, affecting decision-making processes, relationships and individual effectiveness, as well as productivity and creativity (Cowan, 1995: 24). Additionally, there is evidence that conflict can impact negatively on organizational productivity, and increase costs (Burton, 1990). Despite these assertions, if constructively managed, conflict can contribute positively to job satisfaction, well-being (De Dreu et al., 2004: 15) and even stress reduction (Friedman et al., 2000).

According to Wils et al. (2006), managing conflict in the workplace involves the diagnosis and analysis of organizational conflict, and the development of effective intervention techniques and methods to resolve it. Organizational conflict management strategies involve the analysis of types of conflict, impact of conflict, and conflict resolution styles (Rahim, 2002). However, amongst conflict management scientists (Francis, 2003; Pondy, 1967) it is 'common sense' that the best way to manage conflict is a situational and contextualized approach (Rahim, 2001). This approach, which considers cross-cultural contexts, has replaced the striving for 'one best approach' to managing conflict (Rahim, 2002: 217). However, it is assumed that cooperation is one of the most useful key concepts in reducing organizational conflict in a globalized context (Blake and Mouton, 1986).

Given the internationalization processes across different organizations, and the increase of cosmopolitan thoughts and philosophies in lifestyles, there has been a focus on cross-cultural, intercultural and transcultural conflict-related research (Mayer, 2008). This trend in increased cross-cultural conflict management research is further stimulated by the increased potential for cross-cultural conflict in the international workplace. Consequently, culture and its influence on conflict, as well as the management thereof, are increasingly gaining attention in organizational studies, cross-cultural management (Gerhard, 2008), and conflict management research (Kazan, 1993), with a particular focus on constructivist research paradigms to culture and conflict management (Morris and Fu, 2001). Focusing on cross-cultural conflict in organizational settings requires a theoretical approach to culture, cultural concepts and definitions, as well as cultural influences on inter-personal interaction, conflict and its management. In management research, identifying the source of conflict has often been seen as one of the most central tasks in conflict management theory, with regard to types of conflict (Laine, 2002), conflict management typologies (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Rahim and Bonoma, 1979), face-negotiation theory (Oetzel et al., 2001) and cultural differences within organizations (Gartzke and Gleditsch, 2006). In addition, research on conflict and culture in cross-cultural and multicultural teams has contributed to the body of literature in this field (Brett et al., 2006; Cowan, 1995).

Conflict is often associated with issues of values and identity (Cartwright and Cooper, 2000; Mayer, 2010). This is because conflict often begins when an individual or a group perceives differences as well as opposition between the self and others, about interests, beliefs, needs and values (De Dreu et al., 1999).

In the constructivist paradigm, conflict is viewed as episodes that are created through perception – which is assumed to be culturally influenced – and that lead to recognizing the existence of multiple realities (Lederach, 1988). These multiple realities are connected to intra-personal processes (Rahim, 2002) created by different parts of the psyche, the value system and the behaviour (Folger et al., 2001). Given the key role in understanding and transforming conflict in cross-cultural organizational settings, there is a need for more research on identity and values.

Aim of this special issue

This Special Issue on 'Managing Cross-Cultural Conflict in Organizations' aims at providing a forum to examine how cross-cultural conflict and its management in organizations can be viewed from different perspectives. It also aims at advancing international, interdisciplinary cross-cultural conflict-management research. Furthermore, it is the intention of this issue to contribute to the body of knowledge in interdisciplinary research, and to facilitate scientific dialogue on managing cross-cultural conflict in organizational contexts, by exploring particular disciplinary perspectives on managing cross-cultural organizational conflict, and exchanging ideas, viewpoints and research findings from different cross-cultural perspectives and scholarly backgrounds. A contribution towards improved understanding of cross-cultural conflict and its management in different parts of the world in this issue is made by including cross-cultural conflict-management research which is based on both qualitative and quantitative empirical research, as well as theoretical and conceptual research.

Articles in this Special Issue refer to current and relevant research questions, such as: How do theoretical approaches shape the understanding of culture and conflict? When are conflicts in (international) organizations cross-cultural conflicts? Which kind of cross-cultural conflicts occur in selected organizations in different regions and countries, and how are these conflicts managed successfully? How are culture and international mediation inter-related? Which team paradoxes and

cross-cultural conflicts do team members experience? How does conflict relate to particular organizational forms, such as mergers and acquisitions? And what is the nature of the relationship between cross-cultural conflict and identity?

By addressing these research questions, this Special Issue contributes towards the interdisciplinary understanding of the complexities in organizational cross-cultural conflict in specific contexts and situations. Biased debate on cross-cultural conflict and its management were minimized as far as possible. Furthermore, this Special Issue enhances the understanding of paradoxical and evolving conceptualizations of cross-cultural conflict and its management in the frame of cross-cultural organizational-management theory, practice and interdisciplinary empirical research. Finally, the articles presented in this issue do not only answer existing research questions, but also introduce new ideas and new questions for future research.

