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CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Since much of experiential learning takes place as a student group activity, there is a potential for intragroup conflict as a byproduct of the decision process. This research reports on a study of the approaches taken by experiential learning groups in resolving conflicts, and the influence of these resolution modes upon group performance.

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning, especially management simulations often take place with student groups as the fundamental decision making unit. Such a group, given an incentive for sound performance (grades, pride), and a complex, sometimes ambiguous task to be performed by a group of diverse individuals under time pressure, provides fertile ground for conflict.

The present research is an extension of research into intra-group conflict by Lambert and Uhring [2]. This research, while demonstrating that conflict was present in these groups, and providing a description of group factors associated with conflict, found no association between conflict level and group performance in the simulation. Much of the literature dealing with intra-group conflict however, describes moderate levels of conflict as intrinsically neither facilitating or detrimental to overall group performance. The performance-related effects of conflict are believed to proceed from the manner in which conflict is resolved. Accordingly, this research was undertaken to examine the issue of conflict resolution in experiential learning groups.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The particular theoretical perspective on conflict resolution into which the present research is cast is that of March and Simon [4]. While the object of their research was intra-organizational conflict, the fundamental element of concern, conflict between persons involved in joint decision making, is shared by the usual experiential learning situation. Thus it is seen as an applicable theoretical perspective. March and Simon describe the process of conflict resolution in terms of four approaches: problem-solving, persuasion, bargaining, and politicking.

Problem-solving

Problem-solving behavior, as a response to conflict, describes the situation in which the group has agreed upon a goal. The problem they face is one of identifying alternatives and selecting a solution which is most likely to achieve their goal.

Persuasion

In the case of persuasion as a response to intra- group conflict, subgoals among group members differ. Group members respond by comparing subgoals to some larger objectives, thereby attempting to persuade the group that some particular subgoal or set of subgoals is more consistent with their objectives than the others. In the instance of the experiential

learning group, the larger objective is likely to be "winning" with subgoals arrayed in terms of various strategies and tactics.

Bargaining

If a group begins to bargain as a means of conflict resolution, the group has acknowledged that there are subgoal differences within the group which cannot be altered. Therefore, the process becomes one of seeking an agreement through give-and-take procedures without persuasion.

Politicking

When politics become involved in the group process, the group situation is essentially the same as it is for bargaining. The major difference being that allies are sought, conceivably both within and outside the group, for the purpose of changing the group's interaction pattern.

Problem-solving and persuasion represent genuine attempts to reach agreement on an issue, and are essentially analytic in nature. In contrast, bargaining and politicking are non-analytic, more potentially disruptive to the group, and less likely to produce the improved decision-making desired as a consequence of the group process.

The fact that experiential learning groups operate with moderate levels of conflict has been demonstrated elsewhere [2]. The decisions produced by these groups are the result of processes which then must inevitably include the resolution of conflict. To the extent that certain approaches to the resolution of conflict are more analytical than others, we might expect to find the efficacy of group decisions affected by the group's dominant mode of resolution. That preface forms the principal issue addressed by this research. More specifically, the research issues are:

- H1: The more confrontation-oriented (i.e., less analytical) the method of conflict resolution, the less effective will be the group's performance.
- H2: Higher levels of conflict will be associated with more confrontation-oriented resolution modes.
- H3: Conflict produced by disagreements over group goals and objectives and/or by the decision-making style of one or more group members will be associated with more confrontation-oriented resolution modes than will conflict with other antecedents.

METHOD

Subjects

A convenience sample of students enrolled in a marketing management course at a midwestern university was used in the study. All participants were MBA students. Prior to involvement in the marketing simulation exer-

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cise, each student was assigned to membership in one of five teams within one of four industries. These teams served as the primary units of analysis.

Questionnaire Administration and Content

The issues under investigation in this study require data on three group attributes: level of conflict, conflict antecedents, and conflict resolution modes.

Level of Conflict

The level of conflict present in the groups was assessed using two Likert-scale items: one asking about the frequency of conflict within the group, and the other inquiring about the intensity of intragroup conflict.

Conflict Antecedents

The factors which group members perceived as producing conflict within their groups were evaluated via a constant-sum scale, in which subjects were asked to allocate 100 points across four statements, such that their allocations reflected the relative importance of each factor in producing group conflict. The four statements were developed from the March and Simon [4] listing of intragroup processes which lead to conflict. The statements were:

- Disagreement among group members over goals and objectives of the group.
- Disagreement concerning how the simulation behaves (i.e., differences between the expected vs. actual results of the group decision in each period).
- Disagreement regarding the impact of a particular decision variable (i.e., advertising, price, etc.).
- The decision making style of one or more group members.

