

## Effects of Conflict Management Strategies on Perceptions of Intragroup Conflict

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Although conflict over ideas is thought to be beneficial to task performing groups, research documents a strong interrelation between idea-based task conflict and emotionally laden relationship conflict. The current study posits the manner in which task conflicts are managed influences subsequent relationship conflict. Two hundred seventy participants formed dyads to discuss a task issue. The conflict management strategy of one member was manipulated to examine the resulting level of relationship conflict perceived by the partner. The level of relationship conflict after the meeting was significantly impacted by the management style used during the meeting: competing produced the most, and collaborating the least, relationship conflict. Findings suggest competing to resolve task-based differences may be particularly harmful by generating relationship conflict.

*Keywords:* conflict, conflict management, team, group

Conflict presents small groups with both an obstacle and an opportunity. Conflict can be dysfunctional, harming performance and breaking down cohesion (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Sullivan & Feltz, 2001; Wheaton, 1974); meanwhile, conflict can also be beneficial, protecting the group from its natural tendency toward groupthink and status quo thinking (Gero, 1985; Turner & Pratkanis, 1997). The challenge for those using and studying groups lies in distinguishing what Deutsch (1973) termed the constructive and destructive aspects of conflict. Small group research has identified two categories or types of conflict, one presumed to be

productive and the other destructive (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995). This bipartite view prompted the idea that groups ought to promote conflict over ideas related to their task while discouraging conflicts over emotional and interpersonal issues (cf. Tjosvold, 1998). However, numerous studies have pointed out that the two types of conflict tend to coexist in groups (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b; Simons & Peterson, 2000; Tidd, McIntyre, & Friedman, 2004). Thus, teams face a dilemma: How can productive conflict be encouraged without inadvertently stimulating destructive conflict? The current study addresses this issue by exploring one potential triggering mechanism of dysfunctional conflict: conflict management strategies. Our central thesis is that task conflict managed using disagreeable strategies will be more likely to create relationship conflict than that which is handled using more agreeable strategies.

Small group conflict is a process (Thomas, 1992) that begins when at least one group member perceives a difference of opinion regarding something that is important (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a). Although there are numerous theoretical formulations of the conflict process (Bell & Song, 2005; Deutsch, 1949; Smolek,

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Hoffman, & Morain, 1999; Tjosvold, 1985), there is a consistent distinction between conflict issues or types, which are cognitive perceptions of differences, and conflict behaviors, which are verbal or behavioral actions or inactions aimed at intensifying or reducing the conflict issue (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a; Thomas, 1992). Small group research has investigated the role of both conflict issues and behaviors on group outcomes, such as performance and viability (Jehn, 1994; Janssen, Van de Vliert, & Veenstra, 1999). The following sections will outline the key empirical findings concerning both conflict types and conflict behaviors.

### Conflict Types

A conflict type is “the substantive issue in which the tension is rooted” (De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999, p. 371). Research on small groups generally maintains a distinction between two types of conflict: conflict among group members regarding their work task (task conflict), and conflict over working relationships (relationship conflict). More formally, task conflict is defined as “disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions” (Jehn, 1995, p. 284). Relationship conflict is defined as “interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which typically includes tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group” (Jehn, 1995, p. 284).

Numerous empirical studies have explored relationships between types of group conflict and group outcomes (cf. Amason, 1996; Cosier & Dalton, 1990; Jehn, 1997). In some studies, task-based conflicts have been linked to positive outcomes including decision quality and acceptance (Amason, 1996), task performance (Jehn, 1995), and innovation (De Dreu, 2006; Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, 2001). Although in other studies, task conflict has either shown no effect, or harmful effects on outcomes (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a). The effects of relationship conflict have been much more consistent across studies and outcomes, showing a clearly harmful effect on both task performance and affective outcomes like satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a; De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Janssen et al., 1999).

A recent meta-analysis took stock of the group conflict-performance relationship (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a). Notably, both task and relationship conflict were found to be inversely related to group performance. Furthermore, the two types of conflict were strongly correlated. Although conflict theory once implied task conflict should be promoted and relationship conflict prevented (Jehn, 1995), (De Dreu & Weingart’s 2003a) findings question this logic and underscore the need for a better understanding of the basic processes involved. In particular, these findings raise a question: How do groups remain open to task conflicts while preventing relationship conflicts? This is a critical question for conflict research if we are to move toward understanding how and when conflict can have positive effects.

