Task conflict vs relationship conflict

**Task conflict** – or conflict in understanding – occurs when there are perceived disagreements among group members about the content of their decisions and involves differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions.

**Relationship conflict** – or emotional conflict – occurs when there is perceived incompatibility between group members, and typically includes tension, annoyance and animosity between people.

Task conflict is usually associated with effective decisions but relationship conflict is associated with poor decisions.

Why is this?

**Task conflict** encourages greater understanding of the issue being discussed – both in the individuals and in the group as a whole. With a deeper understanding of the issues, group members make better decisions. It is also likely that simply having more voices added to the discussion leads to better quality decisions.

A second effect relates to group members' acceptance of their decisions. Task conflict appears to lead to increased satisfaction with group decisions and desire to remain with the group. This could be because task conflict makes it more likely that members of the group will have more chance to voice their own opinions – and this 'voice' in the discussion is linked to increased emotional acceptance of the decision.

**Relationship conflict** has a negative effect on group satisfaction and commitment, and has a negative effect on the quality of group decisions. This appears to be because this type of conflict limits the ability of the group to process information – group members spend too much time and energy focusing on each other rather than on the group's problems.

In addition, relationship conflict increases stress and anxiety levels of group members, thereby limiting their ability to think clearly and understand the issues they are deciding. Thirdly, relationship conflict encourages antagonistic thinking and misattribution of others' behaviour, for example thinking others have a sinister motive, which creates mutual hostility and escalating conflict.

The problem is that the two types of conflict often run together – groups that experience task conflict also experience relationship conflict.

When does task conflict – which is considered a healthy thing for a decision-making group – contribute to relationship conflict? How can your board have positive conflict and avoid negative conflict?

In a recent study, the researchers tested the idea that the key ingredient might be trust between group members. One idea tested was that task conflict can be misunderstood by group members – i.e. they may take the differences of opinion personally – which leads to relationship conflict.

They found that groups with a low level of trust within the group had a much stronger link between task conflict and relationship conflict than those groups that had a high level of trust. So in low trust groups, it was more likely that differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions – which are essential for good decision making – would be misinterpreted as personal attacks.

There was also a link with loudness of groups’ discussions – more raising of voices during task conflict was more likely to lead to relationship conflict. Perhaps this highlights the importance of the chair's role in keeping board meetings positive and on track.

These results suggest that decision-making groups – such as boards or management committees – should take positive steps to reinforce and maintain trust within the group so that the benefits of task conflict can be realised without the risk of destructive relationship conflict.

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