

Organizational Communication and Conflict Management Systems

A Social Complexity Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to examine the prevailing model of systematic organizational conflict management from an organizational communicative perspective and to suggest directions for improvement. Particularly the model of conflict management system (CMS) is examined at the macro-level from the novel theoretical perspective of social complexity augmented with an interpretive view of organizational communication. Specifically two models – the dual function of communication and the arena model – are utilized to illustrate weaknesses and points of development in traditional CMS thinking. CMS was found to represent a rather limited vision of contemporary conflict management. It is rooted in a mechanistic view of organizational communication, which, we assert, is problematic from the organizational conflict management perspective, both theoretically and practically. The differences between CMS and social complexity approaches are identified, and a fresh framework for strategic conflict management is introduced.

Keywords: conflict management, conflict management system, social complexity, organizational communication

Introduction

Conflicts are part of human consciousness in all aspects of life. One cannot avoid conflict, whether at home, at the office, or when watching television news. The consequences of organizational conflict reach further today than ever before as the interface between work and home blurs and organizations experiment with flatter and more decentralized structures. In addition, the complexity of conflict increases as organizations become more open and diverse. Conflict is inevitable and even desirable: “To work in an organization is to be in conflict. To take advantage of joint work requires conflict management” (Tjosvold 2008: 19). It is no wonder that conflict management is receiving increasing attention from top managers and policymakers across major corporations and non-profit organizations. Lipsky and Seeber (2006) note that during the past 25 years, organizations have changed their orientation towards conflict management. In particular, organizations are more inclined to adopt “a proactive, strategic approach to managing organizational conflicts” (ibid.: 360).

The prevalence of conflict has various implications for organizations. It has been noted that managers may spend up to 42 percent of their time dealing with conflict-related

negotiations (Watson & Hoffman 1996). This task is momentous as conflicts have the potential to deteriorate organizational functioning by inducing resignations, absenteeism, accidents, and overtime (Meyer 2004) as well as debilitating individual health and well-being (De Dreu et al. 2004). On the other hand, some view conflicts as a source of innovation, creativity, and development in organizations (Nemeth et al. 2004).

Scholars have found it useful to conceptualize organizational conflicts broadly (e.g., Rahim 2002; Lipsky & Seeber 2006). Rahim (2002) defines conflict as “an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organisation, etc.)...[C]onflict can relate to incompatible preferences, goals, and not just activities” (207). According to Lipsky and Seeber (2006), there are three types of organizational conflict. (1) Latent and manifest disagreements refer to “any organizational friction that produces a mismatch in expectations of the proper course of action for an employee or group of employees (Lipsky et al. 2003: 8). (2) Workplace disputes are conflicts “that ripen into formal complaints, grievances, and charges” (Lipsky and Seeber 2006: 363). (3) Litigation refers to lawsuits and charges filed with regulatory agencies. In general, it has been noted that conflict centres on three factors within the communication field: incompatibilities, an expressed struggle and interdependence between two or more parties (Putnam 2006).

Traditionally, conflicts have been viewed as impediments to organizational functioning. From this perspective, conflicts need to be judiciously controlled, because “social interaction itself is a negative force, and this is so because human beings are incapable of engaging in either social interaction or conflict without destructive consequences” (Bush & Folger 2005: 247). However, others argue that conflicts are vital for modern organizations; they are “not only essential to the growth, change, and evolution of living systems, but [are], as well, a system’s primary defence against stagnation, detachment, entropy, and eventual extinction” (Ruben 1978: 206). Similarly, Aula (1999; 2000) argues that conflicts are an important force in bringing out the differences among agents’ opinions, logics and worldviews, which, in turn, leads to more creative and novel outcomes. Individual level conflict interaction is crucial because it ultimately changes the whole social environment (Bush & Folger 2005).

