Constructively Managing Conflicts in Organizations

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Abstract

Researchers have used various concepts to understand the conditions
and dynamics by which conflict can be managed constructively. This
review proposes that the variety of terms obscures consistent findings
that open-minded discussions in which protagonists freely express
their own views, listen and understand opposing ones, and then in-
tegrate them promote constructive conflict. Studies from several tra-
ditions also suggest that mutual benefit relationships are critical
antecedents for open-minded discussion. This integration of research
findings identifies the skills and relationships that can help managers
and employees deal with their increasingly complex conflicts. Re-
search is needed to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of
open-minded discussion and the conditions that promote it as well
as when open-mindedness is inappropriate. Training studies can test
and show how the model of open-minded discussion supported by
mutual benefit relationships can be applied in cross-cultural and other
challenging settings.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict pervades organizations. Executives, managers, supervisors, and employees all confront conflict over issues from company direction to the distribution of resources to how they relate to each other. Indeed, teamwork is incredibly useful in organizations in large part because it is a vehicle for promoting open discussion of diverse perspectives and integrating them into viable solutions.

Conflict management research recognizes that conflicts are constructive or destructive as well as inevitable (De Dreu & Gelfand 2008, Deutsch et al. 2014). It addresses the central intellectual and practical challenge of identifying how and when managers and employees can discuss and deal with their conflicts for the benefit of the organization and themselves. Such research recognizes that at times conflicts should be developed and stimulated as well as resolved.

Given the many forms and situations in which conflict occurs, it is not surprising that researchers have developed various theoretical frameworks for conflict. Indeed, there is conflict over the study of conflict management. Organizational researchers have developed extensive knowledge using the theoretical frameworks of conflict management styles (Rahim 1983, 1995; Thomas 1976; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff 1990), integrative negotiations (Bazerman & Neale 1994, Brett 2000, Brett et al. 1998, Fisher et al. 2006, Fisher & Ury 1981, Pruitt et al. 1983), constructive controversy (Deutsch 1973; Johnson et al. 2014; Tjosvold 1985, 1998), and task and relationship conflict (De Dreu & Weingart 2003; Jehn 1995, 1997). These frameworks have their own historical and theoretical roots as well as terminologies.

However, Frank Schmidt (Le et al. 2009, 2010) has recently warned us about concept proliferation, in which different labels for similar phenomena obscure the consistent findings needed to develop our understanding and guide practice. This article integrates various frameworks to develop an elegant model of constructive conflict management in organizations. We argue that there is considerable agreement on the contributors to constructive conflict, although this consensus is obscured by the use of different concepts and terms. We propose that research from several traditions indicates that open-minded discussion is the foundation of constructive conflict. Constructive conflict participants have been found to express their own diverse ideas directly to each other, but they also consider and understand each other's ideas. This dialogue is the basis for developing high-quality solutions as well as strengthening relationships. Finding support for the value of open-minded discussion, researchers have used such terms as problem solving (Pruitt & Carnevale 1993, Pruitt & Lewis 1975) and motivated information processing (De Dreu 2007; De Dreu et al. 2000b, 2008) to describe this discussion.

This article's model identifies mutual benefit relationships as the key underlying condition that helps managers and employees discuss their diverse ideas open-mindedly. In such relationships, the protagonists are committed to helping each other achieve their respective goals. Conflict researchers have described this foundation using such terms as dual concerns (Pruitt & Carnevale 1993, Pruitt & Rubin 1986), prosocial motivation (De Dreu et al. 2000a,b), and cooperative goals (Deutsch 1973) (see **Figure 1** for a diagram of the article's argument).

This article is divided into seven sections: The first shows that defining conflict as incompatible activities does not confound conflict with competition as many traditional definitions have done. The second section argues that prominent approaches to understanding conflict management in organizations have found that open-minded discussion contributes a great deal to constructive conflict. The third section shows that conflict researchers have proposed that mutual benefit relationships are a foundation of open-minded discussion. The fourth section uses research on the dynamics of open-minded discussion to identify the skills and norms managers and employees need to manage conflict constructively. The fifth section uses research to outline ways to develop
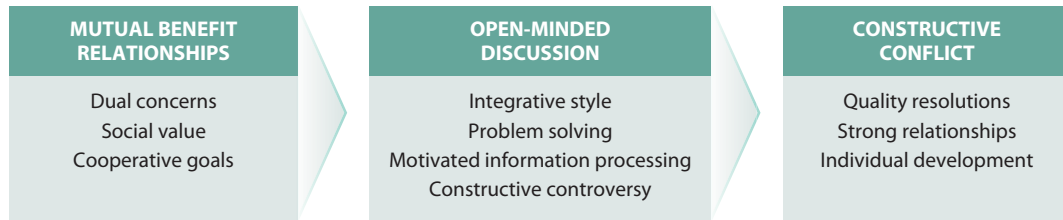
MUTUAL BENEFIT RELATIONSHIPS	OPEN-MINDED DISCUSSION	CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT
Dual concerns Social value Cooperative goals	Integrative style Problem solving Motivated information processing Constructive controversy	Quality resolutions Strong relationships Individual development

Figure 1

The authors' argument of how conflict in organizations can be constructively managed

mutual benefit relationships. In light of the fact that managing conflict increasingly involves protagonists from diverse cultures, the sixth section describes research that supports the application of the article's model to such situations. The last section identifies future research that can develop and extend the arguments presented here.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

In this article, we consider interpersonal conflict, in which two or more individuals engage in incompatible activities. Conflict management occurs when protagonists are aware of a conflict and work to handle it. We do not directly consider intrapersonal conflict, which involves incompatibility within one person—for example, individuals may have internal dialogues in which their moral values and their desires suggest opposing actions.

