

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN CONSTRUCTION

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While the adversarial nature of construction is frequently cited in the construction press only a few researchers have investigated conflict within the construction industry. Due to the interdisciplinary construction environment, which inevitably results in clashes of interest, the uses of conflict and recovery from conflict must be a subject of real interest, yet construction management research in this area is scarce. This study has gathered information on the emergence and resolution of conflict within groups. The research data have been used to develop a greater understanding of conflict occurrence and its management. Observations of construction management and design team meetings recorded using the interaction analysis technique were used to identify conflict and the nature of interaction used. A further study of postgraduate students engaged in a group exercise was used to gather perceptions and experiences of conflict and management. Initial findings identify a number of reasons for conflict and interaction behaviour used to manage conflict and reduce associated tension. It is also suggested that further research into conflict should consider issues in terms of concern for self, others and task.

Keywords: communication, conflict, groups.

INTRODUCTION

Most people can recount an uncomfortable group experience when negative interaction of another person is used against them (John 2000). Such experiences can mean that “avoidance is more comfortable than conflict” (Belbin 1993:66). Unfortunately, both engaging in conflict and avoiding it can put a strain on professional relationships and induce stressful experiences for the individuals involved. The extent a person engages in conflict may result from personal interests and concerns for others. Within construction it may also be suggested that there is a concern for the task or project. Conflict within any social organizations is to be expected (Ferguson 1999), construction is no exception (Gardiner and Simmons 1992), and managers must develop strategies for dealing with it, not avoiding it. Early engagement in discussions that help resolve initial, uncomfortable, possibly stressful, disagreements may reduce the potential for conflict escalation. Group communication researchers often talk about strengthening relationships and resolving conflict through socio-emotional or maintenance based interaction; however, these terms are often rather abstract and it is important to identify the nature of conflict and practical methods used during conflict resolution.

FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL CONFLICT

Conflict within construction is not only inevitable it is often desirable. Gardiner and Simons (1992: 460) define conflict as “any divergence of interest, objectives or priorities between individuals, groups or organizations, or non-conformance to

requirements of a task, activity or process.” Conflict can be natural, functional and constructive or unnatural, dysfunctional, destructive and unproductive. Functional conflict results from challenges, disagreements and arguments relating to tasks, roles, processes and functions, this type of conflict often involves detailed discussion of relevant issues. Functional conflict is often beneficial, helping to expose problems, reduce risks, integrate ideas, produce a range of solutions, develop understanding, evaluate alternatives and improve solutions (Emmitt and Gorse 2003). The occurrence of functional conflict also results in tension, and if this tension is not defused it can build up and threaten relationships (Gorse 2002). However, if functional conflict is amicably resolved, the success achieved from working through the conflict can strengthen relationships (Loosemore 1996).

With some episodes of conflict it is difficult to identify a rational purpose. Unnatural conflict is where a participant enters into the encounter intending the destruction or disablement of the other. Personal insults, criticism that boost self-ego and comments that lack regard for others feelings are often described as dysfunctional. Such conflict is not aimed at improving task performance.

Indicators that conflict has become unproductive include (O’Neil 2002): Conflict becomes personal; conflict increases with each meeting rather than reduces; communications become one way; parties become entrenched and will not accommodate alternative views; and the conflict becomes a major issue – incurs costs and delays activities. Ultimately, the completion of construction projects relies on co-operation between multidisciplinary teams and as disagreements are to be expected managers must attempt develop appropriate mechanisms for dealing with conflict.

CONFLICT EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT

Conflict has been found to develop in multidisciplinary building teams as the group members discover their team objectives and then attempt to enforce them on others, attempting to change other peoples beliefs or actions (Wallace 1987). Conflict may also occur due to a failure to develop and manage expectations. For example, the inexperience of some clients means that they need to be carefully taken through the construction process. Where problems emerge and decisions need to be made clients require unbiased and balanced information about the choices. Unfortunately, the information offered to clients from different professionals is often inconsistent and confusing. Even though professionals may offer the same service they tend to concentrate on aspects closely associated with their profession, training and experience (Gameson 1992).

A level of conflict in construction can be anticipated. Gardiner and Simmon’s (1992) research identified that conflict occurred at all stages in the construction process. The reasons for conflict emerging and situations where conflict tended to occur included poor briefing and coordination, lack of experience in situations, difficulty in arriving at a consensus, failure to take on board opinions, design errors and omission, design failing to meet specification, construction failing to meet design requirements, difficulty in obtaining formal approval of decisions, difficulty in clients interpreting drawings, quality of work less than expected, exceeding project duration and budget, building functional problems, internal politics, conflict in loyalty, different levels of change control, by-passing single point of contact, different emphasis on project, difficulty in managing professional group interfaces and the use and misuse of standard documents and contracts. Conflict reported by Gardiner and Simmon focuses

predominantly on construction tasks which are undertaken by, or affect, multiple parties. The different priorities and agenda of the individuals and the different teams feature strongly in this research. However, the aspects reported manifest from very different situations.