Within the field of communication, three models of organizational conflict management have dominated (Putnam 2006). First, the integrative and distributive negotiation model, based on Walton and McKersie’s (1965) work on labour negotiations, examines formal approaches to conflict management. Second, the mediation competency model refers to third party interventions in conflicts. Finally, the dual concern model focuses on informal, individual level conflict management in organizations. Several researchers (e.g., Guetzkow & Gyr 1954; Pinkley 1990; Jehn 1997; Amason 1996) have suggested that there are two dimensions that are relevant for managing conflict: disagreements relating to substantive issues and disagreements relating to affective issues (Jehn 1997). The substantive dimension refers to disagreements relating to tasks, policies, and other organizational issues (Rahim 2002). The affective dimension refers to issues that “are generally caused by the negative reactions of organizational members (e.g. personal attacks of group members, racial disharmony, sexual harassment)” (Rahim 2002: 208). There is a widespread unanimity that a moderate amount of substantive conflict is valuable and even essential for organizational development, whereas affective conflict impedes organizational performance at various levels (Rahim 2002). However, some

scholars (e.g., Tjosvold 2008) argue that the two dimensions are inseparable and should not be examined separately: “[T]he kind or source of conflict is not the culprit; it is how people manage it that determines its course and outcomes” (Tjosvold 2008: 25). We too stress the role of management in determining whether conflict becomes functional or dysfunctional to the organization.

According to Rahim (2002), if they are to be effective, conflict management strategies should satisfy certain criteria. First, conflict management strategies should be designed to improve organizational learning. Instead of dealing with conflict “within the existing structure and processes of an organization” (ibid.: 212), one should challenge the status quo by enabling organizational members to challenge the underlying policies, assumptions, and goals. Second, strategies should be designed to include “the right stakeholders to solve the right problems” (ibid.: 209). Conflicts are often complex issues that involve multiple parties. Including all the relevant parties in problem-solving leads to collective learning and organizational effectiveness. Finally, conflict management should be ethical. That is, the design should enable conflict management that leads to “ethical actions that benefit humankind” (ibid. 209) on the leadership as well as on other stakeholder levels.

The present article is conceptual in nature and falls within the area of organizational communication in communication research. In the past decade, there has been a “Copernican revolution” (Mumby 2006) within the field of organizational communication that has shifted the focus from linear process models to interpretive, nonlinear perspectives on communication (Putnam & Boys 2006). However, the study of organizational conflict management has been dominated by the linear process view to date (e.g., Nicotera & Dorsey 2006). The underlying purpose of the present article is to apply an interpretive organizational communication view to the study of organizational conflict management. The approach is macro-oriented by nature, thus discussion of micro-level consequences and phenomena is limited by choice.

In particular, the prevailing model of systematic organizational conflict management, namely conflict management system (CMS), is examined from a communicative perspective, and directions for improvement are suggested. The article starts by describing the main features of CMS followed by a discussion of the underlying communication view of CMS. Next, conflict management is considered from a fresh perspective of social complexity augmented with an interpretative view of organizational communication. Two models are utilized – dual function of communication and the arena model – to portray a blanket of strategies available for organizational conflict management. All in all, the purpose is to shed light on the limitedness of CMS in providing a strategic approach to organizational conflict management on a macro scale.

Conflict Management System (CMS)

Conflict management system (CMS) refers to “a comprehensive set of policies designed to manage workplace conflict” (Lipsky & Seeber 2006: 371). The concept of a ‘system’ (von Bertalanffy 1951; Boulding 1956) was first adopted by conflict researchers and practitioners two decades ago (Constantino & Merchant 1996; Slaikeu & Hasson 1998; Ury et al. 1989). There is no one clear definition of CMS; however, all the prevailing CMS definitions are based on the principles of general system theory at least to some

degree. For example, Constantino and Merchant (1996) indicated the following characteristics of CMS: boundaries, purpose, inputs, transformation, outputs, and feedback. Slaikeu and Hasson (1998) in turn based their model on principles that include directives on various issues such as the preferred path, a template with internal and external system components, checkpoints and evaluations.

The Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR; Gosline et al. 2001) examined critical points of CMS and introduced the concept of an integrated conflict management system (ICMS). The society argued that ICMS is a more comprehensive version of CMS. In particular, SPIDR developed a set of guidelines and provisions for the scope, culture, access points, options and support structures of CMS. SPIDR also highlighted the importance of fairness and proper due process protocol. It noted that CMS models are often centred on formal dispute resolution processes such as grievance procedures and mediation. Although necessary, such processes are not sufficient because “they usually address the symptoms of conflict, not the sources... An integrated conflict management system addresses the sources of conflict and provides a method for promoting competence in dealing with conflict throughout the organization” (Gosline et al. 2001: 8).