Defining Conflict

Confounded definitions of interpersonal conflict have obstructed effective organizational research and practice. Conflict has traditionally been defined in terms of opposing interests involving scarce resources, goal divergence, and frustration (e.g., Pondy 1967). However, people without opposing interests not only can but often do have conflicts. Team members all highly committed to producing a high-quality report can still disagree about the form and length of the report, how they should divide the work, and how they should distribute the benefits of its completion. These conflicts have to do not with opposing interests, but with how to effectively accomplish the common interest of producing a quality report.

Defining conflict in terms of opposing interests confounds conflict with competition, which is defined as involving incompatible goals (Deutsch 1973). Practitioners and researchers alike often assume that conflict is competitive. In competitive conflict, rather than trying to learn whether there are opposing goals, protagonists quickly conclude that their interests are incompatible such that only one can "win" the conflict at the others' expense. But not all conflict is competitive.

The confounding of conflict with competition highlights the difficulties associated with using the term conflict in our measures as well as in our discussions. For example, survey measures of task and relationship conflict include the term "conflict" unmodified by adjectives. Given that many people assume that conflict is competitive, any item using the term conflict without any further explanation is then measuring competition as well as conflict. Using the term conflict without explaining it may well contribute to the general finding that task as well as relationship conflict measures are negatively related to group performance (De Dreu & Weingart 2003). Indeed, direct evidence suggests that task and relationship conflict measures are confounded with competition measures (Tjosvold et al. 2006b). Teams that had high scores on relationship and task

conflict measures had high scores on the measure of competitive, win–lose conflict and low scores on the measure of the cooperative approach to dealing with conflict; teams with high scores on task and relationship conflict were also unproductive.

This article defines conflict as incompatible activities, that is, the actions of one person ("the self") interfere, obstruct, or in some way get in the way of the actions of another ("the other") (Deutsch 1973, Roloff 1987). Incompatible activities occur in both cooperative and competitive contexts. Studies have documented that protagonists' beliefs about whether their goals are cooperative or competitive affect how they manage conflict.

Constructive Conflict

Constructive conflict occurs when people conclude that the benefits from the conflict outweigh the incurred costs (Deutsch 1973). The idea that conflict can be productive, as opposed to destructive at all times, is much more than a belief or an ideology. Research using a variety of theoretical frameworks has demonstrated that conflict can actually affect whether managers and employees accomplish a wide range of important tasks (Tjosvold 2007). These studies also indicate that the benefits of conflict are much more likely to arise when the conflicts are discussed openly and skillfully.

For example, studies suggest that conflict can contribute to the overall direction and success of organizations. Top management teams that disagreed with each other were more entrepreneurial in developing strategy (Li & Li 2009). Top management teams that relied on open, mutual benefit discussion of their conflicts rather than competitive or avoiding strategies worked together to develop firms that were more innovative and successful in the marketplace (G. Chen et al. 2005, Schotter & Beamish 2011). Indeed, the value of conflict seems to be appreciated even in the corporate governance context. Adopting government regulations that strengthened the capacity of shareholders to voice their conflicts boosted shareholder value (Campbell et al. 2012).

The contribution of conflict to decision making has been documented by a range of scholars (Amason 1996, Gruenfeld 1995, Mason & Mitroff 1981, Peterson & Nemeth 1996, Schweiger et al. 1986). Through conflict, conventional thinking is challenged, threats and opportunities identified, and new solutions forged. Discussing opposing views gives teams the confidence to take calculated risks so that they also are prepared to recover from their mistakes; with this preparation, they innovate (Tjosvold & Yu 2007).

Despite widespread beliefs that conflict's benefits are limited to task issues, studies indicate that open-minded discussions of anger can strengthen relationships and restore respect (Gibson & Callister 2010, Tjosvold 2002, Tjosvold & Su 2007, Van Kleef et al. 2004). In such discussions, an angered person communicates a belief that he or she has been frustrated by the other intentionally and without justification, as well as the reasoning behind that belief. The discussants are then able to clarify their intentions and make amends if there was a misunderstanding. In understanding both that the frustration was not intentional and that it will not be repeated and in receiving an apology, the angered person can develop confidence that similar incidents are less likely and continued anger less warranted. Such open-minded discussions are useful for managing relationship conflict as well as task conflict.

Beyond conflict management's clear contribution to team and organizational success (Deutsch et al. 2014, De Dreu & Gelfand 2008), can it be constructive for individuals as well? The answer appears to be yes. Individuals who resolve conflicts openly and constructively have been found to feel more connected to others at work (Tjosvold et al. 2008). Confronting individuals about paradoxes—that is, apparently opposing ideas that might be reconciled—can also create internal conflicts that in turn increase the creativity of individuals (Miron-Spektor et al. 2011). Directly

discussing opposing views challenges people's initial positions, strengthens curiosity, stimulates exploration through asking questions, and fosters actual understanding of opposing positions (Tjosvold & Johnson 1977, 1978). Developmental psychologists have long theorized that this accurate perspective taking stimulates cognitive and emotional development (Kohlberg 1969).

DISCUSSING CONFLICTS CONSTRUCTIVELY

Researchers recognize the value of the contingency approach, which holds that managers and employees should have alternative ways to deal with a conflict so that they can select the one most useful and appropriate in their situation (Rahim 1992, Thomas 1976). Researchers also agree that some approaches are more likely to be constructive and some destructive under a wide range of conditions (De Dreu & Gelfand 2008, Deutsch et al. 2014). Avoiding discussion about conflict, though very popular and useful in some circumstances, is widely regarded as ineffectual as a general approach and potentially very damaging (De Dreu & Van Vianen 2001, Friedman et al. 2006, Liu et al. 2009, Lovelace et al. 2001, Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010). Conflicts seldom disappear by themselves and often fester and grow without direct discussion and action (Bacon & Blyton 2007, Eisenhardt et al. 1997, Nemeth & Owens 1996). In this section, we argue that, considered together, studies conducted using different theoretical frameworks indicate that open-minded discussion between protagonists results in constructive outcomes in many situations, but of course not all.