CONFLICT AND CHANGE

Change in construction results in additional work. Conflict may emerge as parties attempt to avoid undertaking additional or alternative work (Wallace 1987). Loosemore (1996) demonstrated that change in the construction process often leads to conflict; however, Gardiner and Simmons (1992) found that conflict could also lead to change. The conflict / change process may become cyclic. In successful conflict management processes it is to be expected that conflict and change cycles will occur a number of times (Emmitt and Gorse 2003). For the process to be successful parties need to be sufficiently satisfied with the resulting changes so that the working relationship can continue.

MANAGING CONFLICT

Most management models work on the principle that people perform their duties with a level of concern for their self and a concern for their product, for example, Blake and Moulton's (1964) approach to management strategies (the managerial grid). Pruitt and Rubin (1986) suggest that this concept has been adapted for conflict management by replacing concern for product with concern for others. Using these two simple dimensions various approaches to conflict management have been categorized (see Figure 1).

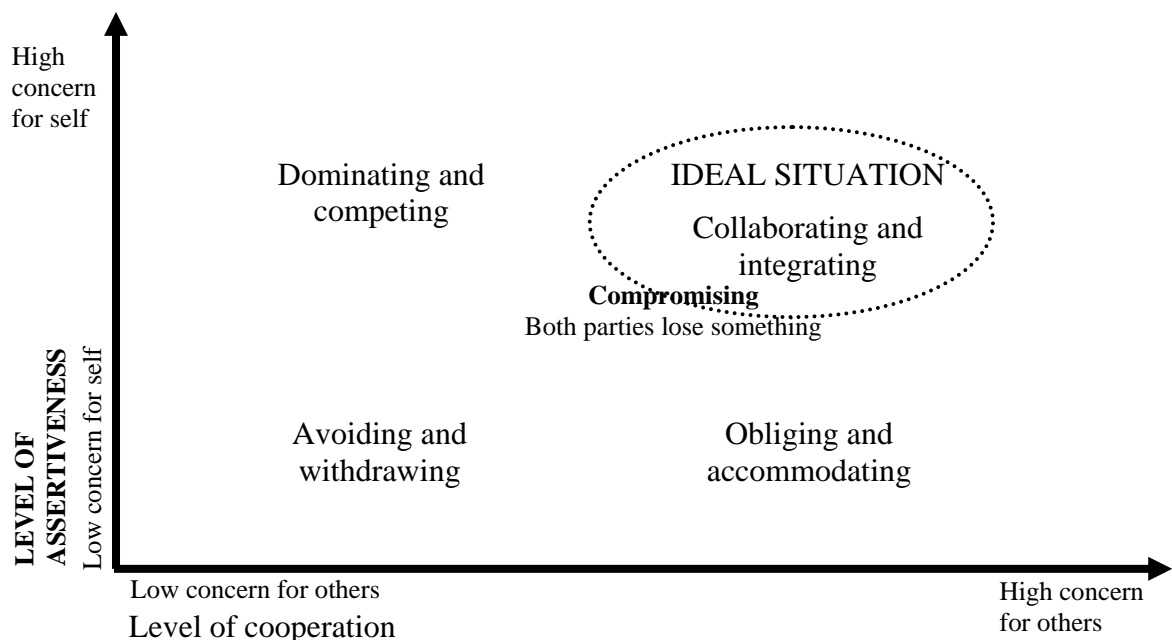


Figure 1: Conflict handling styles (adapted from Kilmann & Thomas, 1975; Thomas 1976; Rahim, 1983)

There is an argument that each of the conflict management styles has a useful purpose (e.g. O'Neil, 2002), although parties must consider how the outcome will affect the

working relationship. In short-term one off ventures, where the risk of having to work with another person is minimal, the most profitable strategy may be to dominate discussions ensuring that everything falls to an individual's favour. Such strategies may result in a bad reputation, exclusion from further projects, or legal disputes. The use of the different conflict management strategies with a goal of finding a solution that benefits all offers the optimum strategy. There is a time and place for each of the processes, but to maintain relationships with clients and suppliers managers must balance concern for themselves and others, pushing negotiations towards the ideal position.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND CONSTRUCTION