Albeit structurally varying, all CMS models offer basically the same venues for conflict management. According to Bendersky (2003), CMS often consists of three types of conflict management options: rights-based processes, interest-based processes and negotiated processes. Rights-based processes, such as grievances and arbitration, involve third parties determining the outcome of a conflict based on laws, contracts or standards of behaviour (Ury et al. 1989). Interest-based processes, such as mediation and facilitation, include third parties that help participants reach agreements without determining outcomes for them. Finally, negotiated processes cover “all efforts by individual disputants to resolve conflicts for themselves, without any third-party interventions” (Bendersky 2003: 645). Power-based processes such as strikes and picketing can also be considered a type of conflict management; however, they are generally not included in organizational CMSs. Typically, organizations utilize only the rights-based processes systematically (Lipsky & Seeber 2006; Bendersky 2003). According to Lipsky and Seeber (2006), a typical organization in the US “waits for conflicts to evolve into litigation, and only then begins to manage ‘conflict’” (362).

In addition to types of conflict management processes, CMS scholars emphasize the importance of organizational support structures. Gosline et al. (2001), for example, emphasize the importance of management support, appropriate culture and training. They also advocate the concepts of fairness and due process in the design and operation of CMS. Some CMS scholars argue that in order to implement a CMS, a culture change is always necessary (Lipsky & Seeber 2006).

CMS and Organizational Communication

Communication has been found to play an integrative role in conflict and conflict management (e.g., Putnam 2006; Aula & Siira 2007; Putnam & Poole 1987; Ruben 1978; Thomas & Pondy 1977). Thomas and Pondy (1977) considered communication to be the factor “with which we are most concerned in understanding conflict management” (1100). Ruben (1978) in turn pointed out that assumptions about the nature of commu-

nication lead to different conceptualizations of conflict, which is a major factor when people make decisions about the proper ways to approach conflicts.

We argue that CMS harbours a conventional, mechanistic view of human communication. This view is rooted in information theory (Bowman & Targowski 1987). Despite its undisputed significance to the study of communication, the model is by nature reductionistic and sender-centred and could be characterized as a straight derivative of the so-called linear main paradigm of human communication: $A \rightarrow B = X$ or in other words, A communicates something to B, resulting in X (Thayer 1978; Littlejohn 1978).

From the CMS perspective, information theory-led conflict communication is associated with the balancing and strengthening of a system's structure (Aula 1996; 1999). Accordingly, new information is also primarily centred on strengthening already existing communication structures. Communication process models are linear, predictable, rational and related to positivistic frames of reference in organizational studies.

The linear approach to communication assumes that conflict is a deviation from harmony and normality. Conflict is presumed to be "a consequence – or at least evidence – of a stoppage, breakdown, error, or deterioration in communication" (Ruben 1978: 205). This view has dominated conflict research to date (Nicotera & Dorsey 2006), even though various scholars objected to this view already decades ago (e.g., Hawes & Smith 1973; Miller 1974; Ruben 1978).

CMS Conventions

According to some scholars, organizational conflict management research has not kept up with the changes in practice (e.g., Hughes 2004; Lewicki et al. 1992; Nicotera & Dorsey 2006; Putnam 2006; Bush & Folger 2005). It has been argued that the predominant worldview of linearity, reductionism, objectivism, determinism, prediction and rationality restricts the way we think about conflict and conflict management (Hughes 2004; Nicotera & Dorsey 2006). Conflict has been viewed as a social phenomenon of rights, interests and power that can be managed with the right tools and careful analyses. CMS endorses the same assumptions.

Aula and Siira (2007) examined the dominant individual level organizational conflict management framework, namely the dual concern model, from a communicative perspective and found it to be unsatisfactory in many ways. They noted that the assumptions of linearity, reductionism and determinism are present in at least four aspects of individual level conflict management: the purpose of conflict management, control in conflict interaction, approaches to conflict and conflict outcomes. We maintain that problems in the conventional CMS also stem from the traditional view of organization, which is heavily rooted in the mechanistic communication conception, as noted above. Below, we highlight four factors that we regard as significant in organizational level conflict management: conflict communication, purpose, control and options.

Conflict Communication

The mechanistic communication conception is notably present in the CMS view of conflict communication. Communication focuses on specific existing facts, while leaders are the primary architects of meaning. Moreover, conflicts are managed by adhering to

fixed processes in a controlled environment. This view is in line with monologic leadership (Fairhurst 2001), which prohibits the view that meaning could be contested. Given the complexity of conflict and the role of conflict in the development and renewal of an organization, such a view seems fraught with difficulties.