Defining Open-Minded Discussion

Open-mindedness is the willingness to actively search for evidence against one's favored beliefs and ideas and to weigh such evidence impartially and fully (Baker & Sinkula 1999, Cegarra-Navarro & Sánchez-Polo 2011, Mitchell et al. 2009). Open-minded discussion occurs when people work together to understand each other's ideas and positions, impartially consider each other's reasoning for these positions, and seek to integrate their ideas into mutually acceptable solutions (see **Figure 2**). Evidence indicates that these aspects of open-mindedness are reinforcing (Tjosvold 1990, Tjosvold et al. 1992, Tjosvold & Halco 1992).

Open-mindedness in conflict is inherently interpersonal, as people are acting and reacting to each other. It takes two to have a conflict, and it takes two to manage that conflict. Open-mindedness is generally needed by all protagonists for conflict to be constructive. Evidence suggests that protagonists develop similar levels of open-mindedness; one protagonist's open-mindedness encourages the
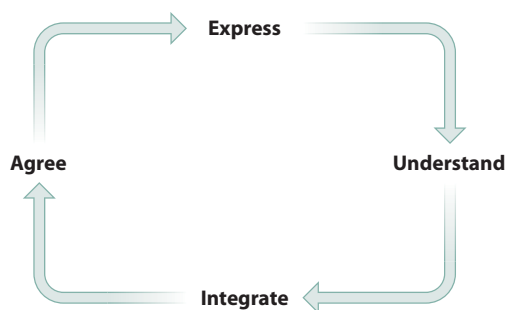

Figure 2

The cycle of open-minded discussion

other(s) to be similarly open (Tjosvold 1990, Tjosvold et al. 1992, Tjosvold & Halco 1992). Although one protagonist can take bold, persistent, and concerted actions to discuss conflict open-mindedly, conflicts are more likely to be constructively managed when all protagonists discuss their views directly and integrate them into solutions.

It may seem that recent theorizing that the type of conflict affects whether addressing conflict is constructive or destructive challenges the central role of open-minded discussion. Specifically, researchers have proposed that conflicts over tasks contribute to group performance, whereas relationship conflicts disrupt it (Jehn 1997, Jehn et al. 2008). The data, however, are inconsistent, as both types of conflict have often been found to predict low team performance (Choi & Sy 2010, De Dreu & Weingart 2003).

Studies have documented that it is not just the type of conflict that determines whether it is constructive or destructive. For example, task conflict is more apt to be productive when it is moderate in amount, when it is not closely related to relationship conflict, and when the outcomes measured are financial performance and decision quality rather than overall performance (De Dreu 2006, De Wit et al. 2012, Farh et al. 2010, Mooney et al. 2007, Shaw et al. 2011).

Recent studies also provide direct evidence that open-minded discussions contribute to making task conflict constructive (Jiang et al. 2012, Tekleab et al. 2009). Teams with members with high levels of open-mindedness had constructive task conflicts (Bradley et al. 2013, De Jong et al. 2013). Overall, evidence indicates that open-minded discussion contributes to making both relationship and task conflict constructive (Gibson & Callister 2010, Lau & Cobb 2010, Tjosvold 2002, Tjosvold & Su 2007).

Findings on Open-Minded Discussion

Researchers have used various terms to characterize the nature of discussions that result in constructive outcomes. These terms have their own historical roots, emphasize different aspects of interaction, and provide various ways to measure and operationalize the interaction. We propose that, although these terms are not identical, their differences should not obscure the substantial agreement among conflict researchers that open-minded discussion contributes to resolving conflicts in many situations. Indeed, further examining the operations of these terms suggests the similarity of the concepts and their emphasis on open-minded discussion.

Considerable research supports open-minded discussion being a foundation for developing constructive conflict (**Table 1**). Integrative negotiation research has examined the conditions under which bargainers develop new options superior for both parties to those previously under consideration (Follett 1940). Walton & McKersie (1965) proposed that this integration is more likely when protagonists consider several issues simultaneously, consider the issues as problems to be solved, freely exchange accurate and credible information about their interests, avoid win-lose behaviors, and argue their own positions unless and until they are convinced otherwise.

Dean Pruitt and other researchers tested these ideas experimentally and concluded that problem-solving interaction characterized by full information exchange results in integrative, mutually beneficial solutions (Pruitt & Carnevale 1993, Pruitt et al. 1983, Pruitt & Lewis 1975). They operationalized this problem-solving interaction as asking for valid information, for example through requesting for information about the other bargainer's interests and giving truthful information, showing interest in the other's welfare, and proposing mutual concessions. Integrated negotiators challenge each other's original ideas, delve into these positions to identify each other's underlying interests, endure the uncertainty of not finding a quick solution, and are only satisfied with solutions that promote the interests of all. This problem solving and exchange of information,

