

# DYNAMICS OF POWER IN TEAMS: A LEADERS' ROLE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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**Abstract**— A review of power as an inherent characteristic of social and organizational life, how its' differences shape conflict in organizational teams is known. But little is known about its role in conflict resolution. The theoretical framework on the conflict account of power dynamics in teams underpins the role of a leader in conflict resolution, and a detailed review of literature enunciates the same.

**Index Terms**— Conflict Resolution, Cooperative power, Dynamics of power, Leader, Teams

## I. INTRODUCTION

*"The difference between success and failure is a great team."*

In a fresh research done by ADP research Institute 2019 on employee engagement and published in the Harvard Business Review they discovered the power of well-functioning teams to engage employees. The researchers also conclude that the share of employees who are fully engaged more than doubles if they are on teams, and not just any teams but well-functioning teams.

Teams are social in nature with team members having high task interdependency and shared, common values [Salas, Cooke & Rosen, 2008]. Power, like other essential organizational phenomena, has been studied through the years from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Each approach has contributed to our understanding of power and influence in organizations; however, each is aspectual; focusing on particular aspects of power at the expense of our understanding of others. Team power is based on the control of resources that enables a team to influence others in the company. Some literature generally suggests that effective team leaders express their need for power and influence in ways that create value to the organization. [Harold, 2012]. In this literature review, the most information was available on the influence of dynamics of power for conflict resolution.

## II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are as follows: -

- i. To understand the dynamics of power,
- ii. To examine the influence of power dynamics on team leader, in conflict resolution

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY USED

The paper examines selected literature on dynamics of power and conflict resolution with the aim of building a theoretical framework. It identifies the role of power, specifically cooperative power in resolving the conflicts in an organization.

## IV. THE CONCEPT OF POWER

"Power is simply the ability to get things done the way one wants them to be done" [Salancik & Pfeffer, 1989]. Social action depends on power just as physical movement depends on energy. [Bennis et al. 1969: 153]. Power distribution is usually visible within organizations. For many of us, the word evokes a lot of negative feelings and associations. "We frown upon those in power", "the greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse" and "power is the source of all evil". These are just a few sayings that are used when referring to power. The phrase, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" was first said by English historian John Emerich Edward Dalberg, who warned that power was inherently evil and its holders were not to be trusted. Yet, power is not necessarily constraining, negative or antagonistic. Power can be creative, empowering and positive. [Stewart, David, Nelson, 2006]

On one hand, powerful CEOs can align an entire organization to move together to achieve goals. Amazing philanthropists such as Paul Farmer, a doctor who brought hospitals, medicine, and doctors to remote Haiti, and Greg Mortenson, a mountaineer who founded the Central Asia Institute and built schools across Pakistan, draw on their own power to organize others toward lofty goals; they have changed the lives of thousands of individuals in countries around the world for the better [Kidder, 2004; Mortenson & Relin, 2006].

## V. REVIEW ON DYNAMICS OF POWER IN TEAM

Power is a critical resource for organizational actors. It is an elusive concept because it has so many manifestations. Everyone has many potential sources of power, most of which he or she is often unaware. Some are independent of the conflict while others can be enhanced or diminished by the process of conflict [Bernard, 2000, p. 54].

The term, "power dynamics" is used to describe how the relative levels of power of two or more people/groups impact their interactions with one another.

Mary Parker Follett: Power-over versus Power-with

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Mary Parker Follett, writing in the 1920s, offered a different perspective on power. Follett argued that even though power in organizations was usually conceived of as “power-over” others, that it would also be possible to develop the conception of “power-with” others. She envisioned this type of power as jointly developed; co-active and noncoercive [Follett, 1973].

By jointly developing power with workers, managers set the stage for a fair fight. She wrote, “That is always our problem, not how to get control of people, but how all together we can get control of a situation.” Cooperative power, then, is that type of power that brings about constructive outcomes for all. It motivates people to search out each other’s abilities and to appreciate their contributions, to negotiate and influence each other to exchange resources that will help them both be more productive, and to encourage each other to develop and enhance their valued abilities. In fact, Follett suggested that one of the most effective ways to limit the use of coercive power strategies was to develop the idea, the capacity, and the conditions that foster cooperative power.

As such, she was able to rise above the dualistic power struggles between labor and management that threatened the survival of many organizations during her time. She did so by encouraging both groups to see the value of working together to improve their mutual situation. This was Follett’s attempt to temper scientific management practices with her own “science of the situation”, where labor and management collaborated to define acceptable rates of productivity and social justice [Boje and Rosile, 2001].