Short introduction to articles

This Special Issue provides the reader with an in-depth insight into the recent theoretical debate and current empirical research pertaining to cross-cultural conflict management in international organizations from an interdisciplinary perspective. Consequently, it contains articles from authors who argue from different disciplinary perspectives, including cultural anthropology, political sciences and international relations, human resource management and organizational studies, as well as interpretative anthropology and ethnography. Examples and research findings from different countries and different organizational contexts provide the reader with a broad insight into the complexity of conflict-management research.

These articles address the topic using different methodological approaches ranging from positivist to social constructivist and interpretative paradigms, allowing for a broad variety of research data.

Dominic Busch refers to cultural theory and conflict management in organizations, and addresses the question of how theory shapes the understanding of culture in practice. He develops an analytically structured synoptic model that reveals a wide range of forms, and also the extent of the assumed influence of culture on social interaction in organizational settings. The author presents a discourse-analytic approach to discovering interactants' subjective notions of culture, by providing empirical examples. This article points out subjective notions of culture from a discourse-analytic point of view, and contributes to new theoretical approaches in inter-cultural communication and research by introducing and discussing various views on culture.

Jacob Bercovitch and Jon Foulkes focus on the topic of managing cross-cultural conflict from a political science and international relations perspective. The authors criticize the traditional approaches to conflict and its management in the political sciences, which emphasize the supremacy of the state while ignoring internal features such as culture. In this article, the profound impact of culture is discussed by referring mainly to intra-statal conflict, which occurs along cultural and religious lines. Consequently the authors develop a theoretical framework to examine culture and its impact on mediation. In this article, the importance of cross-cultural factors in international conflict management is supported by a large set of quantitative data.

While the first two mentioned articles define culture and conflict (management) in-depth from different disciplinary backgrounds and from a theoretical perspective, the following four articles focus on managing conflict from a management and organizational studies perspective. They present qualitative and quantitative data, and refer to different organizational, managerial and national contexts.

The article by Yvonne du Plessis addresses cross-cultural conflict management in a multicultural organizational context. She explores the issue from a human resource perspective by exploring teamwork and teamwork paradoxes. By using a mixed research methodology, du Plessis presents insightful empirical research data in a South African management context. She contributes to exploring cross-cultural conflict-management challenges in teamwork paradoxes, by referring to the complex cultural and historic context of the South African society.

Yaakov Weber, Dalia Rachman-Moore and Shlomo Yedidia Tarba contribute to this Special Issue by referring to human resource practices during post-merger conflict and merger performance. The authors develop a knowledge-based theory of mergers and acquisitions integration, by exploring critical differences between acquirers from various countries, in terms of the way human resources are managed during cross-cultural conflict situations, as well as regarding the relationship between human resources practices and post-merger performance. The results of this profound quantitative study lead to providing a differentiated picture of how to address conflict situations and enhance performance in mergers and acquisitions, by highlighting theoretical and managerial implications.

By referring to the concept of the learning organization and various effective ways of managing conflict, David A. L. Coldwell and Andrea Fried investigate the transferability of the learning organization concept in the British, German and South African human resource educational-management context. The authors use a specifically designed measuring instrument to operationalize Senge's five disciplines of a learning organization, and point out that the model of the learning organization may require specific adaptations to meet the needs of different cultural situations.

Max U. Montesino's article focuses on affirmative action policies, both as a mechanism for managing cross-cultural conflict and as creator of other types of conflict in multi-ethnic Malaysia. The article identifies several cross-cultural conflicts that the nation is facing after four decades of affirmative action implementation. Based on a field research report and a theoretical literature review, the article provides the reader with information about the complex Malaysian environment. It points to cross-cultural conflict potentials, as well as the influence of ethnic identity and conflict-management models used in Malaysia's workplace. The article finally provides the reader with implications for managing conflict in the Malaysian work context in the future.

By posing the question 'Are engineers religious?' Jasmin Mahadevan approaches the topic of managing cross-cultural conflict from an interpretative anthropological and ethnographic point of view. She uses an interpretative, sense-making approach to cross-cultural conflict and collective identities in the context of a multicultural high-tech engineering organization. By focusing on professional identity and religious practice amongst a diverse group of employees in two German-based engineering organizations, Mahadevan highlights the relationship between conflict and various intervening factors, and develops a model of how to assess cross-cultural conflict from an interpretative perspective.

The articles introduce and pull together new thoughts and ideas in the cross-cultural conflict management debate, and stimulate further research and discussion on the topic. You are now invited to read further and be stimulated to move the discussion forward, in a constructive, non-conflictive, but controversial, way.

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