Table 1 Open-minded discussion

Term for constructive interaction	Content	
Integrative negotiation	Researchers	Pruitt & Carnevale (1993), Pruitt et al. (1983), Pruitt & Lewis (1975)
	Conceptual definition	Defined as the problem-solving, creative process by which bargainers discover better options and reach agreement by a series of mutual exchanges.
	Operational definition	Operationalized as asking for valid information, giving truthful information, showing concern in the other bargainer's welfare, proposing mutual concessions, and reaching solutions that promote the interests of all.
Motivated information processing	Researchers	De Dreu (2007), De Dreu et al. (2000, 2008)
	Conceptual definition	Defined as thorough, systematic processing of information that can release fixed-pie perceptions during negotiation and result in accurate perceptions of the other's pay-offs and, ultimately, in integrative agreements.
	Operational definition	Measured in terms of problem solving and information exchange, such as exchanging preferences and priorities information, making positional commitments, and using persuasive arguments to bolster one's own position.
Integrative conflict management style	Researchers	Rahim (1983, 1995), Thomas (1976), Van de Vliert & Kabanoff (1990)
	Conceptual definition	Defined in terms of collaboration between parties to reach a solution acceptable to both parties.
	Operational definition	Measured with openness, exchange of information, and examination of differences to reach mutually beneficial solutions. An example is for one to investigate an issue with the other to find a solution acceptable to both.
Behavioral integration	Researchers	Hambrick (1994, 1997, 2007), Li & Hambrick (2005)
	Conceptual definition	Defined as mutual and collective interaction that includes quantity and quality of information exchange, collaborative behavior, and joint decision making.
	Operational definition	Operationalized as having a voice in major decisions, open and fluid communications, collectively exchanging points of view, and frequently sharing experience and expertise.
Integrative complexity	Researchers	Lerner & Tetlock (1999), Peterson et al. (1998), Wong et al. (2011)
	Conceptual definition	Defined as seeing problems in multidimensional ways and changing one's mind in response to new evidence.
	Operational definition	Measured through the group dynamics Q-sort (GDQ) measure of intellectual flexibility, a construct analogous to integrative complexity. An example item is "the group has a flexible multidimensional world view."
Constructive controversy	Researchers	Johnson et al. (2000, 2006), Tjosvold (1985)
	Conceptual definition	Defined as the open-minded discussion of conflicting perspectives for mutual benefit. Controversy occurs when protagonists express their opposing ideas that at least temporarily obstruct resolving issues.
	Operational definition	Constructive controversy is measured by such items as expressing views directly to each other, listening carefully to each other's opinions, trying to understand each other's concerns, and using opposing views to understand the problem better.

we argue, constitute open-minded discussion between protagonists, with particular emphasis on understanding each other's interests and finding solutions to promote them.

De Dreu and colleagues have drawn upon integrative negotiation research to develop the motivated information processing approach (De Dreu 2007; De Dreu et al. 2000a, 2008). This research also proposes and measures constructive interaction in conflict in terms of problem solving and information exchange. Engaging in thorough, systematic processing of information induced protagonists to question the perception that any one protagonist could achieve his or her interests only if the others could not achieve theirs; challenging this trade-off in turn resulted in more accurate assessments and more integrative agreements (De Dreu et al. 2000a,b).

Out of the five approaches to dealing with conflict (Rahim 1983, 1995; Thomas 1976; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff 1990), all of which can be useful under the right circumstances, the integrative conflict management style, at times supplemented with other styles, is constructive under the widest range of conditions (Van de Vliert et al. 1995, 1999). Research on integrative conflict management also indicates that being open with one's own views as well as to those of the others and integrating the two contribute to constructive conflict (Pruitt & Carnevale 1993).

Hambrick and colleagues found that behavioral integration resolved conflicts in top management teams and at other strategic levels (Hambrick 1994, 1997, 2007; Li & Hambrick 2005). Behavior integration has been measured through a survey with questions about mutual and collective interaction, joint decision making, and resource and information sharing. Like integrative negotiation, behavior integration is also characterized by open-minded discussion.

Philip Tetlock and colleagues theorized that the personality variable of integrative complexity helps individuals develop quality solutions for contentious decisions (Lerner & Tetlock 1999, Tetlock et al. 1994, Wong et al. 2011). Individuals with high levels of integrative complexity are open to divergent views and able to reconcile contradictions. They can differentiate potential solutions in contrast to thinking in rigid, good–bad terms, and they can integrate positions by reconciling conflicting values. Teams with high levels of integrative complexity view problems in multidimensional ways, change their position in response to new evidence, resolve conflicting views, and develop quality solutions (Peterson et al. 1998). Research on the personality variable of low need for closure also suggests that individuals predisposed to open-mindedness make effective decisions on complex issues (Giacomantonio et al. 2011).

Research has also found that constructive controversy contributes to resolving conflicts within and between organizations (Johnson et al. 2014, Tjosvold 1985). Like conflict more generally, controversy involves incompatible actions—in this case, the proposal and reconciliation of opposing ideas—that temporarily disrupt reaching a resolution. Constructive controversy studies also support the idea that open-minded discussion contributes to effective conflict management.

RELATIONSHIPS FOR OPEN-MINDED DISCUSSION

When do protagonists discuss their conflicts open-mindedly? Researchers have theorized that the nature of the relationships between protagonists has a profound impact on their mutual motivation to discuss conflicts open-mindedly. Open-minded discussions occur when both participants are motivated to work together to manage their conflicts constructively.

Researchers have developed the dual concern model, prosocial and proself social motivation, and cooperative goals as theoretical perspectives for understanding these facilitative relationships (De Dreu et al. 2000b, Deutsch 1973, Pruitt & Rubin 1986, Rahim & Bonoma 1979). In this section, we argue that these different terms obscure fundamental agreement about the nature of the facilitative relationships. Indeed, all of these perspectives have identified commitment to mutual benefit as the foundation of open-minded discussion.

Managers and employees of course do not always discuss their differences open-mindedly, and according to the contingency perspective, under certain conditions it would be inappropriate and dysfunctional to do so. Here, we describe the conceptual and operational definitions of prominent approaches to understanding relationships that promote open-minded discussion (**Table 2**). These research approaches agree that mutual benefit relationships in which protagonists are committed to the others' interests as well as their own induce open-minded discussion and constructive conflict.

