

# **Do attributions matter when task conflict becomes personal?**

*The relationship between team task conflict attributions, relationship conflicts and work-sense of coherence in agile software development teams\**

## **Extended Abstract**

### **Purpose**

Effects of conflicts types on well-being indicate that task conflict is only detrimental to well-being in the presence of relationship conflict. Task conflict is neither harmful nor conducive when relationship conflict is controlled (Bruk-Lee et al. 2013; Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Medina, Munduate, Dorado, Martinez, & Guerra, 2005; Meier, Gross, Spector, & Semmer, 2013). However, the two conflict types are normally correlated in teams (Amason, 1996; De Dreu, 1997; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003, Friedman, Tidd, & Currall, 2000; Janssen, Van de Vliert, & Veenstra, 1999; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Simons & Peterson, 2000) and a number of studies show that task conflicts can spill over into relationship conflicts that negatively impact well-being (Betinez, Guerra, Medina, Martinez & Munduate, 2008; Medina et al. 2005). The co-existence of the two conflict types is explained by misattributions of task conflict as relationship conflict. Critically assessing current ideas may be experienced as a personal attack (De Dreu & van Knippenberg, 2005; Jehn, 1997) or as an indication of negative intention, such as asserting one's own interests (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Lindsley, Brass, Thomas, 1995; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Thomas & Pondy, 1977). Such misattributions trigger negative emotions like anger and may induce escalating conflict spirals that result in relationship conflicts (Baron, 1997; Simons & Petersons, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to investigate groups' misattributions of task conflicts as relationship conflicts and their cross-level impacts on individuals' work-sense of coherence (Work-SoC) which is an individual psychosocial health resource and represents how individuals perceive their work situation as manageable, comprehensible and meaningful (Bauer, Vogt, Inauen, & Jenny, 2015).

### **Design/methodology/approach**

A total of 121 employed members of 43 agile software development teams from three different companies completed an online questionnaire. Participants were asked to list their task conflicts in their team between two or more team members that affected the whole team. Then, they assessed the causes of their task conflicts on the basis of attribution scales (itself adapted from Werpers, 1999). Three categories of task conflict attributions were analyzed: characteristics of the group members such as traits, attitudes, status or interests (internal attribution); interactions between group members such as feedback, competitive behavior, or modes of interaction (relational attribution) and situations or structures in which they work (external attribution).

Task conflict attributions and relationship conflicts were aggregated by individual-level data. Thus,  $r_{wgj}$ , ICC(1) and ICC(2) were calculated. Situational attributions could not be considered because aggregation indices did not allow an aggregation of the data. Multilevel structural equation modelling was used to analyze the data.

### **Findings**

Multilevel structural equation modelling analyses support the hypothesis that groups' internal and relational attributions of task conflict predict relationship conflict. This, in turn, is found to impact individuals' Work-SoC negatively. These findings support the explanation of misattribution of task conflict as relationship conflict.

### **Research limitations/implications**

The results suggest that investigations of conflict types should include shared cognitive mental processes that underlie these conflicts because they crucially shape whether teams are able to distinguish between task conflict and relationship conflict. The data are cross-sectional; therefore, inferences about causality are limited.

### **Practical implications**

Work teams can recognize their attribution patterns and their consequences on their conflict behavior. They may learn to question their interpretations and, if necessary, to modify them. Being aware of the variety of interpretations allows more freedom in thinking and may reduce the risk of focusing on a misinterpretation of conflict party's behavior. Under such circumstances, the constructive handling of differences of opinion may be easier and less harmful to relationships. In this way, the connection between the conflict of tasks and relationships can be interrupted and the health-damaging effect of task conflicts reduced or even prevented.

### **Originality/value**

This study is particularly valuable in understanding why task conflict can transform into relationship conflict and is therefore harmful to well-being. Additionally, this study extends research in the area of conflict attributions into a group context. Findings reveal that team members' conflict attributions become equalized to a shared perception, especially when they attribute their task conflicts to internal and relational factors. The proven cross-level effect supplements the little empirical research on the influence of group attributions on individual's perception.

### **Keywords**

attributions, conflict types, sense of coherence, well-being, team, multilevel

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