Purpose

Drawing on the mechanistic model of communication, organizational functioning depends upon a flawless transmission of information, which is the main purpose of CMS. Hence, CMS treats conflict as an unconstructive force that needs to be systematically abolished. “Management” refers to “resolution” or “determination” rather than to dealing with difficult and unpleasant issues. The system reacts to a conflict once the conflict becomes too harmful to the organization. Usually this means judicial resolution rather than exploration of the underlying reasons for the conflict.

Control

CMS follows a conventional view of leadership, “where in a figure-ground arrangement the individual is figure, the system is background, and communication is incidental or, at best, intervening” (Fairhurst 2001: 383). Control of the process is separated from the actual parties to the conflict and given to an outside authority, such as a mediator or a manager. This approach concurs with monologic leadership, which “conceives of members as largely surrendering their right to make meanings by virtue of their employment contract within a hierarchical organization” (Fairhurst 2001: 387). From this point of view, the control orientation of CMS is insufficient, at the least.

Options

CMS models are normally designed to treat conflicts generically, that is, conflicts are treated as a tangible substance and the members of the organization are viewed as an undifferentiated mass. Accordingly, CMS options typically address only the explicitly “severe” conflicts, while systematic management of apparently lesser conflicts is ignored. Options are limited to interest- and rights-based processes, while the lesser disagreements are managed ad libitum by the personnel along with their other daily responsibilities.

The Social Complexity View of Conflict

Social complexity generally refers to an approach to social phenomena that examines organizations as complex systems, where complexity refers to “a high degree of systemic interdependence, which, among other things, leads to nonlinearity, emergent order creation, and other surprising dynamics” (Hazy et al. 2007: 4). As opposed to a general systems approach, social complexity is not concerned with individual agents in an organization; rather “the heart of the new complexity paradigm is on the interactions and networks that *connect* [emphasis in the original] individual agents or elements” (Hazy et al. 2007: 5). A complex system demonstrates emergent behaviour that “resides only in

the system as a whole and not in any of the constituent pieces” (Hughes 2004: 685).

Changes in a complex system occur within certain limits under which long-term changes in particular are impossible to predict (Lorenz 1972). In organizations, for example, norms, routines, conventions and values have been believed to constitute a means with which to regulate the overall stability of social structures (Goldspink & Kay 2003; Dolan et al. 2003). Yet the system is never totally predictable, meaning that a small change in the initial conditions may generate disproportionate organizational change.

Human organizations have qualities strikingly similar to all natural complex systems; however, there are certain fundamental characteristics that distinguish human organizations from all other complex systems. Along with several other scholars, we believe that communication is one of these factors (e.g., Aula & Siira 2007; Dolan et al. 2003; Goldspink & Kay 2003; Jones 2003; Lansing 2003; Stacey 2003).

Social Complexity and Organizational Communication

We maintain that a social complexity perspective on conflict enables an interpretative view of organizational communication. In other words, whereas the mechanistic model treats nonlinearity, disorder, chaos and emergence as system defects, social complexity embraces these qualities as natural parts of human, and thus organizational, communication. The interpretative view conceptualizes communication as a negotiation and an exchange of meaning (see Fiske 1990; O’Sullivan et al. 1994). Similar to Brent Ruben (1978), we too view communication as “a systemic or transactional process involving the transformation of symbols as a means by which living things organize with one another and their environment” (Ruben 1978: 203). This definition concurs in part with the notion that communication is a process, yet the “outcome” is not the linear transmission of information, but the nonlinear production of interpretations (Aula 1999). Meanings are co-constructed: “[T]here is no leader or constituent, only individuals engaged in a dialogue of conversing and listening” (Fairhurst 2001: 388). As opposed to the deterministic and positivistic process view, “the individual takes an active, constructive role in creating knowledge through language and communication. Individuals are neither passive nor reactive, but intentional and reflexively self-aware” (ibid.: 385).

The central purpose of communication is generally to keep the organization up-to-date, to renew common beliefs and to make sense of complex, unordered meaning structures (e.g., Weick 1995). Nevertheless, communication can also break the existing meaning-making structures and create intentional disintegration, which can foster emergent properties in the organization. This notion of the dual function of organizational communication (Aula 1996, 1999, 2000) is based on the idea that organizational communication embodies both integrative and dissipative elements with which one can create or reduce the diversity of the existing meaning structures and, consequently, increase the chance of emergence of new meanings in the unfolding interaction (Aula 1996, 1999).