Dual Concerns Model

Thomas (1976, 1992), Rahim & Bonoma (1979), and Rahim (1983, 1992) built upon Blake & Mouton's (1964) managerial grid to develop the dual concerns model, which identifies styles of conflict management based on two dimensions: concern for self and concern for the others. The

Table 2 Mutual benefit relationships

Term for relationship		Content
Dual concerns	Researchers	Pruitt & Carnevale (1993), Pruitt et al. (1983), Pruitt & Rubin (1986), Rahim (1983, 1992), Rahim & Bonoma (1979), Thomas (1976), Van de Vliert & Kabanoff (1990)
	Conceptual definition	Combining the concern-for-self dimension (the extent to which people attempt to satisfy their own interests) and concern-for-the-other dimension (the extent to which people want to satisfy the interests of the others) yields the five recognized conflict management styles. Integrative bargaining researchers define the dual concerns model as involving protagonists who are committed to the interests of their counterparts as well as themselves.
	Operational definition	Own (or self) concern is measured by such items as the protagonist's resistance to yielding. Other-concern is measured by such items as the importance a protagonist places on the other's outcomes.
Social value motivation	Researchers	De Dreu & Boles (1998), De Dreu & McCusker (1997), Messick & McClintock (1968), Van Lange (1999)
	Conceptual definition	Defined as preferences with respect to the other's outcomes, such that prosocial, egoistic, and competitive negotiators differ in attaching a positive, zero, or negative weight, respectively, to the other's outcomes.
	Operational definition	A decomposed game measure of social value orientation involves the choices protagonists make about resolutions that maximize joint outcomes, promote the outcomes for the self, and maximize the differences between the other and the self.
Theory of cooperation and competition	Researchers	Deutsch (1948,1973), Tjosvold (1984, 1998)
	Conceptual definition	The extent to which protagonists believe that their goals are cooperative (i.e., positively related), competitive (i.e., negatively related), or independent affects their interaction in conflict.
	Operational definition	Cooperative goals are measured by such items as the extent to which protagonists believe that their goals are compatible and that they can both succeed.

first dimension describes the extent to which people attempt to satisfy their own interests. The second describes the extent to which people want to satisfy the interests of the others (Rahim & Bonoma 1979). Combining the two dimensions yields the five conflict management styles of integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating, and avoiding (Psenicka & Rahim 1989, Rahim & Psenicka 1984, Ruble & Thomas 1976, Van de Vliert & Kabanoff 1990).

Dean Pruitt and other integrative negotiation researchers have also contributed to the development of the dual concerns model (Pruitt & Carnevale 1993, Pruitt et al. 1983, Pruitt & Rubin 1986). Protagonists committed to the interests of the others as well as themselves discuss conflict open-mindedly, and they are satisfied only with solutions that promote the interests of all parties. Dual concerns exist when protagonists are both concerned about their own interests and outcomes, that is, they are willing to assert themselves to get what they want, and motivated to promote their counterparts' interests and outcomes.

Experiments have induced dual concerns using various methods (Ben-Yoav & Pruitt 1984, Pruitt et al. 1983). Resistance to yielding is thought to reflect and to be a measure of self-concern (Pruitt 1983). Protagonists developed high concern for self when they were led to believe that their own constituent group would decide how much they would be paid for their negotiations (Benton & Druckman 1973, Klimoski & Ash 1974). They developed a high concern for the others when they were led to believe that they would participate in another study with the other people. Interpersonal attraction (Clark & Mills 1979), common group identity (Hatton 1967), and positive mood (Isen & Levin 1972) can strengthen a commitment to the others' concerns. These studies also support the argument that dual concerns promote open-minded interaction and constructive conflict.

Prosocial Motivation

Researchers have used motivational and social value orientation theory (Messick & McClintock 1968) to understand the impact of relationships on constructive conflict (De Dreu et al. 2000a,b; De Dreu & Van Lange 1995). Social motives refer to preferences with respect to the others' outcomes; specifically, prosocial, proself (egoistical), and competitive negotiators differ by attaching a positive, zero, or negative weight to the others' outcomes, respectively (e.g., De Dreu & Boles 1998, De Dreu & McCusker 1997, Van Lange 1999).

Social motives are rooted in individual differences but also can characterize interaction (Kelley & Schenitzki 1972, McClintock 1977, Messick & McClintock 1968, Van Lange & Kuhlman 1994). These motivations are often measured as a personality difference through decomposed games, in which participants make choices about their preferences for dividing outcomes between themselves and their protagonists. Protagonists are classified as prosocial if they choose options that maximize joint outcomes, as proself if they select options in which their own outcomes are higher than those of the others, and as competitive if they choose options that maximize the differences between the two, that is, their own outcomes are much better than the others'. Prosocial motivation can also be measured by survey questions such as whether one believes that making a positive impact on the others is valuable to the self (Grant 2008, Grant & Sumanth 2009). Prosocial motivation develops the open-minded exchange of information that results in constructive conflict (De Dreu et al. 2000a,b; Nauta et al. 2002).

Theory of Cooperation and Competition

Constructive controversy research has identified cooperative goals as an important condition leading to open-minded discussion. Deutsch (1948, 1973) theorized that the way in which people believe their goals are related affects their interaction and thus their outcomes. They can conclude that their goals are cooperative (positively related), competitive (negatively related), or independent.

When people have cooperative goals, as one of them moves toward attaining goals, this progression helps the others achieve their goals as well. When people have competitive goals, their goals are negatively related, and only one of the protagonists can succeed in the interaction. When goals are independent, one person's success neither benefits nor harms the others' successes.

Deutsch (1973) further proposed that cooperative goals can explain why some protagonists are able to manage their conflicts constructively. Both survey and experimental studies confirm that with cooperative goals, managers and employees discuss their differences directly and open-mindedly (Alper et al. 1998, Poon et al. 2001, Schei & Rognes 2004, Tjosvold 1988). Teams are considered cooperative if members believe that their goals are compatible (Alper et al. 1998); they are considered competitive if members favor their own goals rather than the goals of the others (Alper et al. 1998); and they are considered independent if members believe that one member's success is unrelated to the success of their teammates (Alper et al. 1998). Competitive and independent goals have been found to lead to conflict avoidance, to conflict escalation, or to both (Alper et al. 2000; Tjosvold et al. 2001). Protagonists with cooperative goals promote each other's goals because doing so is to their own advantage.