Empirical research has cast this as an issue of moderation (cf. Simons & Peterson, 2000); that is, what moderates the strength of the relationship between task and relationship conflict? Variables that have been examined as moderators include group norms (Yang & Mossholder, 2004), time (Peterson & Behfar, 2003), group efficacy (Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000), personality (Bono, Boles, Judge, & Lauver, 2002), and conflict management (DeChurch & Marks, 2001). Research has found both trust and role ambiguity qualify the task-relationship conflict linkage (Simons & Peterson, 2000; Tidd et al., 2004). Both Simons and Peterson and Tidd et al. found the level of interrelation between task and relationship conflict was a function of the degree to which group members trusted one another. In trusting teams, the two types of conflict were less related than in teams where trust was low. Furthermore, Tidd and colleagues found role ambiguity was another contextual driver of the degree of overlap among the two types of conflict. Team members grew a greater distinction between task and relationship conflict when their task was high in role ambiguity than when it was low in role ambiguity.

Research also demonstrates that, when the two types of conflict are distinct, it is possible for them to relate to outcomes differently (cf. Jehn, 1994). Conflict management seems to play a large role here. De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001), Lovelace et al. (2001), and DeChurch and Marks (2001) all found conflict management behaviors served as moderators of the conflict type—group outcome relationship. In particular, passive conflict man-

agement tactics were found to mitigate the harmful effects of relationship conflict (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001) while agreeable conflict management tactics were found to promote the benefits of task conflict (DeChurch & Marks, 2001; Lovelace et al., 2001). The emerging contingency perspective on group conflict explicitly notes the key role of management processes in determining the effects of conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003a).

This line of inquiry suggests conflict management may also play an important role in not only the effects of, but also the emergence of different types of conflict over time. This proposition was suggested by both Simons and Peterson (2000) and DeChurch and Marks (2001), but remains untested. Toward this aim, the current study was undertaken to explore a behavioral explanation for the relationship between task and relationship conflict. Specifically, we examine conflict management strategies as a triggering mechanism whereby task conflict inadvertently stimulates relationship conflict.

### Conflict Management

Conflict management is defined as "behavior oriented toward the intensification, reduction, and resolution of the tension" (De Dreu, Harinck, Van Vianen, 1999, p. 371). Dual concern theory (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), rooted in Blake and Mouton's managerial grid (Blake & Mouton, 1964), is often used to describe the different modes of handling conflict. These frameworks posit two underlying dimensions: concern for relationships/people and concern for tasks/production, which define five styles of conflict handling. These dimensions have since been reinterpreted for use in guiding conflict theory as activeness and agreeableness (Van De Vliert & Euwema, 1994). The five styles are collaborating (high agreeableness, high activeness), competing (high activeness, low agreeableness), accommodating (low on activeness, high agreeableness), avoiding (low on both dimensions), and compromising (moderate on both dimensions).

#### Effects of Conflict Management on Conflict Types

Simons and Peterson (2000) summarize two explanations for the coexistence of task and

relationship conflict. First, a cognitively based misattribution explanation suggests group members misinterpret others intentions and perceive a conflict originally rooted in task differences, as indicative of interpersonal incompatibilities. The finding that trusting groups draw a greater distinction between relationship and task conflicts than do untrusting groups supports this explanation (Simons & Peterson, 2000; Tidd et al., 2004).

A second more behavioral explanation suggests the use of harsh and aggressive management tactics in response to task conflict actually stimulates relationship conflict (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Team members view forceful tactics as unconventional, and attribute disrespect to those employing them. Thus, regardless of the root issue, this explanation suggests using harsh tactics may generate relationship conflict within the team. Simons and Peterson found some support for this explanation, observing that loudness and debate weakly moderated the relationship between task and relationship conflict. The current study investigates this second mechanism.

Based on findings that agreeable conflict management tactics positively moderate the relationship between task conflict and performance (DeChurch & Marks, 2001), we expect agreeable conflict management tactics will also play a role in the transformation of task to relationship conflict. In fact, a potential explanation for the moderating role of agreeableness is that it is primarily by minimizing relationship conflict that agreeable handling of task conflict is able to improve and not impede performance. The finding that aggressive conflict management tactics positively moderate the relationship between task and relationship conflict (Simons & Peterson, 2000) is also consistent with this logic. In summary, we propose how conflict is handled within groups can influence individual members' perceptions of the conflict. Furthermore, we expect using more agreeable styles will result in less relationship conflict than using more disagreeable styles.