The dual function helps to explain the indeterminate nature of conflict interaction and the challenge of conflict management. The two qualities of communication draw interaction in separate directions while giving parties an opportunity to influence the conflict process. Instead of interveners and conflict parties having to adapt to fixed processes, the processes adapt to the needs of the parties in conflict and to the unfolding conflict interaction. So far, CMS has been the flagship strategy and framework for

addressing organizational conflicts. However, CMS offers a rather biased and one-sided approach to organizational conflict management. That is, CMS has utilized solely the integrative means of communication (literal, intentional, controlled, and monophonic communication).

Organizational communication occurs in communicative arenas (Stacey 1991), that is, all organizational surroundings in which we create and share meanings and make sense of our experiences. This includes surroundings inside and outside an organization. Arenas are places in which organizational members and stakeholders encounter each other and create representations and interpretations (Aula 1999, 2000). We suggest that two distinctive types of communication arenas can be identified, which are also the places where conflicts are managed.

Institutional arenas (Stacy 1991) are typical examples of arenas in which communication is predominantly integrating (Aula 1999). Communication processes are formed from the top down, and the communication is controlled, regulated and literal. CMS practices typically fall in this category (i.e., rights- and interest-based processes). Institutional arenas represent arenas that are intentionally constructed and draw their appearance from an organization's formal structures, rules and processes. They also appear in documentary form as employee manuals, codes, notices and reports. Institutional arenas are often constantly scheduled, formal in behaviour and limited in participation. In personal encounters, institutional arenas take the form of board meetings, briefings, weekly meetings and project assemblies.

Spontaneous arenas (Stacey 1991), on the other hand, are formed unofficially and informally (Aula 1996). If they are formed intentionally, then they are highly spontaneous and free in means and form. Some examples of spontaneous arenas include work groups, informal powwows and corridor talk that arise around certain topics. Spontaneous arenas enable the use of dissipative communication in which interaction is free of hierarchy or conflict and is unexpected (Aula 2000). As opposed to communication in institutional arenas, communication and its outcomes in spontaneous arenas are highly sensitive to context. Spontaneous arenas are common to all organizational members, and it is fairly safe to assume that most interactions among organizational members occur in these arenas. Negotiation-based processes, as identified by Bendersky (2003), could be included in spontaneous arenas; however, they typically fall outside the realm of CMS.

Towards Strategic Conflict Management

We believe that conflict management is closely interconnected with the conceptualization of an organization's communication systems and cultures. Whereas organizations have traditionally been piloted towards a unified culture in which the ideal has been harmonious and predictable relations among various stakeholders (Aula 1996), we argue that recognition of the dual function of communication gives organizations the opportunity to rethink conflict management beyond the limits of traditional CMS (i.e., systematic resolution and the reduction of emerging conflicts). The conceptualization of an organization's communication systems and cultures, however, needs further explanation.

Cultures in the arenas are characterized by the nature of their communication or by which of the two communicative qualities is dominant. Using the dual function of communication, Aula (1996, 1999) described the diversity of organizational cultures using

four interconnected fields. Anarchist culture is formed when an arena is characterized by high dissipative communication and low integrative communication. Monolithic culture emerges when integrative communication dominates and dissipative communication is low. A vacuum of cultures is formed when both qualities are low. Finally, a struggle of cultures occurs when both qualities are high.

The system approach views organizational cultures, and arenas, mainly as monolithic, that is, the dissipative quality of communication neither exists nor is it desirable. The same applies to the CMS approach to conflict; conflicts are preferably managed in institutional arenas where the status quo of the organization and the system can be maintained. Conflict, in turn, is characterized by a high level of integrative communication and low levels of dissipative communication. In other words, the conflict arena is also consistent with the monolithic culture, whereas the other possible cultures are not really considered valid.

The evolution of an arena is dependent upon the relationship among the cultures and the dual function of communication (Aula 1996; 1999). According to Aula (1999), communication influences the way an arena operates, while being simultaneously influenced by the arena’s culture structure; therefore, “neither arena, cultures, nor communication can be understood in isolation from one another” (Aula 1999: 193). As opposed to CMS, conflict management structures are not fitted to the organization, but rather structures emerge instead as conflict arenas.