Conflict Resolution Modes

Groups' uses of March and Simon's [4] modes of conflict resolution (problem-solving, persuasion, bargaining, and politicking), were assessed, again via a constant-sum scale, using an adaptation of nine conflict resolution statements developed by Patchen [5], and Renwick [6]. The statements used were:

- a. When differences arose, more information was obtained and/or further analyzed.
- b. In group meetings or other interaction, members played down differences and emphasized common points of view.
- c. The decision was reached through negotiations and bargaining.
- d. When differences arose, there was a search for an immediate position; a compromise was sought.
- e. Problems were brought out into the open and carried out to resolution even though feelings were hurt.
- f. One or more individuals used the power of their knowledge to win acceptance of their point of view.
- g. A survey of opinion was taken and the majority ruled in making the decision.
- h. Group politics played a dominant role in the decision making.
- i. Everyone in the group makes a valuable contribution to decisions.

Respondents were asked to assign 100 points across these statements such that their assignment reflected the importance of each of these approaches to conflict resolution in the operation of their group. Statements a, b, and i are problem-solving styles; d and g are persuasion oriented; c and e are bargaining oriented; and f and h are reflective of politicking.

Boughton's [1] conceptualization of conflict resolution modes as a continuum from interpersonal oriented to confrontation oriented was applied. Point assignments were summed across statements a, b, d, g, and i, to produce an index, which, as it increases, reflects an increasingly interpersonal orientation to group problem-solving. Conversely, as this Index diminishes in size, an increasing confrontation orientation is indicated.

A self-administered questionnaire was presented to each individual group member during the eighth week of a ten week simulation. The timing was arranged to insure that interaction patterns between group members had time to develop. A brief disclosure of the purpose of the survey was included in instructions to the respondents. The introduction provided assurance that the instrument was strictly a means of gathering information, and did not involve evaluation of the individual respondent or of the group.

FINDINGS

Resolution Mode and Performance

The first hypothesis investigated concerns the effects of the group's mode of conflict resolution upon group performance. In the particular simulation used as a research vehicle¹ the figure of merit sought by teams is net marketing contribution (NMC). In order to permit performance data to be compared across the four industries in the simulation, NMC was standardized within each industry to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

A Pearson product moment correlation between NNC and conflict resolution mode yielded $r = .0224$, $n = 20$, $p = .463$. Thus no systematic relationship was found between conflict resolution mode and performance in this instance.

Conflict Level and Resolution Mode

H₂ suggests an association between conflict resolution mode and the level of conflict. While cogent arguments may be made on either side of the issue of which is predictor and which criterion in H₂, for the present purposes it is sufficient to see if there is covariation. Thus begging this issue, resolution mode was regressed upon the measures of conflict level: conflict frequency, and conflict intensity. The resulting regression equation reveals a significant overall linear association ($F = 4.0545$; $df = 2, 17$; $p < .05$), however, the slope associated with conflict frequency is not significant, therefore we can evaluate the association between conflict level and mode of resolution in a bivariate fashion using Pearson product moment correlation. This analysis yields an association between conflict intensity and conflict resolution mode of $r = .5537$, $p < .01$. The association between frequency of conflict and conflict resolution mode approaches an acceptable level of significance with $r = .3262$, $p = .08$. The lack of an association between resolution mode and frequency of conflict is logical, since the frequent occurrence of conflict by itself provides no rationale for abandoning the maintenance of more friendly interpersonal relations.

Conflict Producers and Resolution Mode

The third hypothesis posits an association between the factors which tended to produce conflict and the manner in which conflict was resolved. Groups more frequently in conflict over goals and/or members' decision-making were hypothesized to more frequently employ resolution modes which were confrontation-oriented. A composite variable was calculated for each group by summing the points assigned to the role played by goal differences

¹ See [3].

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and decision-making styles, yielding an index of conflict producers with a potential range of 0-100, with higher scores representing movement away from task factors toward personal factors.

The group scores ranged between 7.5-95.0, with a mean of 39.7. Examining the Pearson product moment correlation between conflict producers and resolution mode, we find $r = .2621$, indicating a weak, non-significant relationship.

DISCUSSION

To summarize the findings of this research, conflict resolution mode was found to be unrelated to either group performance in the simulation or to the antecedents of conflict. Conflict resolution mode was shown to covary with conflict intensity, such that higher levels of conflict tended to be associated with increasingly confrontation-oriented resolution modes.

While performance and conflict resolution mode were not demonstrably associated, it is likely that resolution mode and enjoyment are related, and for that matter, perhaps even resolution mode and the efficacy of the learning process. It may, after all, be supposed that the discomfort occasioned by confrontation may inhibit intragroup exchange of information and tend to produce "specialists" within the group, to the detriment of the individual's exposure to different issues.

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