### Method

#### *Participants and Procedure*

We employed a sample of 270 undergraduate psychology students (135 dyads) to test these

ideas. All participants were recruited through the subject pool at a large southeastern university. The sample was 65% female and the average participant age was 24. Participants were tested in one of five group testing sessions conducted over a two-week period; sessions ranged in size from 50 participants (25 dyads) to 64 participants (32 dyads). Each session began in an auditorium where an experimenter read an explanation of the study, and obtained informed consent from all participants. Next, participants were handed a survey packet containing pairing numbers. These numbers were used to assign participants to one of two roles, and participants were then separated by role so the manipulation could be introduced.

For clarity in presenting our findings, we designate one role as the conflict sender and the other as the conflict receiver. Both roles read general information describing a task-based conflict. Participants in both roles were told they were senior board members in a student government organization, and that they needed to make a decision on an issue of which they had opposing viewpoints. The two board members had to select two individuals from their organization to attend a desired trip, and they disagreed as to the criteria on which to base their decision. More specifically, the conflict senders were told:

You believe that the members should be chosen based on the number and significance of their contributions to the organization. On the other hand, your vice president thinks that members should be chosen according to their seniority in the organization. Arguing that while the others can rejoin the organization and attend the following year, older members may not have the chance to attend in the future because they are graduating from the school.

Conflict receivers were told:

You believe that the members should be chosen according to their seniority in the organization. Arguing that although the others can rejoin the organization and attend the following year, older members may not have the chance to attend in the future because they are graduating from the school. On the other hand, your president thinks that members should be chosen based on the number and significance of their contributions to the organization.

Next, in order to examine the effects of conflict management strategies by one person on another's perceptions of conflict issues, we introduced a conflict management manipulation

into the conflict sender role, and later measured conflict perceptions of the conflict receivers. Conflict receivers read the description of the conflict and then completed a short survey containing a baseline measure of conflict perceptions. Meanwhile, conflict senders received additional instructions related to the manipulation and completed a short survey of conflict perceptions.

Once participants in both roles completed the short survey, pairing numbers on the surveys were used to match one participant in each role. Each dyad then had five minutes to discuss the issue. After the time had elapsed, all participants completed a brief survey containing measures of relationship and task conflict, conflict management, and satisfaction.

### *Conflict Management Manipulation*

Each group of participants (i.e., testing session) was randomly assigned to one of five conditions corresponding to the five styles of handling conflict (collaborating, competing, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding). The manipulation was delivered by having conflict senders read written instructions on how to go about resolving the conflict, and then by having an experimenter verbally reinforce the written instructions. The manipulation was focused solely on the instructions given to the conflict senders; the conflict receivers read identical information regardless of experimental condition. The full instructions given to the conflict senders for each of the five conditions are presented in Appendix.

The conflict management manipulation was designed to predictably vary the behavioral tactics used by the conflict senders so the effects of each tactic on perceptions of relationship conflict could be examined. We chose to manipulate rather than measure conflict management to even out the effects of other individual difference variables that may have otherwise confounded the effects of conflict management on conflict perceptions. For example, it is reasonable to expect individual differences such as gender, personality, and emotional intelligence to drive the preference for certain tactics over others. By randomly assigning participants to conflict management conditions, the effects of these individual differences ought to operate similarly within each condition and therefore

exert no net effect on the focal relationships examined in this study.

### *Manipulation Check*

To check the efficacy of our conflict management manipulation, we asked the conflict receivers to describe the conflict handling behavior of their partners using the 20-item Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH; De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001). The DUTCH contains four items measuring each of the five styles of handling conflict. All items were preceded by the prompt, "How well does each item describe how YOUR PARTNER handled this conflict." Responses were then made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Alpha reliability coefficients for the accommodating, compromising, competing, collaborating, and avoiding scales were .86, .92, .89, .82, and .92, respectively.

### *Conflict Measures*

Relationship and task conflict were measured using Jehn's Intragroup Conflict Scale (1995). A sample item from the relationship conflict scale is "How much does this situation reflect interpersonal friction?" A sample item measuring task conflict is "How much do you disagree about ideas regarding your work task?" Responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*none or, hardly any*) to 5 (*a great deal*). We administered the relationship and task conflict measures both before and after the group meeting. These measures were completed by both roles, though we only used the responses of the conflict receivers in our analysis, since it is their reactions that are of interest. Coefficient alpha reliability for the relationship conflict scale was .65 prior to, and .81 after the meeting. Alphas for the task conflict scale were .64 before, and .83 after the group meeting. Scales were then created for each conflict type and time period.

### *Satisfaction*

We measured the receivers' level of satisfaction as one conflict outcome of interest. Receiver satisfaction was assessed using two items written for this study. The two items read, "How satisfied are you with the decision outcome?"

and "How satisfied are you with how this decision was made?" Responses were made on a five point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*to a great extent*). Coefficient alpha was .77, and the two items were averaged to reflect the overall satisfaction of the conflict receiver.

## Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all variables examined in this study. All measures are those reported by the conflict receivers only. Examining the pattern of intercorrelation between the measures of conflict types shows task and relationship conflict were more strongly related after the group meeting than before. After reading a description of the conflict, but before interacting with the other party, the correlation between task and relationship conflict was .14 (*ns*), whereas after the meeting took place, the observed correlation was .60 ( $p < .01$ ). This finding is consistent with prior work illustrating that these two types of conflict tend to be highly intertwined (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b).

Intercorrelations among measures of the five conflict handling styles ranged from  $-.06$  (*ns*; collaborating and competing) to  $.75$  ( $p < .01$ ; collaborating and compromising). Receiver's satisfaction with the conflict's resolution was negatively related to the levels of perceived relationship ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and task conflict ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This finding is largely consistent with prior research indicating that all conflict tends to associate with low satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b). Examining links between the styles used to handle the conflict and satisfaction shows a difference between competing and the other four styles. Satisfaction was positively related to the use of all tactics except competing ( $r = -.28$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The strongest positive relationship was observed between perceived use of collaboration and satisfaction ( $r = .54$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### *Manipulation Check*

To verify that participants in the conflict sender role did indeed exhibit the intended conflict management behavior, we had the conflict receivers rate the conflict style used by their partners. The five conditions (manipulation of conflict senders' behavior) were then analyzed

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Variable Intercorrelations ( $N = 135$  dyads)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Relationship conflict pre	3.13	.90	(.65)											
2. Relationship conflict post	2.73	1.02	.51**	(.81)										
3. Task conflict pre	3.66	.75	.14	.08	(.64)									
4. Task conflict post	3.18	1.07	.17	.60**	.28**	(.83)								
5. Accommodating	3.18	1.12	.00	-.21*	.16	-.23**	(.86)							
6. Collaborating	3.18	1.11	.06	-.18*	.19	-.15	.50**	(.81)						
7. Compromising	3.18	1.33	.02	-.16	.14	-.04	.38**	.75**	(.91)					
8. Competing	2.95	1.22	.03	.34**	.01	.47**	-.34**	-.06	-.09	(.89)				
9. Avoiding	3.38	1.20	.00	-.11	.13	-.04	.55**	.35**	.27**	-.27**	(.93)			
10. Agreeableness	0.02	2.14	.01	-.34**	.11	-.44**	.67**	.62**	.48**	-.63**	.06	(.93)		
11. Activeness	-.43	2.52	.04	.24**	-.05	.28**	-.65**	.02	-.01	.74**	-.70**	-.36**	(.93)	
12. Satisfaction	3.91	1.12	-.01	-.21*	.05	-.27**	.47**	.54**	.52**	-.28**	.34**	.50**	-.27**	(.77)

Note.  $N = 135$  dyads; values enclosed in parentheses are alpha coefficients.

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .05$ .

using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on each of the five styles (measured by the conflict receiver). Table 2 presents the results of these analyses.

ANOVA results indicate that significant variance in conflict styles (as rated by conflict receivers) was explained by the manipulation (instructions given to conflict senders). The only exception was in the avoiding condition, where there was little observed variability. As a result, we focus subsequent analysis on the other four conditions. Next, planned contrasts were used to follow up the overall ANOVAs, where each condition was contrasted to the other four conditions. For example, for accommodating, the coefficients by experimental condition were 1 (*accommodating*),  $-1/4$  (*compromising*),  $-1/4$  (*competing*),  $-1/4$  (*avoiding*), and  $-1/4$  (*collaborating*). In this way the scores for those in the accommodating condition on perceived use of accommodating behavior were compared to the scores of those not in the accommodating condition. Similar contrasts were examined for the other four styles. With the exception of avoiding, all contrasts were significant, indicating that the manipulation produced predictable differences in the perceived utilization of conflict behavior. Essentially, these results indicate that the instructions provided by the experimenter were predictive of the perceptions of what behavior was actually displayed by the conflict senders. Table 3 reports the relevant means and standard deviations.

### Effects of Conflict Management

The primary aim of this study was to test the prediction that how a task conflict is handled will impact subsequent levels of relationship conflict. We tested this using a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on relationship conflict perceptions (see Table 4). The independent variable, conflict management strategies, had five levels corresponding to the five management styles we manipulated. Initial levels of relationship conflict perceptions were included as a covariate in the analysis to control for preinteraction conflict perceptions. The covariate was significant [ $F(1, 129) = 40.61, p < .01$ ], indicating that the level of perceived relationship conflict held by the conflict receiver's prior to the meeting were, as expected, highly predictive of postmeeting relationship conflict.

