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Organizational Conflict Navigation: Building a Comprehensive Conflict Management Course

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It is our pleasure to present the *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Appalachian Research in Business Symposium* from the 2017 conference held March 30-31 hosted by the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University. The Appalachian Research in Business Symposium provides a venue for presenting new research, discovering contemporary ideas, and building connections among scholars at Appalachian State University, Eastern Kentucky University, East Tennessee State University, and Western Carolina University.

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ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT NAVIGATION: BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT COURSE

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Introduction

Conflict situations are unfortunately a naturally occurring phenomenon in the workplace. Whether it is an employee not voicing concerns because of fear of retaliation, team members not trusting one another, or companies negotiating terms of an agreement, conflict situations are ubiquitous. Because no organization is immune to conflict, employees must enter the workplace equipped with the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to appropriately navigate such situations. Companies recognize this need and call for graduates to possess this unique set of soft skills (e.g. Buhl, nd), as much efficiency can be lost when employees are focused on conflict and not its resolution. Ultimately, conflict can lead to a number of negative individual, team, and organizational outcomes such as decreased commitment, engagement, motivation, and performance as well as increased turnover. While many employees prefer to avoid conflict altogether due to discomfort with such situations, the "costs" of addressing conflict as soon as it is arises are much lower than the "costs" associated with those potential and likely negative distal outcomes.

Despite its importance and the request by employers for employees to have these KSAs, few business programs offer a course that comprehensively covers this topic. What "conflict management" or "conflict resolution" courses are offered focus singularly on negotiation which is only one type of conflict situation. Despite an extensive search, there is not even an existing textbook that covers conflict management topics beyond negotiation. This leaves employees with recommendations on handling conflict situations that are either invalid and unreliable such as "hit conflict head-on" (Myatt, 2012), or that are unsympathetic such as "maintain a positive outlook" (Harper, 2012). Students graduating and entering the workforce with the capacity to navigate a variety of conflict situations will not only be a more attractive hire to employers, but they will also be more confident in managing conflict situations when they inevitably arise.

In an effort to provide students the opportunity to develop this critical skillset through both study of and practice in navigating conflict, a course titled *Organizational Conflict Navigation* was designed and offered to junior- and senior-level students in a large, Midwestern, regional university during the 17-week Fall semester of 2016. The course also (a) strengthened the business program by offering expert instruction on a challenging yet critical subject matter, and (b)

increased the number of elective course options for students. This paper first outlines the design of the course and then offers professor and student evaluation regarding the course material.

Methodology

The course is designed to be interactive and application-based, covering topics in general conflict navigation as well as one specific context of conflict management: negotiation. Instruction includes the sharing of foundational terms, theories, models, and current research in the many topics included. But because navigating conflict situations from both an employee and manager perspective is a *behavior*, it is critical students be provided the opportunity to demonstrate their transfer of knowledge from thought to action. Thus, nearly every class session involves both lecture and activity.

The course opens with a concentrated focus on specific tools that can be applied universally to manage conflict situations. By building this "toolbox" early in the course, students have many opportunities to apply the tools to a variety of conflict situations presented as the class progresses. For example: How can another employee's perspective truly be understood? How can employees be encouraged to "speak up" in conflict situations? How can a conversation be started and maintained that can lead to conflict resolution? How does trust contribute to more effective working relationships? And how might psychological safety relate to the navigation of conflict situations? A variety of practitioner-based, popular press articles are assigned. The specific tools introduced and examples of relevant readings include:

- Perspective-Taking. Many employees believe that experience with conflict is enough to be successful at navigating complex workplace situations (e.g. Soyer & Hogarth, 2015). The importance of perspective and the dynamics of this behavior are discussed (e.g. Konnikova, 2011).
- Voice. The disadvantages of silence and advantages of voice are considered (e.g. Perlow & Williams, 2003).
- Dialogue. The progress from voice to dialogue as well as the linguistics associated with conversation are examined (e.g. Ehrenfeld, 1999).
- Workplace Trust. Trust violations are often present in conflict situations. The concept of trust and trust repair are studied (e.g. Hurley, 2006).
- Psychological Safety. Employees must believe that they will not encounter emotional or psychological harm if they take appropriate interpersonal risks in the workplace. The process of building a psychologically safe workplace is outlined (e.g. Edmondson, 2011).

Once students are acquainted with the "toolbox," the course moves into a focus on the environmental dynamics of conflict navigation. This portion of the course specifically addresses a gap in the broader conflict management curriculum: as previously stated, most "conflict management" courses offered by business programs cover only negotiation, which is one specific type of conflict situation; yet employers want employees to have the KSAs needed to successfully manage conflict in situations beyond the give-and-take of making agreements. For example: How can an employee manage a boss who objectively is unfair? Should an employee "play" the "politics game?" Can a team be successful if its members just cannot get along? Does organizational culture positively or negatively contribute to conflict? Is there a way to convince employees who resist change initiatives? And what can an employee do to work effectively with someone who insists

on being difficult, rude, unethical, or critical? A variety of practitioner-based, popular press articles are again utilized. The specific situations introduced and examples of relevant readings include:

- Power Dynamics. Formal structures, informal hierarchies, status, and power often instigate and usually perpetuate conflict (e.g. Bartolomé & Laurent, 1986). These issues are presented.
- Organizational Politics. The concept of political skill and the proper, ethical way to play an active, appropriate role in organizational politics is introduced (e.g. McAllister, Ellen, Perrewé, Ferris, & Hirsch, 2015).
- Team Conflict. Relationship conflict—a major source of team conflict and ultimate failure—is studied in-depth (e.g. Edmondson & Smith, 2006).
- Organizational Structure. Companies' contribution to conflict by means of strong, negative organizational culture is discussed (e.g. Neilson, Pasternack, & Van Nuys, 2005).
- Change Resistance. Competing commitments and lack of communication are often to blame for resistance to change initiatives. These, along with the change process, are considered (e.g. Kegan & Lahey, 2001).
- Difficult Working Styles. There are often simple explanations to negative workplace behavior, but sometimes employees make being difficult to work with their goal. Strategies for managing difficult employees, uncivil employees, and workplace bullies are shared (e.g. Sutton, 2007).
- Ethics. A conversation of ethics in the midst of conflict situations is offered (e.g. Badaracco, 2005).