Researchers have used the concepts of dual concerns, prosocial motivation, and cooperative goals to understand the antecedents of open-minded discussion of conflict. We propose that these perspectives together provide powerful evidence that mutual benefit relationships are the foundation of open-minded discussion and constructive conflict.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: DEVELOPING OPEN-MINDED DISCUSSION

To promote constructive conflict, managers and employees can be encouraged to develop skills and procedures that facilitate open-minded discussion. However, open-minded discussion is a complex and demanding aspiration for protagonists. In addition to measuring open-minded discussion as a whole and documenting its antecedents and consequences, researchers have examined this discussion itself to clarify how managers and employees can discuss conflicts open-mindedly. This research has theorized and developed evidence of four mutually reinforcing aspects of open-minded discussion: developing and expressing one's own ideas, questioning and understanding other views, integrating and creating new ideas, and agreeing to and implementing solutions (Johnson et al. 2014, Tjosvold 1985). These aspects are presented here in a time sequence phase, but it is understood that these aspects are reiterative, with protagonists moving back and forth among them. They highlight both the challenges of discussing conflicts open-mindedly and how managers and employees can develop their skills to discuss conflict constructively.

Developing and Expressing One's Own Views

Expressing one's own needs, feelings, and ideas contributes to open-minded discussion. It provides valuable information about protagonists' expectations for the conflict and its resolution. In order to develop a resolution that they all believe is mutually beneficial and constructive, protagonists need to know what each of the others wants and believes is valuable.

To strengthen expression of their own positions, managers and employees can learn to research their position, present the best case they can for it, and defend it vigorously. They can learn to be effective advocates and practice to be effective devil's advocates, critically analyzing opposing positions and pointing out weaknesses and flaws in evidence and logic. They can learn to refute opposing views to highlight the strength of their own position.

Although it is often thought that conflicts are easier to manage if protagonists are not pushy or demanding, conflict researchers argue that not knowing each other's views can frustrate conflict

resolution (Pruitt & Rubin 1986). However, expressing one's own position needs to be supplemented with open-mindedness to the others' positions.

Questioning and Understanding Other Views

Conflict is an opportunity to know opposing positions as well as to develop and express one's own. Listening and understanding opposing views as well as defending one's own makes discussing conflicts more challenging but also more rewarding.

Managers and employees can point out weaknesses in each other's arguments to encourage better development and expression of positions by finding more evidence and strengthening their reasoning. They can also learn both to become less adamant that their original positions are adequate and complete and to seek to understand opposing views. They can act on their curiosity by asking questions to gain more information about the logic and evidence supporting the opposing view (Tjosvold & Johnson 1977, 1978).

Role reversal asks protagonists to put themselves in another's shoes and to present the opposing arguments as comprehensively and convincingly as they can (Johnson 1967, 1971b). Such exercises can demonstrate that the protagonists are listening to each other as well as deepening their understanding of opposing positions (Johnson 1971a).

Integrating and Creating Solutions

The creation of new alternatives lays the foundations for genuine agreement about a solution that the protagonists can accept and implement. Open-minded discussion helps protagonists develop and evaluate alternative resolutions so that they can implement the one they believe is most effective. It also may allow them to develop more confidence in their relationships, as they will have exchanged views directly and shown that they are trying to understand and integrate each other's ideas so that all may benefit.

Protagonists may, however, have to engage in repeated discussions to reach an agreement, or indeed they may be unable to create a solution that is mutually acceptable. For example, it is possible that they will be unconvinced that the evidence warrants modifying their original positions. They may have to continue to discuss their opposing views until they develop a mutually beneficial resolution.

Agreeing to and Implementing Solutions

Open-minded discussion has been found to contribute to full, effective participation and mutual influence (Tjosvold 1987, Tjosvold & Field 1983). Laboratory and field experiments have shown that individuals participating in controversies tend to reach agreement and carry out that agreement (Richter & Tjosvold 1980, Tjosvold & Deemer 1980).

Teams and organizations can develop supportive norms and patterns to help managers and employees be open with their ideas and to other views and integrate them. Managers and employees can learn to seek the best reasoned judgment, instead of focusing on "winning"; to criticize ideas, not people; to listen and learn everyone's positions, even if they do not agree with them; to differentiate positions before trying to integrate them; and to change their minds when logically persuaded to do so.

Teams and organizations should also encourage interpersonal relationships within which managers and employees can apply open-mindedness skills. The next section examines how to promote these mutual benefit relationships.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: DEVELOPING MUTUAL BENEFIT RELATIONSHIPS

Conflict researchers have found that protagonists' commitment to promoting each other's outcomes is a foundation for open-minded discussion (Johnson et al. 2014). These findings indicate that to strengthen conflict management capabilities, protagonists should be aware of how the conflict can be resolved in ways that promote their own interests, the interests of the others, and, perhaps most critically, the two simultaneously.

One's Own Interests

Although it is commonly thought that conflicts are ineffectively managed because people are too self-centered and focused on their own goals, researchers have found that protagonists who see how the conflict can further their own interests are willing to engage and persist in discussing and negotiating the conflict. Without this commitment, they may simply avoid or smooth over their conflict to reach minimally acceptable resolutions. Integrative negotiations researchers, for example, have found that protagonists who yield too quickly do not challenge easy solutions and do not create mutually beneficial resolutions (Pruitt 1983). For constructive conflict management, protagonists should be firm as well as flexible, with the firmness coming from recognition that their own important interests are at stake.

