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Overcoming the dark side of task conflict: Buffering roles of transformational leadership, tenacity, and passion for work

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the job demands–resources model, this study considers how task conflict reduces employees' job satisfaction, as well as how the negative task conflict–job satisfaction relationship might be buffered by supervisors' transformational leadership and employees' personal resources. Using data from a large organization, the authors show that task conflict reduces job satisfaction, but this effect is weaker at higher levels of transformational leadership, tenacity, and passion for work. The buffering roles of the two personal resources (tenacity and passion for work) are particularly salient when transformational leadership is low. These findings indicate that organizations marked by task-related clashes can counter the accompanying stress by developing adequate leadership and employee resources within their ranks.

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1. Introduction

Task conflict, marked by disagreements across different viewpoints, represents a significant feature of many organizations (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Jehn, 1997; Rispens, 2012). Research that suggests its beneficial role notes, for example, how confrontations of diverging opinions can stimulate team cooperation (Puck & Pregonig, 2014), improve decision quality (Amason, 1996; Baron, 1991), and generate creative outcomes (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). Although insightful, such research provides only a partial view of the effect of task conflict on workplace outcomes, in that it assumes that employees have sufficient capacity to cope with the stress that accompanies task conflict (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000; Guerra, Martínez, Munduate, & Medina, 2005). This assumption does not always hold; clashes of divergent opinions can become so distracting that they harm employees' feelings about their immediate work environment (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Thus

the positive influence of task conflict can be elusive if the goal is to enhance affective work outcomes such as positive emotions (Medina, Munduate, Dorado, Martínez, & Guerra, 2005; Simons & Peterson, 2000) or team member satisfaction (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Shaw, Zhu, Duffy, Scott, & Shih, 2011). In turn, we need a clearer understanding of when employees might respond negatively to task conflict and how its harmful effects can be contained (Guerra et al., 2005; Tidd, McIntyre, & Friedman, 2004).

With this study, we investigate the circumstances in which task conflict is more or less likely to diminish employees' job satisfaction. Previous research has paid ample attention to the negative influence of relationship conflict due to personality clashes (Amason, 1996; Bouckenoghe, De Clercq, & Deprez, 2014; Choi & Sy, 2010; Pelled et al., 1999), but relatively few studies provide insights into the harmful effect of task-driven clashes on job satisfaction, let alone how this effect might be mitigated (Guerra et al., 2005; Tidd et al., 2004). To develop our arguments, we draw from the job demands–resources (JD-R) model, which indicates that adverse work conditions tend to trigger significant stress in employees and undermine positive job attitudes, but access to relevant resources can attenuate those harms (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Because confrontations

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of opposing viewpoints can create significant stress (Friedman et al., 2000), employees' exposure to greater task conflict might have negative effects on how they feel about their job. By focusing on employees' affective reactions to task conflict, in the form of reduced job satisfaction, we offer important insights for scholarship and practice, because employees' job satisfaction critically informs the likelihood that they engage in positive work behaviors and their performance (Fu & Deshpande, 2014; Ilies, Fulmer, Spitzmuller, & Johnson, 2009).

Moreover, we add to extant research by investigating how supervisor leadership style and employee personal resources might function as buffers against the harmful role of task conflict on job satisfaction (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Xanthopoulos, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007). In response to calls for contingency approaches to conflict outcomes (De Clercq, Thongpapanl, & Dimov, 2009; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Shaw et al., 2011), this study offers hitherto unexplored insights into how employees' negative affective reactions to increasing task conflict might be moderated by transformational leadership (Chen, Lin, Lin, & McDonough, 2012) and personal resources in the form of tenacity and passion for work (Baum & Locke, 2004). Together, these three moderators provide a parsimonious, yet comprehensive, view of how employees' access to relevant resources—embedded in either supervisor relationships or their personal characteristics—might diminish their negative affective responses to task conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Finally, we contribute to a better understanding of the negative affective outcomes of task conflict by investigating how the *interplay* of transformational leadership with the two personal resources (tenacity and passion for work) informs employees' ability to cope with task conflict. Thus, we explicitly acknowledge the interdependence of different resource types in terms of how they buffer the harmful effects of adverse work conditions, an approach that has received little attention in previous applications of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

2. Theoretical background

Job satisfaction informs both positive workplace behaviors and performance (Fu & Deshpande, 2014; Ilies et al., 2009); the study of its antecedents thus is of instrumental value for organizational effectiveness (Liu, Siu, & Shi, 2010; Volmer, Niessen, Spurk, Linz, & Abele, 2011). Employees may feel less satisfied with their jobs when they experience significant stress in their daily interactions with organizational peers (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014)—particularly if they are exposed to work conditions that enhance their cognitive load (Carnevale & Probst, 1998)—so it is important to understand how a stress-inducing factor such as task conflict might reduce their job satisfaction (Friedman et al., 2000), as well as how this negative effect can be mitigated.