Loosemore *et al.* (2000) claims that construction professionals should be encouraged to engage in functional conflict and that an indiscriminate attempt to reduce conflict in construction incurs an opportunity-cost for clients and professionals. Loosemore *et al.* (2000) research, which focused on the construction phase and conflict between the contractor and architect, and contractor and subcontractor, found that the contractors' attitudes were receptive to functional conflict, although not as strongly as originally thought. The findings suggest that most conflicts were managed by exploring alternative solutions, different perspective, and encouraging all participants to engage in discussions and co-operate. Such behaviours were believed to be most likely to result in win-win solutions. However, a considerable proportion of the conflict-handling styles used by the construction managers were not considered to offer such positive benefits. Too much emphasis on compromising, and obliging by the site manager restricted the potential development of mutually beneficial solutions. While site managers are often considered to be uncooperative and lacking concern for others, the style of conflict management that was least used was the dominating style, which places concern for self before others.

The conflict management behaviour observed by Loosemore *et al.* is not uncommon in work groups. Work by Farmer and Roth (1998) who examined a range of student and work-groups found that the most common conflict management strategy used was collaboration (integration), followed by accommodation (obliging), compromise, competing and the least used style was avoiding. While many anecdotal reports suggest that the construction industry is adversarial, much of the research suggests that the way conflict is handled is rather typical; however, the research also shows that there is considerable room for improving conflict management. There is a need to delve deeper into the occurrence of conflict and the different approaches to managing it.

FIRST STUDY: RESEARCH METHOD

The first study examined the interaction data collected by Gorse (2002) during management and design team meetings. The data from observations of 36 meetings were collected using the Bales (1950) Interaction Process Analysis method. This method categorizes communication under 12 categories, six task based or six socio-emotional. The six socio-emotional categories are further divided into three levels of positive and negative interaction (see Figure x). It is the negative socio-emotional categories and occurrences that surround such acts that this study focuses on. Further information on the method can be found in Gorse's (2002) initial study. The method provides useful data on the level of conflict occurring and the types of communication act associated with conflict and those act used to prevent conflict escalation.

Interaction Results

The following table shows the number and percentage of all of the communication acts observed during the meetings. The negative socio-emotional acts provide an indication of disagreement and conflict occurring within the meetings. The occurrence of conflict was low only accounting for 3% of communication acts observed; however, the study also found that when negative acts were used it had a noticeable effect on group members. The normal, almost passive, nature of the meetings would change, with all the members of the group showing increased interest in the discussion. Members became more alert, were less distracted by occurrences outside the meeting room, they stopped reading their own notes and focused in on the discussion. Engaging the attention of all parties in a meeting may be a powerful attribute of the conflict process.

Table 1: Observations of 36 management and design team meetings. Communication acts observed using Bales (1950) IPA

	Total	
	No. of communication acts.	%
Positive socio-emotional acts		
1. Shows solidarity: gives help	18	0
2. Shows tension release: jokes, laughs	193	1
3. Agrees: shows acceptance, understands	978	7
Gives task-based communication acts		
4. Gives suggestion: direction	2776	18
5. Gives opinion: offers evaluation, analysis	4060	27
6. Gives orientation: information, clarifies	4303	29
Requests task-based communication acts		
7 Asks for orientation: information	1042	7
8 Asks for opinion: evaluation, analysis	609	4
9 Asks for suggestion: direction action	725	5
Negative socio-emotional acts (CONFLICT EMERGENCE)		
10 Disagrees: shows passive rejection	243	2
11 Shows tension: withdraws out of field	122	1
12 Shows antagonism: deflates others status	8	0
Total number of communication acts observed	15077	

An initial examination of acts surrounding the conflict shows that negative emotions tend to follow suggestions and directions, or requests for suggestions, although not always. This type of communication is often associated with activities. Generally the use of a suggestion or directions is a prompt for action requiring the mobilization of resources. All observations of conflict tended to be accompanied with task-based interaction, there was an increase in the questions asked both before and during the disagreement. Following the occurrence of negative emotion, often members of the group would attempt to re-establish the group norm by introducing positive socio-emotional acts, such as agreeing, praising a suggestion, joking or making a light humoured statement.

SECOND STUDY: RESEARCH METHOD

The second study was not construction related. After obtaining the data from the first study it was decided that a more detailed inquiry was necessary to uncover more detailed accounts of the conflict. Two groups of eight part-time masters students undertook a short problem solving group exercise. The students were asked to develop a best practice model for group decision-making. Apart from the brief, no guidance was given on how to conduct the initial group meeting. Following the meeting, which was limited to 30 minutes, students were asked to complete a questionnaire. Two questions were asked: how did conflict emerge and develop within the group? and how was the conflict managed?

