

Chapter 2

Communication, Structural Links, and Conflict in Three Inter-Organizational Virtual Collaborations

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is just as common in virtual teams as it is in collocated teams. However little is known about the process of conflict in these teams. The study presented in this chapter analyzed conflict in three inter-organizational teams. The purpose of this research is to identify primary types of conflict in virtual teams, examine the role that the structure of communication plays in the conflict, and examine the influence of the social context. Specifically, this chapter (1) reviews the extant literature on conflict in virtual teams and organizational conflict in general; (2) presents results from a study of three inter-organizational virtual team collaborations; and (3) offers an outline of potential future research in this area and provides best practices and potential pitfalls for practitioners to consider when structuring inter-organizational virtual teams.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict in virtual teams is as inevitable as it is in collocated teams. Although a growing body of literature examines conflict in virtual teams (e.g., Hinds, & Mortensen, 2005; Mortensen & Hinds, 2001; Paul, Samarah, Seetharaman, & Mykty, 2005; Shin, 2005), little is known about *processes*

of conflict management in virtual teams and the influence that team structure has on conflict within the team. Much of the research on conflict in virtual teams focuses on the antecedents to conflict or the conditions necessary to prevent conflict and the implications of said conflict. In other words, extant research examines the inputs and outputs of conflict. This study, however, seeks to explore how individuals experience conflict and how they

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are constrained and enabled by various relational structures to deal with that conflict. Exploring these experiences allows us to understand the nuances of conflict in virtual teams. Ultimately we seek to answer three questions about the nature, manifestation, and management of conflict in three inter-organizational collaborative projects: (1) What are the primary types of conflict in virtual inter-organizational collaborations? (2) How does the structure of communication influence virtual team conflicts and dynamics? (3) What is the influence of social context on communicative practices and conflict in virtual teams?

The data for this study come from three health intervention projects. The projects varied systematically on a number of fronts, but were similar in that teams consisted of core members from two or three organizations (academic, community health, and political), and several team members were consistent across all three projects. Additionally, the ultimate goals of the projects were similar. The team dynamics varied based on the structures of communication linkages, relational history, and degree of collocation. While the projects ultimately shared similar goals, the participating organizations had very different missions, roles, expertise, and power that influenced team member interaction, and ultimately, conflict. Overall, the structure of communication (the formal and informal rules that regulated who could talk to who, how communication occurred)¹ and the division of tasks across team members represented the degree to which the teams integrated across the organizations and the level to which they became interdependent versus continuing to operate as largely autonomous organizations.

The chapter begins with a brief review of the theoretical perspectives relevant to conflict in virtual teams. Processes of data collection and analysis are presented in the methods section. Then, an overview of each collaborative project is provided. Each overview situates the broad nature of the participating organizations, describes the teams, and offers a history of relational development and

collocation. The structure of each collaborative project and communication linkages between participating teams are illustrated. Similarities and difference related to conflict between cases based on structural linkages, relational history and levels of collocation are explored. The chapter concludes by offering a set of “best practices” for practitioners to use when structuring virtual teams and also provides a set of “potential pitfalls” for forming virtual teams and developing interaction practices within these teams.

BACKGROUND

Review of Virtual Team Conflict

We draw on multiple definitions of conflict (e.g., Pondy, 1967; Putnam & Poole, 1987; Walls & Calister, 1995) and advance the following working definition: Conflict involves grievances between interdependent people that arise from incompatible values, attitudes, goals, and/or beliefs.

Geographic dispersion further complicates team conflict. Although studies have suggested that there is not necessarily more conflict in geographically dispersed teams (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001), the nature of conflict is different. Theorists have posited that there are four ways that distance perpetuates conflict: (1) teams no longer have a shared context, meaning they no longer “have access to the same information and share the same tools, work processes, and work cultures” (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005, p. 293); (2) team members are not familiar with one another because of the decreased informal interactions; (3) friendship relationships do not form because there is a lack of spontaneous interaction; and (4) because distance increases the heterogeneity of the team (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). However, conflict can be mitigated if teams can form a shared identity and have a shared context, which is often accomplished through spontaneous communication (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005). In their

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