The second half of the course is centered on the specific conflict situation of negotiation. Just as the "toolbox" was applied in the aforementioned environmental dynamics of conflict, it also is functional for management of negotiation situations. But a negotiation situation involves a number of defining characteristics that clearly differentiate it from other conflict situations. The mere magnitude of literature directed at the subject is evidence of this. As such, it deserves more time and attention as well as use of a text that provides foundational guidance to students who have never formally studied this activity. While nearly every academic publisher offers texts on the subject, this course uses a customized version of *Essentials of Negotiation* (Lewicki, Barry, & Saunders, 2016), a popular text and one that balances academic rigor with useful practice. (This allows selection of particular chapters instead of the full text, thus lowering the purchase price for students.) This portion of the course is designed such that on a weekly basis, students are introduced to a concept in negotiation via lecture, offered a short, in-class, impromptu negotiation activity, and then assigned the preparation for a larger role play negotiation that is carried out the next class session. The specific topics in negotiation introduced, following the aforementioned *Essentials* text, include:

- Negotiation Basics.
- Distributive Negotiation.
- Integrative Negotiation.
- Communication in Negotiation.
- Finding and Using Power in Negotiation.
- Complex Relationship Negotiation.
- Multiparty and Team Negotiation.

During the course, feedback is provided to students through various assessments. The first half of the course (i.e. introduction of "tools" and environmental dynamics) requires the following: weekly readings from Harvard Business Review articles and other credible, practitioner-based sources; weekly online, open-article and open-note quizzes to ensure completion of reading and understanding of concepts; and an essay-format midterm exam. The second half of the course uses different assessment tools necessitated by the nature of negotiation needing much practice for skillset cultivation: negotiation role play case preparations are due for large, in-class negotiation activities; a negotiation journal is written by students focusing on tools/concepts attempted, mistakes made, insights gained, emotions encountered, and future goals set, all in reaction to each negotiation activity; and a final exam tests material mastered throughout the entire course. Note that students are never graded on whether they "win" or "lose" a negotiation. Instead, the classroom environment is designed to be a safe learning space in which students are encouraged to try new concepts and experience their effects. Because negotiation, in particular—and the management of conflict situations, in general—require practice for skill development, students are evaluated on their learning process and other outcome variables rather than on such a dichotomous result.

Results and Implications

Insight can be gained into the success of the class by examining both professor and student perspectives. Speaking from the first, all learning objectives for the course were achieved: by the end of the course, students were able to (a) recognize and explain causes of conflict in organizations; (b) prepare and apply methods of managing conflict in organizations, (c) develop and practice the skillset required to be successful in negotiation situations, (d) improve oral argument skills, and (e) demonstrate professionalism in thought, action, and communication. In fact, the professor is confident the course material strengthened students' professionalism, as students can now use a skillset prepared by extended study and practice based in valid and reliable research for management of challenging situations instead of relying on unstable emotions. Student performance was impressive, and unsolicited student comments were positive throughout the semester.

Speaking from the second, students were provided an opportunity at the midterm of the course to participate in an optional, anonymous survey that took approximately five minutes to complete. Eight out of thirty students chose to take advantage of this opportunity, resulting in a 27% response rate. A series of questions was asked regarding class time, assignments, access to resources, and each student's personal approach to class, with responses provided on a six-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. In reference to class time, 100% of students agreed to some extent (i.e. *Slightly Agreed*, *Agreed*, or *Strongly Agreed*) that they learned something new each time they attended class, and 88% of students agreed to some extent that they enjoyed attending class and were engaged during class. When asked about assignments, 100% of students agreed to some extent that the topics covered in the course were relevant to navigating conflict in the workplace and would be applied to their future career. Ultimately, 100% of students *Agreed* or *Strongly Agreed* that the course should continue to be offered in the future. Students were given the opportunity, too, to provide open-ended comments about what should be continued when the class was taught again. Comments included "the content was the best," "I really liked the material since it's different," and "the entire class is challenging yet fun."

This course was successful in its first semester offered. As the course is offered again in the future, more formal feedback needs to be collected so that refinements can be made to achieve the optimal student experience.

Conclusion

No matter the industry, company, or department, all employees will experience conflict in the workplace. For career success, one absolutely must be able to recognize and navigate conflict situations, promote functional conflict, and suppress dysfunctional conflict. Employers are demanding students possess the soft skill of conflict management upon entering the workforce, yet business programs are not providing students the opportunity to develop such a skillset. This course was designed to fill this gap and cover all aspects of conflict situations, including conflict management tools, environmental dynamics of conflict, and negotiation. With its comprehensive design, engaging lectures, interesting readings, and many opportunities for practice and application of concepts, this course was successful in its first offering.

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