Results for group questionnaires

It was clear from the data collected that each member identified different reasons for conflict occurring, and different ways in which the group had contributed to its management or not. A summary of the responses to the questions follows.

Summary of responses to the question ‘how did conflict emerge?’

Perceptions of conflict within the groups varied enormously. While one member did not believe that the group had experienced any conflict stating that ‘ideas were presented and discussed before being rejected or accepted’ all other members of the group were able to recount episodes of conflict or disagreement. Some members drew a distinction between a disagreement and conflict. In such cases conflict was categorized by a split in the group, emotional debate, use of authoritarian dominance and assuming positions of leadership without nomination. The main distinction between disagreements and conflict was predominantly based on the level of emotion or commitment a person made to a particular view; however, it was clear that individuals could show their commitment in many different ways. One member of a group noted that ‘the disagreements experienced were trivial and good natured and despite the conflict arising a workable solution to the problems was borne out from it’. However, other members of the same group showed concern over ‘splits in the group’, and suggested that the conflict increased ‘when the aim of the task looked no closer to being achieved with only 5 minutes remaining in the session’. Many of the subjects stated that problems developed because ‘difficulties (were experienced) in understanding the task and problem’, ‘misunderstanding of what the group was trying to achieve’, or that conflict developed ‘when an opinion or idea was put forward in an ambiguous way’. While many of the members stated that conflict emerged because of a lack of understanding of both the task and other members one person stated that conflict emerged as the group members developed a better understanding of others and the problem. As members recognized and understood the nature of discussion and proposals they were able to agree or disagree, or reserve their opinion. The latent objection of issues previously agreed resulted in a level of frustration experienced by some members. However, it was stated that ‘once members understood they challenged others more forcefully’. A few members noted that the challenges and conflict improved the quality of discussion, for example, ‘people’s opinions were obviously challenged so different ideas were generated’, ‘other people often developed other people’s ideas which meant production of a better quality end result’. However there was a note of scepticism by some members who questioned whether the quality of discussion actually improved, in their opinion some members just thought that their input was better and their self acclaimed position of superiority was used to influence other members. Comments related to this observation included ‘conflict occurred when people thought their ideas were superior’; ‘individual characters influenced the group either by being over keen to provide input or quiet, shy or unwilling / or unable to provide ideas’; ‘disagreements emerged when one person tries to impose him/herself as the leader, when a group member attempts to dominate the discussion, and insist that their view should be considered as the most important’. English was a second language for two members in one of the groups. Other members felt that this affected the level of understanding and ability to participate, one member noted that ‘there was a limited input from certain members of the group due to their limited use and understanding of English’. Other related comments included ‘communication and language barriers were a cause of conflict’, ‘I

was unsure whether what members of the group were saying were being understood by all’.

Summary of responses to the question ‘how was the conflict managed?’

Generally, the perceptions of approaches to conflict management from within each group varied from person to person. There were some points of agreement on how conflict management was approached, but differences in the tactics used and whether or not the conflict management was successful. For some member the combined involvement of the group was viewed as an important factor in resolving issues. Comments such as ‘letting everyone know they have a voice’ and ‘providing opportunity to make opinions known’ suggest that it was not only important that people contributed to the group decision, but that this participation was perceived as important in managing conflict. The belief that as many members as possible supported the group decision was also considered important during the management of conflict. It was suggested that conflict was managed ‘by group consensus’; ‘by using majority’, ‘the whole group stepped in to decide on the most optimum idea and dispel least acceptable idea’. However, the degree that decisions were based on group consensus was challenged by one person; ‘members of the group highlighted their disagreement, this was then discussed with most of the group and direction was taken, however, not all members contributed so the decision did not reflect the whole group’. Another group member pointed out that a ‘strong personality would sway the rest of the group’. One individual questioned whether conflict was managed; ‘Personally I don’t think that conflict was managed effectively. Some individuals provided little or no input while others seemed keen to pursue their own idea without fully appreciating or considering what others had to say. In some instances quiet individuals were encouraged to speak and provide input, but this was a rare occurrence’. Methods identified to reduce the tension and impact of conflict between members included: ‘interruptions’, ‘conflict dissipated through humour and tacit acceptance’; ‘disagreeing and discussing’; ‘review the aim and objectives’ and what one member referred to as ‘divergence tactics – illustrating differences’. Some members felt that conflict had to be managed by decision-makers, such an approach was identified by members in both groups. With regard to the question of how was the conflict managed, statements such as ‘by key individuals making a decision’; ‘quick decisions and clear leadership; and a less authoritarian approach, suggested that individuals made an ‘effort to compromise listen to ideas and make recommendations.’