Researchers have further found that holding protagonists accountable contributes to commitment to their own interests. Understanding that the group they represent will know and evaluate the conflict and its outcomes can strengthen commitments to pursuing their own interests in the conflict (Ben-Yoav & Pruitt 1984, De Dreu 2004, De Dreu & Van Knippenberg 2005, Lerner & Tetlock 1999, Pruitt & Carnevale 1993, Tetlock 1992).

Discussing conflict can also reinforce a commitment to one's own interests. The effort to present one's views deepens the understanding of one's own position, and rephrasing can reinforce the importance of one's own interests. Although these dynamics may suggest that commitment to one's own interests undermines conflict, researchers have argued that it is not too much commitment to one's own interests but rather an inadequate demonstration of a commitment to the others' interests that undermines constructive conflict (Deutsch 1973).

The Others' Interests

Credibly communicating an effort to further the others' interests develops open-minded discussions. One way this commitment is increased is when protagonists know that they will interact and depend upon each other after the conflict (De Dreu & Van Vianen 2001, De Dreu & Weingart 2003). The more that protagonists understand that they have a long-term relationship, the more they can be expected to resolve the conflict in such a way that the others believe they have gained from working together (De Dreu 2006, 2008).

Restating the others' arguments through role reversal is thought to increase understanding of the opposing position. Skillfully done, it can also communicate an interest in furthering the opposing position (Johnson 1971b). Learning the others' needs and aspirations can also strengthen commitment to promoting them.

Joint Interests

Mutual benefit relationships require that commitments to one's own interests and to the others' interests be integrated. Commitment to one's own interests without commitment to the others'

interests is likely to generate a win–lose dynamic that undermines open-mindedness and constructive conflict.

Developing cooperative goals is an effective way to convince protagonists that their interests are compatible and reinforcing (Deutsch 1973, Johnson & Johnson 2005, Tjosvold 2007). With cooperative goals, protagonists believe that as one of them benefits by moving close to his or her goals, the other benefits by moving toward his or her own. Important antecedents to cooperative goals include common tasks, integrated roles, personal relationships, and shared reward distribution (Hanlon et al. 1994; Li et al. 1999; Tjosvold & Tjosvold 1995a,b). Valuing people and respecting each other (G. Chen & Tjosvold 2008), shared vision (Wong et al. 2005), and a common commitment to corporate social responsibility (Wong et al. 2014) have been found to promote cooperative goals. Conditions in Chinese settings that develop cooperative goals include *guanxi* (personal connection) relationships (Wong & Tjosvold 2010) and collectivist compared with individualistic values (Tjosvold et al. 2010).

Implementing Mutual Benefit and Open-Mindedness

Training studies suggest that mutual benefit relationships and open-minded discussion can be practical investments for organizations. More than 150 employees from all the teams in a company in Beijing participated in a constructive controversy workshop and a two-month follow-up of team feedback and development (Lu et al. 2010). Findings indicated that this training strengthened cooperative goals, developed open-minded discussion, fostered creative processes across teams as well as within them, and resulted in higher group potency and productivity.

A second training program demonstrated that developing cooperative goals helped employees discuss issues open-mindedly, which in turn strengthened collegial relationships and reduced employee service errors (Tjosvold et al. 2012). Three hundred and sixty-eight employees in a call center who formed teams with cooperative goals and the skills to discuss issues open-mindedly not only strengthened their feelings of interdependence and improved their attitudes, but they also increased the number of phones answered on time by nearly 40%, shrank customer complaints by over 55%, and reduced the call center's turnover by over 20% in two months. Cooperative teamwork helped employees both feel more integrated into their work and complete their individual tasks skillfully and productively.

CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Managers and employees are increasingly asked to work with culturally diverse people. Cross-cultural research has the potential to increase joint learning but also has significant barriers to realizing this and other benefits (Crotty & Brett 2011, Guina et al. 2012, Vaara et al. 2012). Diverse people need theories that they can apply to help them deal with their conflicts with people from other cultures as well as their own. Conflict theories that can be applied in only one cultural context are increasingly irrelevant.

Experiments and field studies support that the model of mutual benefit relationships and open-minded discussion for constructive conflict applies in the East as well as in the West (N.Y.F. Chen et al. 2005b, 2008; Tjosvold et al. 2006b, 2010). Although they may have conflict-negative values, Chinese managers and employees can discuss conflict open-mindedly, especially when they have cooperative goals; the same is true for their Western counterparts. Thus, the model of open-minded discussion and mutual relationships is relevant in both Western and Chinese contexts.

Smith & Bond (2003) have emphasized the need to develop frameworks of how diverse people work together, marking how their cultural backgrounds might differ. As described below, a number of studies have directly investigated conflict management between culturally diverse people.

When Chinese employees rated the relationship and discussion they had with their American and Japanese managers (N.Y.F. Chen et al. 2005a, Chen & Tjosvold 2007), the results indicated that mutual benefit relationships laid the foundation for open-minded discussion of views between a foreign manager and a Chinese employee, which resulted in innovation and commitment. When managers in the Hong Kong parent company and new-product development personnel working in Canada had mutual benefit relationships, as measured by cooperative goals, they exchanged their views fully and thereby developed trusting relationships despite cultural differences and geographic separation (Tjosvold 1999).

Evidence from more than 200 Chinese employees from Sino–foreign joint ventures based in Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian, and Shandong suggests that the managers' home cultures had no significant impact on how they and their employees worked together (N.Y.F. Chen & Tjosvold 2005, 2008). However, mutual benefit relationships helped the Chinese employees and their foreign managers develop a quality leader–member exchange relationship and improve leader effectiveness, employee commitment, future collaboration, and innovation.

In another experiment (Chen et al. 2008), Chinese people who developed cooperative, in contrast to competitive, goals with their foreign leaders discussed their diverse views openly and integrated them into decisions. Cooperative discussion of conflicts also helped Chinese employees develop effective relationships with their Western managers (N.Y.F. Chen et al. 2005b). These results suggest that foreign managers who can convince Chinese employees that they want mutual benefit relationships are able to develop open-minded interaction with them.

