Purpose of the current study

Team viability is a critical team outcome that has been linked to group performance and team satisfaction. When teams experience conflict they are likely to have lower levels of team viability and are less likely to continue working together in the future. In the present study we sought to better understand why conflict in teams negatively affects team viability by investigating how these processes unfold over time.

Team Conflict

We measured task, relationship, and process conflicts among team members over time. If gone unresolved, team conflict can escalate over time and have a negative impact on team outcomes.

Team Viability

The extent that team members want to continue working together in the future. When team viability is low team members are likely to disband.

Psychological Safety

The shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal sharing and risk taking. In a recent study at Google, this was found to be the most important driver of team success.

Team Empowerment

A type of task motivation that is due to team members’ collective, positive assessments of their organizational tasks. Team empowerment is positively associated with various aspects of team performance.

A Temporal Examination of Conflict and Viability in Teams: Key Mediators

Study Design

Our study looked at how team conflict impacted team viability through psychological safety and team empowerment in early and later stages of team performance episodes. It was predicted that the effects of team conflict on psychological safety, team empowerment, and team viability would be stronger in later stages.

Findings

The results indicated that all three types of conflict had a negative impact on team viability, and that these relationships were at least partially explained by the negative impact that conflict had on both psychological safety and team empowerment. We were able to compare the effect of conflict on team viability through psychological safety and team empowerment across a single team performance episode. Our results showed a substantial increase in effect size estimates in late, as opposed to early, stages of a performance episode for most of the indirect effects.

Conclusions

The negative effects of team conflict were generally worse towards the end of a performance episode. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to not only how conflict affects team outcomes through other team processes and states, but also when conflicts occur in teams.

Recommendations

Based on the current findings we emphasize the importance of managing conflict in teams early on to enhance development of team empowerment and psychological safety, and to avoid poor team outcomes in later stages of performance.

To Resolve Conflicts Early On…

1) Set multiple goals through the performance episode instead of one long-term goal to reduce conflicts, stress, and time pressure near the end of the episode.
2) Take an active approach to managing conflict by encouraging open discussion of conflicting ideas and opinions, and finding mutually beneficial solutions.
3) Bring in a third-party (e.g., professor) to mediate the conflict.

To Increase Team Empowerment…

4) Ensure teams have the autonomy and resources to solve problems and make informed decisions.

To Increase Psychological Safety…

5) Teams can create a team charter at the beginning of their projects to set expectations and norms on which behaviors are acceptable or not. The charter should communicate that all members’ contributions are welcomed and valued.

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The Relationship and Interaction Optimization in Teams (RIOT) lab at Florida Tech, directed by Dr. Jessica L. Wildman, conducts scientific organizational research in the areas of teams, trust, and culture in the workplace. The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of how relationships and interactions between individuals working together can be maximally effective.

Questions about the current study can be directed to fitriotlab@gmail.com.