The Arena Model of Conflict Strategies

We utilized Aula’s (1996, 1999) framework by applying some of its ideas to organizational conflict management. Aula’s model has also been applied, for example, to strategic reputation management. Aula and Mantere (2008) have formulated an arena model of organizational reputation in which companies meet their audiences and compete for their reputations in different communicative arenas.

Our arena model is based on two elementary aspects of the complex conflict system: the communicative and the circumstantial aspects. The communicative processes work according to a dual function – integrating or dissipating current meaning (Aula 1999), thereby determining the cultural essence and the dynamics of a system. Circumstantial aspects refer to the cultural ambiances of institutional and spontaneous arenas, the two fundamental surroundings in which organizational conflicts are played out, as discussed above. In order to cope with the dynamic circumstances, we differentiated among four strategies that an organization’s CMS should acknowledge: consolidating, suppressing, shaking and engaging (see Table 1).

Table 1. *The Arena Model of Conflict Strategies*

		Communication	
		<i>Integrative</i>	<i>Dissipative</i>
Circumstances	<i>Institutional</i>	Consolidating	Suppressing
	<i>Spontaneous</i>	Shaking	Engaging

Consolidating

Consolidating represents the typical CMS approach. It is the ideal strategy when the conflict issue is impersonal and simple in nature and can be resolved in an institutional arena. Here, conflicting opinions are expected to surface only rarely, and when they do, they are clear in focus, integrative in nature and predictable in outcome. Thus, the system solves them routinely and mechanically. Consolidating requires participants to surrender control of an issue readily to a neutral authority and continue the working relationship as it was prior to the encounter. People are generally in good agreement about the course of action in an organization, and communication follows the official channels. Consolidating is usually considered a desirable strategy, because people often experience change as uncomfortable; moreover, people have limited skills and limited opportunity to manage conflicts.

In sum, consolidating is analogous to the ideals of CMS in that it emphasizes individuals' and organizations' rights; conflicts are defined strictly by subject, participants and interests; consolidating encourages using the official channels of conflict management; and decision-making power is outsourced from the actual participants. Consolidating also focuses on explicit, escalated conflicts instead of nascent conflicts and undercurrents. In terms of conflict type or conflict source, as identified by some scholars (e.g., Rahim 2002; Jehn 1997; Amason 1996), consolidating adheres to the substantive, task dimension of conflict rather than to the more indefinite, affective aspect of conflict. Consolidating is an ideal that rarely endures, even though organizational leadership and official proclamations claim otherwise.

Suppressing

Suppressing represents the undesirable, yet common, reality of organizational conflict management. It emerges when a conflict issue is complex and personal in nature, yet the issue is handled in an institutional arena. Here, organization tries to adhere to the prevailing conflict management structures and conventions that do not allow for elaborate opinions or discussions. Communication is kept formal by the organization; however, conflict participants do not consider the available channels to be sufficient to address their concerns. The conflict is complex in nature, yet the conditions only support handling of clear-cut issues and traditional problem solving. Here, conflict is likely to possess a strong affective dimension, which one prefers to stifle so that it does not lead to dysfunctional outcomes. Ignorance of certain parts, often the personal and salient parts, of a conflict easily leads to unexpected and unwarranted actions, such as recrimination, escalation and frustration.

In practice, suppressing is manifested as underestimations and oversimplifications of the problem, involving unnecessary third parties, union representatives or company lawyers. Attention is drawn away from the real problem to its superficial aspects and from the actual participants to outside experts.

Shaking

Shaking represents a proactive move in conflict management whereby an organization utilizes dissipative communication and informal communication channels in dealing with

a conflict. Shaking indicates the handling of a somewhat straightforward and factual issue in a spontaneous arena. Such a situation occurs when the organization is destined to bury itself wholeheartedly in problems. Shaking may also be used to promote a commitment to handling conflicts in a thorough manner.

At best, shaking allows for and utilizes dissipative communication to manage conflicts comprehensively and humanely and to encourage all opinions to surface. However, shaking may become problematic if what is essentially a factual issue is pointlessly complicated.

Engaging

Engaging represents a situation in which a conflict is amply and carefully explored. In other words, the conflict is engaged in a spontaneous arena to match a complex and highly personal issue. Engaging can work to an organization's benefit if it awakens the introduction of fresh ideas and viewpoints. On the other hand, engaging may not be a desirable strategy because the real issues are likely to be clouded even further, and thus, relationships may become jeopardized. Sometimes engaging occurs because of communicative inabilities on one or both sides.