DISCUSSION

The literature discussed and results from the construction site meetings show an association between task based discussions and conflict. The results from the student meeting also show that both task and personal issues can manifest conflict, and that the group members and the social network attempt to manage conflict and prevent conflict escalation. From the questionnaire responses it is relatively straightforward to categorize the various approaches within Kilmann and Thomas’ (1975) conflict handling styles grid. However, while the different approaches show a level of concern for themselves and for others, the participants also make reference to the task. While the grid is useful, conflict emergence and management in task groups involves a concern for self, others and the task, three dimension. Thus rather than replacing the concern for product with concern for others all three aspects should be included. This is especially true, when the product is used or has uses outside the core group (e.g. third party involvement).

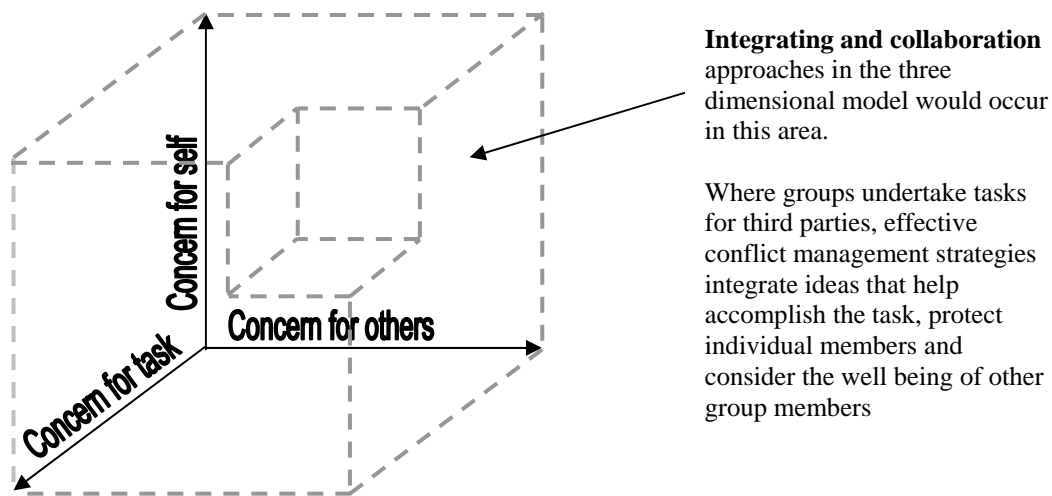


Figure 2: Three dimensional approach to conflict management

The research shows that within short group experiences people can have different perceptions of conflict and the effectiveness of the different management strategies used. The statements made do show that group members are recognising, to different extents, the importance of accomplishing tasks, putting forward their ideas and accommodating others ideas when managing conflict. The study has shown that simple group exercises can be used to identify different perceptions of conflict, different approaches to conflict management and provide perspectives on the level of satisfaction experienced.

It is tempting to go through the different opinions presented in the questionnaire; however, this research shows is that there are many different reasons for conflict and approaches to conflict management. At this stage the results are very individual with only a few trends. Identifying different approaches to conflict management and their potential effects is useful. Uncovering how individuals interject and articulate their ideas and emotions as part of the conflict process will make an important contribution to knowledge in this field. The relationship between group norms and conflict is also important. The results from the study of 'real' management and design team meetings suggest that conflict may occur following certain types of statement. However, as pointed out by one of the students in the questionnaire results, people do not have the same level and comprehension of issues being discussed. It may be sometime after an initial statement was made that a person realizes what was meant and conflict re-emerges. The reoccurrence of conflict in such instances may have little to do with what was discussed immediately before it.

The cyclic nature of change and conflict was previously discussed within the context of the construction process; however, it seems clear that conflict and change are linked at a much more fundamental level. Interaction that follows disagreements often attempts to develop greater understanding. Building a broader, more knowledgeable, context of the problem will change a person's understanding, whether or not they agree with the initial proposal. Changing a person's perspective may result in accommodating another position or it may strengthen previously held beliefs and encourage the individual to be more forceful.

CONCLUSION

Initially this study intended to conduct an examination into data collected from previous research and then investigate in detail perspectives gained from two student groups' experience of conflict. The diversity in perspectives on conflict and conflict management gained from students engaged in a 30 minute group exercise has revealed that there are many and varied approaches, too many to consider in detail in this short paper. However, approaches identified can be considered under the headings of concern for task, concern for self and concern for others, rather than the traditional two dimensions of conflict management. Further research is necessary to uncover more and different strategies used by the individual and group and their affect on group members.

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