Employees tend to be happier in their job situations when they perceive that their immediate work context is supportive and that the successful execution of their job tasks will not be disturbed by unnecessary distractions (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997; Newman, Nielsen, Smyth, & Hooke, 2015). This perception is less likely when employees experience adverse work conditions marked by exhausting discussions about opposing viewpoints (Friedman et al., 2000; Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008; de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). To the extent that task conflict seems disruptive to daily activities (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003) or increases employees' cognitive load (Carnevale & Probst, 1998), they should react negatively and exhibit negative job attitudes (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit et al., 2012). Increasing levels of task conflict also might lead to a potential breakdown in how employees perceive the conflict, such that they start to interpret the task-related conflict as personal attacks rather than constructive discussions about

opposing viewpoints (Simons & Peterson, 2000; Tidd et al., 2004). This misattribution in turn might escalate their negative feelings about their job situation in general (Shaw et al., 2011).

The JD-R model offers a framework for understanding this negative impact of task conflict on job satisfaction. This theory has been applied previously to the study of role conflict (Singh, Suar, & Leiter, 2012) and work–family conflict (Beutell & Schmeer, 2014) but not to task conflict. According to the JD-R model, adverse work conditions, such as intensive battles about opposing viewpoints, create significant stress and deplete employees' energy levels (Demerouti, Bakker, & Bulters, 2004; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). These outcomes then instill negative feelings that spill over to general perceptions about the job (Guerra et al., 2005; Medina et al., 2005). The JD-R model also argues that such stressful work conditions are particularly harmful in the absence of relevant resources (Xanthopoulos et al., 2007), which might be embedded in supervisor relationships or held personally (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In other words, in the presence of relevant resources, the harmful impact of adverse job conditions on positive work attitudes is less pronounced, because the resources function as *buffers* (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). We focus particularly on the buffering effects of two resource sets: (a) transformational leadership and (b) employees' tenacity and passion for work.

First, *transformational leadership* characterizes leaders who emphasize clarity in their communications about organizational goals, engage in active coaching, and promote new skill development among their followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Chen et al., 2012; Shin & Zhou, 2003). Previous research indicates that transformational leadership helps employees cope with uncertainty and upheaval in their work environment (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Lim, 1996; Wayne, Shore, & Linden, 1997), but it is unclear how it can help contain negative affective reactions to excessive task conflict. We postulate that transformational leadership counters the stress that comes with increasing levels of task conflict and helps employees find adequate solutions to the conflict. Second, *tenacity* reflects the persistence that employees exhibit during work, particularly when they confront challenging work situations (Baum & Locke, 2004; Markman & Baron, 2003), and *passion for work* captures the joy that employees derive from making significant time investments in work (Baum & Locke, 2004; Vallerand et al., 2003). Both resources reflect personal energy from which employees can draw, but they differ: Tenacity captures employees' cognitive ability to persevere and work hard in the face of challenging circumstances, whereas passion for work entails an emotional aspect of employees' approach to work, particularly the positive feelings that they experience when they work hard (Baum & Locke, 2004; Goldberg, Clarke-Stewart, Rice, & Dellis, 2002).

We summarize our conceptual framework and its constitutive hypotheses in Fig. 1. The baseline relationship pertains to the link

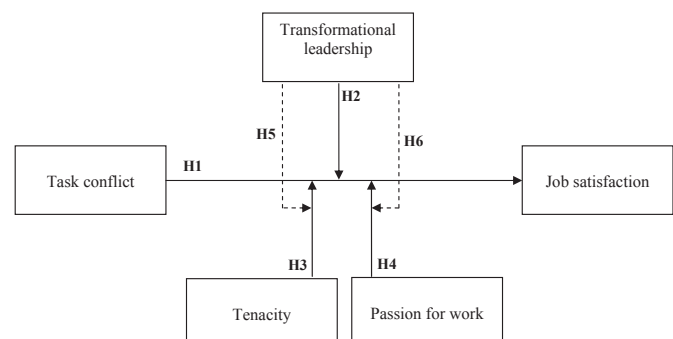


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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