Our model illustrates the four conflict strategies that can be drawn from the examination of organizational conflict management from a social complexity perspective utilizing the concepts of communicative arenas and dual function of communication. Of the above strategies, none is automatically the most desirable. We suggest that organizational conflict management should employ all of them to ease conflict conditions. From our perspective, CMS offers a constricted array of arenas in which to manage conflict. Organizational conflicts are played out on institutional arenas, including processes such as grievances, arbitration, and mediation, which do not aim at challenging the existing meaning structures and consequently lead to organizational learning. The integrative quality of conflict communication is addressed based on predetermined processes, codes, and rules, while the dissipative quality of communication is ignored, downplayed, or suppressed.

CMS Conventions Reinterpreted

Examining organizational conflict management from a social complexity viewpoint raises concerns about the ideals of traditional CMS thinking. This concern also becomes apparent from an examination of the four CMS conventions, as identified earlier. These conventions are examined below from a social complexity perspective (see also Table 2).

Conflict Communication

From a social complexity perspective, conflict always carries both integrative and dissipative qualities of communication, contesting the existing meaning structures and renewing beliefs. Conflicts are by nature indeterminate. "They do not exist in fixed form prior to the application of particular dispute processing techniques; they are instead constituted and transformed as they are processed" (Sarat 1988: 708). The meaning of a conflict is co-developed by the members of the organization; the social domain of

conflict is created, maintained and changed through communicative action. Conflict and communication are co-developed, “thus communication is not an input, moderator, or mediator of outcomes; it becomes the conflict itself” (Putnam 2006: 18).

Purpose

From a social complexity perspective, conflicts are natural, inevitable and necessary for organizational development. Conflicts are critical in renewing organizations, as they are antecedents and outcomes of organizational diversity. From this perspective, local interactions and communication processes have significant effects on the management of an organization; conflicts emerge from micro-diversity and bring out differences in agents’ opinions, logics and worldviews (Aula 1999). Thus, instead of direct and systematic resolution of conflict, conflicts should be managed indirectly, that is, facilitating conditions by shifting the relationship between dissipative and integrative qualities of communication.

Control

A social complexity framework stresses that no one person has absolute or objective control over conflict interaction. Control is continuous, because “[i]n our interaction with each other we constrain and enable each other, and that is control” (Stacey 2003: 37). Unlike in the CMS approach, control cannot be obtained by one of the parties or by a facilitator; instead, a course of action is mandated by contextual factors that are shaped by all parties. Structure and order need not, and cannot, be imposed, but emerge from the interaction of the parties (Bush & Folger 2005).

Options

According to the social complexity approach, rights- and interest-based options are not sufficient to address all organizational conflicts, but should be supplemented with the facilitation of spontaneous arenas. Systematically, this could be achieved by providing options for interpersonal communication and by empowering employees to take initiatives in conflict situations. Instead of treating conflicts as tangible substances and members of an organization as an undifferentiated mass, options should address the variability and complexity of conflicts and their parties.

Table 2. Comparison of the Conventions Underlying CMS and the Social Complexity Approaches

	CMS	Social complexity
Organizational communication	Mechanistic	Interpretative
Conflict communication	Integrative	Integrative/dissipative
Purpose	Reduction of conflict	Facilitation of conditions
Control	Authoritative/personified	Contextual
Options	Institutional	Institutional/spontaneous

Implications

The arena model of conflict strategies suggests that the flagship framework for strategic conflict management, CMS, operates from rather limited foundations of institutional arenas. An examination of underlying conventions reveals that CMS design aims at strengthening the deep-seated structures and belief systems that conflicts actually attempt to challenge. The ideal of CMS is to address conflicts that possess predominantly integrative qualities of communication. Such conflicts could include disagreements on routine tasks and policies. We argue, however, that conflict always carries both integrative and dissipative communication dimensions. Thus, we argue that CMS should also include the spontaneous arenas so as to match the complexity of conflict and enable organizational learning.

Ideally, an updated CMS would address conflicts in appropriate conditions whether they are spontaneous or institutional. Depending on the nature of conflict, both arenas could be utilized in parallel or in tandem. CMS would be flexible and could be adapted to the requirements of a particular conflict process. Instead of forcing the conflict into a predetermined process, CMS would enable various options by which the issue may be handled.