Thus, cooperative power was consistent with the values and intentions of the emerging human relations school of management. The underlying values and assumptions of cooperative power are in contrast to those of power-as-control. These include: 1) It is possible to create power and enhance everyone’s situation through mutually cooperative efforts, 2) Under certain conditions, people will share their power with others, 3) Power relations are bi-directional and mutually interdependent, 4) Often, promotively interdependent goals exist between A and B, as does the opportunity for mutually satisfying outcomes to be achieved, and 5) People’s power can be positively affected by harmonious relations with others and through their openness to the influence of others (Coleman and Tjosvold, 2000).

## VI. THE CONCEPT OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict can be described as a contentious process of interpersonal or inter-group interaction that takes place within a larger social context. [Ho-Won,1999] “Conflict arises from the clash of perceptions, goals, or values in an arena where people care about the outcome” [Alessandra, 1993, p. 92].

Conflict resolution means very different things to different people. To the military strategist it may mean the most sophisticated means of deterrence, even a first strike against a potential enemy if this seems necessary to prevent a more protracted confrontation. Resolving conflict may include for the lawyer a court determination made on the basis of legal norms and legal argument; even the death penalty may be seen as resolution in some circumstances. For the industrial negotiator, resolution implies some settlement arrived at through bargaining, even if it involves the loss of jobs. For the traditional mediator it may mean pressing for some compromise that seems reasonable, despite a possible sense of injustice by weaker parties.

For our purposes, conflict resolution means terminating conflict by methods that are analytical and that get to the root of the problem. Conflict resolution, as opposed to mere management or “settlement,” points to an outcome that, in the view of the parties involved, is a permanent solution to the problem. Because it seeks to get at the source of problems, conflict resolution aims not merely to resolve the immediate social conflict, the immediate family or ethnic dispute, but also to provide insights into the generic nature of the problem and thus

to contribute to the elimination of its sources and the prevention of other instances. It is, in short, analytical problem solving.

## The principles of conflict resolution

Four basic principles underlie most approaches to conflict resolution: (1) conflict resolution is a cooperative endeavour, (2) the solutions sought are integrative ones, (3) the foundation is an understanding of all parties’ interests, and (4) both the process and its outcome are nonviolent. [Christie, Wagner, Winter, 2001]

## VII. INFLUENCE OF LEADERS’ POWER ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION

If the management of the conflict is not effective, it can totally disrupt the entire group process. However, the old saying “that which does not kill us will make us stronger” illustrates how successfully managed conflict can benefit the group.

Team leaders’ role in managing conflict

“Conflicts are part of individual relationships and organizational development, and no relationship or organization can hope to mature to productivity and be successful without being able to resolve conflicts effectively” [Cottringer, 1997, p. 6]. Clearly, one of the main responsibilities of any manager or group leader is to resolve conflict. The two key goals for a group leader are to remain impartial, and to facilitate understanding among the group members.

The empirical research on cooperation and power, although not abundant, has largely supported Follett’s propositions. In a series of studies on power and goal interdependence, [Tjosvold, 1981; Tjosvold, Johnson & Johnson, 1984; Tjosvold, 1985a,b] researchers found that cooperative goals, when compared to competitive and independent goals, were found to induce “higher expectations of assistance, more assistance, greater support, more persuasion and less coercion and more trusting and friendly attitudes” between superiors and subordinates [Tjosvold, 1997, p. 297].

Coleman [1997] found that people with both chronic and primed cooperative cognitive orientations to power were more willing to share resources and involve others in decision-making processes than those with competitive orientations. In another study, powerholders who were led to believe that power was expandable in a given context (compared to a limited and thus competitive resource) developed cooperative relationships, provided support and resources to their subordinates, especially when an employee lacked the ability rather than the motivation to perform well [Tjosvold, Coleman, & Sun, 1999]. These studies support the assertion that, under cooperative situations, people want others to perform effectively and use their joint resources to enhance each other’s power and promote common objectives.

“As a team leader, one must realize the paradox that surrounds conflict. The team needs to embrace conflict as a means of generating and evaluating ideas. While at the same time, it must shy away from it to prevent anger, frustration, or alienation. The biggest challenge for the team leader is figuring out how to balance these two forces” [Brockmann, 1996, p. 61].

VIII. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

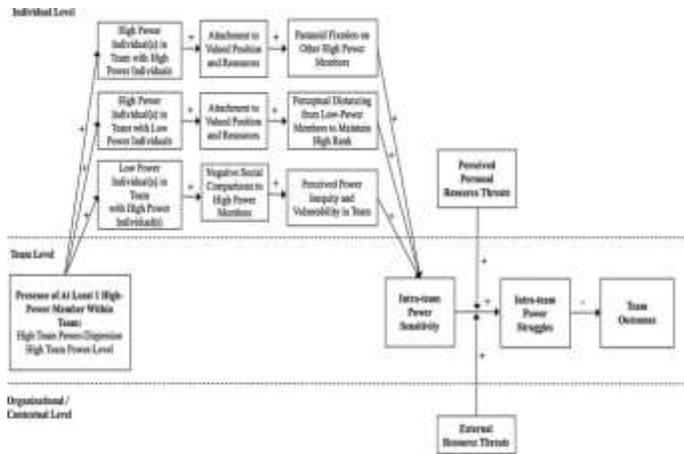


Fig. 1. The conflict account of power dynamics in teams [Source: Lindred, Lisanne, Siyu,2014]

Power over others is intertwined with an understanding of leadership processes. Yet, despite the relevance of power in an organization and the understanding of the leadership process, research studies of power and leadership are not well integrated [Hollander & Offermann, 1990].