In summary, mutual benefit relationships and open-minded discussions have been found to promote constructive conflict in Eastern as well as Western cultural contexts. These conditions appear to help diverse people manage their conflicts productively. Research is needed to explore and expand these findings as well as to develop procedures and programs that can help people from diverse cultures apply this knowledge to manage their conflicts constructively.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This review's proposed integration of research not only highlights agreement in previous findings but also provides ideas for future research. Research is needed to test and expand the theorizing that mutual benefit relationships facilitate open-minded discussions that result in constructive conflict. More studies that identify the conditions and dynamics in which protagonists believe that they have mutual benefit relationships are needed. Studies could identify the actions and conditions that convince protagonists that they have win–lose or independent relationships. Conflict researchers can use the evidence and theorizing by social scientists and philosophers to explore and deepen our understanding of open-minded discussion and the conditions that foster it.

Comparing Theories

We have argued that several prominent research traditions in organizational conflict support the mutual benefit and open-minded discussion model, although they have used different terms. Empirical studies could test this argument directly. For example, protagonists could complete measures of their dual concerns, prosocial and proself motivation, and cooperative goals to see if these concepts are empirically as well as theoretically highly correlated.

Clarifying Alternatives to Open-Minded Discussion

We have not meant to argue that the mutual benefit followed by open-minded discussion is effective in all situations. We appreciate the contingency approach, which encourages people to have alternative ways of dealing with their incompatible actions, but evidence is needed to clarify when alternatives are effective. Research comparing differences between conflict approaches has not bolstered the contingency approach's case, as such research mostly supports the usefulness of mutual benefit relationships and open-minded discussion. Rather than comparing approaches, research that investigates the conditions and dynamics of individual strategies, such as the win–lose and avoidance approaches, may be more useful for developing our understanding of when they are effective (Peng & Tjosvold 2011; Tjosvold & Sun 2002; Tjosvold et al. 2003, 2006a).

Alternatives to Mutual Benefit Relationships

What are the relationships that inhibit open-mindedness? This knowledge would be interesting theoretically as well as useful practically. Evidence supports Deutsch's (1973) argument that competitive and independent goals develop closed-mindedness (Deutsch et al. 2014, Tjosvold 2007). Research is needed to understand the dynamics of closed-mindedness and the conditions, such as competitive and independent goals, that promote it.

Integrating Conflict and Organization Research

Conflict is an everyday part of working in organizations and doing business. However, conflict management research has, to a surprising degree, been pursued independently from other issues in organizations. Conflict researchers have, however, examined (*a*) how conflict can affect team dynamics and outcomes (De Dreu & Weingart 2003, Jehn 1995) and (*b*) such team research concepts as group potency and psychological safety (Chen & Tjosvold 2012, Wong & Tjosvold 2009).

Recent research suggests that conflict management knowledge can contribute significantly to understanding leadership and perhaps to other organizational areas as well (Tjosvold et al. 2014a,b). Research has directly challenged the traditional—and still popular—idea that effective leaders make tough decisions and then use their power to enforce compliance. We are realizing that effective leaders involve followers so that there is open-minded discussion of various ideas. Transformational leaders are effective not by unilaterally directing employees but by encouraging them to manage their conflicts cooperatively (Zhang et al. 2011). To help their teams be effective, leaders can apply their productivity values of pressure to get jobs completed and their people values of caring for followers by having team members discuss their opposing views open-mindedly (Bhatnagar & Tjosvold 2012). Even in crises, leaders are typically more effective when they seek out diverse views (Tjosvold 1984, 1990; N.Y.F. Chen, K. Yi & D. Tjosvold, unpublished manuscript).

Training Studies

More work is needed to broadly disseminate consistent conflict management research findings. Training research could test the effects of applying mutual benefit relationships and open-minded discussion in diverse contexts. Although the variety of terms used in different theoretical frameworks has obscured consistency in findings, the various measures and experimental inductions of the different approaches can be useful for managers and employees in their efforts to develop specific strategies and conditions appropriate and practical for constructive conflict management.

Indeed, the various operations and measures could be integrated to foster mutual benefit and open-minded discussion in the workplace. For example, strategies for developing commitments to one's own benefit and to that of the other could be combined with forming cooperative goals to convince protagonists that they have mutual benefit relationships.

In summary, researchers can directly test the extent to which the operations of mutual benefit and open-mindedness are highly correlated. Studies are also needed to understand when and how conflict avoidance and competitive conflict contribute to personal and organizational success. Knowledge is needed about the relationships and other conditions that inhibit open-minded discussion. Conflict management might also be used to develop our understanding of leadership and other key aspects of organizations. Finally, training studies are needed to identify how managers and employees can profitably learn and apply conflict management knowledge.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As they deal with conflict, individuals and teams use diverse actions, ranging from loud, heated debate to the silent treatment. Movies, newspapers, and novels remind us that conflict management often takes complex forms. Practitioners need clear advice to apply when dealing with their increasingly challenging conflicts. However, the apparent fragmentation of conflict management research has frustrated the dissemination of useful findings.

In this review, we argue that researchers with different theoretical frameworks have used different terms and operations that tend to mask the agreement in findings on conflict management. Studies conducted within these different traditions indicate that open-minded discussion—in which protagonists freely express their own views, listen and understand opposing ones, and then integrate them—is essential for constructive conflict. Researchers have also found that mutual benefit relationships lay the foundation for this exchange because they provide incentives for protagonists to discuss their conflicts open-mindedly.

Discerning consistent findings gives conflict management research real-world applicability. Researchers can now offer the model of open-minded discussion supported by mutual benefit relationships to managers and employees with confidence, knowing that its propositions are supported by both experimental and survey research carried out across a range of theoretical frameworks.

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