A few propositions emerged from our investigation. First, we maintain that one should endeavour to reduce the controlling nature of CMS. In other words, one should break down the existing grievance procedures that force conflicts to be handled by outside authorities using traditional problem-solving techniques. Most organizations utilize only the rights-based processes; thus, conflicts that fall outside the purview of the system design may be excluded from effective conflict management altogether. In fact, CMS has been criticized for not being able to address conflicts using suitable methods. CMS has been limited to methods that do not address the needs of human beings. In fact, parties to a conflict are sometimes encouraged to modify the conflict in terms that fit the system, not the other way around. Folger et al. (2005) demonstrated how disputes are introduced to interveners in ways that match third parties' modes of intervention. They noted that "in the organizational context, employees sometimes select issues and define disputes in ways that will increase the likelihood that they will be addressed by their managers" (300–301). As noted by Bush and Folger (2005), conflict is not merely "or primarily, about rights, interests, or power. Although it implicates all those things, conflict is also, and most importantly, about peoples' interaction with one another as human beings" (49).

Second, we propose that options be provided that address the complex nature of conflict. In practice, this means giving tools and power to micro-level actors, with the primary constituents determining the consequences and outcomes of conflict. The quick fix would be to genuinely include negotiated processes in CMS (Bendersky 2003). This in turn requires giving tools, options, and time for conflict participants to play out the differences without managerial or other third party intervention. In order to achieve this, organizational members' conflict awareness and skills should be increased through continual training. Training and employee empowerment should be acknowledged as some of the most significant elements of modern conflict management (Aula & Siira 2007), whereas in the past, training has been considered a "support structure" of CMS (Gosline et al. 2001).

Third, a culture that honours dissent, disagreement, and trust should be promoted. According to Aula and Siira (2007), leadership plays a significant role in the promotion

of suitable conflict conditions, because leaders are responsible for the creation and translation of symbols in organizations and for the flow of information. However, instead of forcing organization-wide change processes, one should start from within by “carefully examining one’s own assumptions and perceptions of organizational dynamics, especially the beliefs concerning conflict management” (ibid.: 381). Instead of simplifying conflict issues and neglecting relationships, special attention should be paid to them. Conflicts are often complex in nature, and healthy and ongoing relationships are crucial in organizational settings. This view emphasizes the ideology of social connection and conflict transformation (Folger & Bush 2005), according to which conflict is essentially a positive phenomenon and human beings are able to enter into constructive conversations.

Finally, a broader look at organizational conflict management should be taken. CMS is designed to address only workplace conflicts and normally ignores stakeholders from outside an organization. The arena model offers such a broad view. Blurring the interface between work and home and between work and leisure means more potential for unexpected outcomes and effects. For example, petty conflicts have the potential to escalate into serious threats to an organization’s reputation. Inability to rise to the challenge of unpredictability is a serious, and realistic, threat to organizations.

Conclusions

The present article is an attempt to apply an interpretive communication view to the examination of organizational conflict management, particularly on a systemic level.

The approach was chosen to augment the research on organizational conflict management that has traditionally followed a linear transmission model of communication. We maintain that an interpretive perspective is helpful in identifying some of the weaknesses of the dominant strategic conflict management model CMS.

Thus far, CMS has employed only the institutional communication options and structures; yet we argue that that approach is not sufficient to manage organizational conflicts properly. In fact, the greatest problems with CMS models have been their immutability, reactivity and limitedness. This is not to say that dissipative communication and spontaneous arenas do not form at all in organizations that employ CMS. On the contrary, conflicts are often discussed in spontaneous arenas, albeit without conscious efforts to facilitate such conditions (Aula 1996).

The arena model was presented to offer a full spectrum of strategies available for organizational conflict management. It reveals the weaknesses of CMS and the directions for necessary change. In the future, it will be essential to convert the theory into practice. In particular, one should identify and look for practices that epitomize the strategies of spontaneous circumstances, shaking and engaging, and integrate them into CMS design.

Finally, it should be noted that the majority of the current CMS literature has originated in North America, thus there are no relevant points of comparison from other parts of the world. Interest in CMS has started to grow, for example in the Nordic countries (e.g., Jordan 2005). However, there is need for more extensive and solid academic examination. We believe that despite its current deficiencies, a CMS would benefit organizations in all cultures. It would be valuable to examine the systemic approaches to strategic conflict management outside North America to obtain a baseline for CMS.

Note

1. The authors have contributed equally to the article.

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