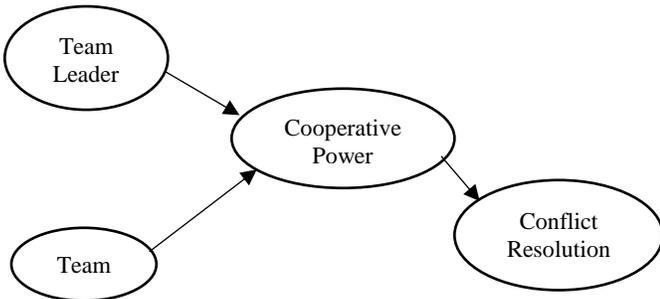


Fig. 2 The Cooperative power account of team conflict resolution [Source: Literature]

Instead of freeing workers from traditional vertical monitoring, improved systems have strengthened vertical control, and the new team related arrangements and horizontal peer monitoring [Sewell, 1998; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992], which can be a great deal more intrusive, coercive, and abusive than the traditional work processes [Barker, 1993; 1999].

Thus, in various types of business settings, demonstrating power (or influence) modifies the receiver’s behavior positively or negatively [Kovach, 2020]. Supervisors who positively influence employees are likely to produce positive outcomes. The same idea is true for supervisors who negatively use influence on teams- they are likely to produce negative outcomes. These outcomes result from the power exhibited upon the team members. Thus, team motivation can be altered based on the type of power his or her supervisor exhibits. Indeed, it cannot be an overstatement to concede that the concept of power relates to peacemaking and conflict management. [Marigat, 2017]

IX. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The mediating role of cooperative power

In conflict resolution, the aim is not to avoid conflict but rather to deal with it in a way which minimizes the negative impact and maximizes the positive potential inherent in conflict within the framework of the values of peace. That is, both the solutions which are sought, and the means by which they are sought, are judged against the criteria of being against violence, dominance, oppression, and

exploitation, and for the satisfaction of human needs for security, identity, self-determination and quality of life for all people.

When individuals or parties enter into a negotiation process to resolve conflict, they will bring a certain orientation to the table in their effort to settle the conflict. The two most basic orientations people adhere to when entering into negotiations are cooperative or competitive. A cooperative approach aligns with the process of interest-based or integrative bargaining, which leads parties to seek win-win solutions. Disputants that work cooperatively to negotiate a solution are more likely to develop a relationship of trust and come up with mutually beneficial options for settlement. The mutual gains approach is considered a constructive resolution process.

X. CONCLUSION

Conflict resolution is a learned skill that can be developed. Any leader can learn and improve his conflict resolution skills. Utilizing conflict resolution strategies using cooperative power however, requires experience through practice, persistence, patience, and reflection. An individual must be willing and open to shift one’s attitude when using conflict resolution effectively. The approach must involve dialogue rather than debate. As the strategies are used, leaders can become increasingly skilled and confident in conflict resolution, and communication in the working environment will be improved.

XI. LIMITATIONS

According to certain studies, rather than offering workers more autonomy and discretion, such cooperative team-based work arrangements often result in more intensive monitoring than would have been possible under the traditional work arrangements.

The notion of cooperative power was preceded by Marx’s concern over the development of a false consciousness among workers [Marx, 1844]. In other words, emphasizing micro-level cooperative practices in organizations can often mask the pressing need for macro-level reform [Mumby and Stohl, 1991; Barker, 1993].

Some critics emphasize that the well-intended human relations and participative management initiatives often become appropriated by management and used as subtle forms of control. For example, Mumby and Stohl [1991] demonstrated how team-based work designs can construct the illusion of worker autonomy and draw the workers’ attention away from the structure imposed on them by the management. As the structure becomes a given, conflicts among workers begin to be perceived by them as merely interpersonal ones and unrelated to management’s policies and objectives. Norms are then established to govern each worker’s obligations toward the team, and efforts are undertaken to enforce those norms, instead of reflecting upon and possibly questioning the agenda dictated from above.

XII. SCOPE OF FURTHER STUDY

Further studies to support the mediating role of cooperative power can strengthen the evidence that it can be used as an effective tool for conflict resolution. Empirical studies to support the framework can broaden the perspective on the influence of the team leader on various aspects of a team, develop new theories on power dynamics for conflict resolution.

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