Table 2  
*Analysis of Variance and Planned Contrasts for Conflict Management Behavior*

Source	DV = accommodating		DV = compromising		DV = competing		DV = avoiding		DV = collaborating	
	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Conflict management manipulation	12.82	14.10*	10.87	7.37*	7.82	6.11*	2.24	1.58	6.09	5.67*
Contrast	35.58	39.14*	16.77	11.36*	22.98	17.95*	0.48	0.34	5.43	5.06**
Within-group error	(91)		(1.48)		(1.28)		(1.42)		(1.07)	

Note. *F* values evaluated at 4 and 128 degrees of freedom. DV = dependent variable.

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .05$ .

The conflict management manipulation term was also significant [ $F(4, 129) = 3.09, p < .05$ ], indicating that the way the conflict sender handled the issue affected the amount of relationship conflict present after the meeting.

Tukey's test for pairwise comparisons was used to follow up on the significant effect for conflict management. These results are presented in Table 5, along with the relevant means and standard deviations. As Table 5 shows, there was a significant difference between the competing style and the other four styles in the postmeeting level of relationship conflict. Thus, when conflict senders tried to resolve the task-based difference by competing, receivers perceived higher levels of relationship conflict than those whose partners used one of the other styles.

Given the high intercorrelations between relationship and task conflict supported in this and prior research on task and relationship conflict, we also examined differences in task conflict as a function of the conflict management manipu-

lation. ANCOVA results (presented in Table 4) show the perceived level of task conflict (post meeting) was a function of the baseline level of task conflict [ $F(1, 129) = 11.17, p < .01$ ], and the conflict styles used to resolve the conflict [ $F(4, 129) = 4.88, p < .01$ ]. Next, we conducted pairwise comparisons of the task conflict means by conflict management condition, and find a similar pattern of differences as was seen with relationship conflict (see Table 5). There was a significant difference between the competing style and the collaborating, avoiding, and accommodating styles. However, the compromising style was not different from the other styles in terms of perceived task conflict. Taken together, these results highlight the importance of the conflict style used in predicting subsequent perceptions of the levels of both relationship and task conflict.

To test for differences in satisfaction as a function of conflict management, we performed a one-way ANOVA (see Table 4). Results indicate receiver satisfaction differed based on the sender's conflict management condition,  $F(4, 129) = 7.62, p < .01$ . Almost 20% of the variance in receiver satisfaction ( $\eta^2 = .19$ ) was attributable to differences in sender conflict management. Examining the means in Table 5 shows conflict management affected satisfaction in a similar pattern as was found with relationship and task conflict. Namely, there was a significant difference in satisfaction between receivers whose partners had used competing and those whose partners had used any of the other four styles.

Taken together, these findings offer strong support for the idea that the way in which conflict is handled impacts important group outcomes. These results show that conflict manage-

Table 3  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Ratings of Conflict Management Behavior by Conflict Condition*

Conflict rating	Focal conflict condition		Average of other four conflict conditions	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Accommodating	4.26	0.88	2.87	1.21
Compromising	3.98	1.10	3.37	0.96
Competing	3.71	1.01	2.66	1.30
Collaborating	3.63	1.06	3.27	1.17
Avoiding	3.27	0.97	3.07	0.91

Table 4  
*Analysis of Variance for Relationship and Task Conflict and Satisfaction*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$
DV = relationship conflict post				
Relationship conflict pre	1	29.58	40.61*	.24
Conflict management manipulation	4	2.25	3.09*	.09
Within-group error	129	(0.73)		
DV = task conflict post				
Task conflict pre	1	10.56	11.17**	.08
Conflict management manipulation	4	4.62	4.88**	.13
Within-group error	129	(0.95)		
DV = satisfaction				
Conflict management manipulation	4	7.95	7.62**	.19
Within-group error	129	(1.04)		

*Note.* Value enclosed in parentheses represents mean square error. DV = dependent variable.

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .05$ .

ment behaviors were manipulated through instructions to the conflict senders, and that resulting differences in management behaviors affected the levels of perceived relationship and task conflict by the conflict receiver. Furthermore, differences in sender conflict management affected receivers satisfaction.

### Discussion

Although the longstanding research tradition of identifying and separating the productive and destructive forms of conflict holds great promise, the potential merits of that research tradition remain tentative because of the widespread overlap typically observed between the two types of conflict in more applied settings (cf. Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Jehn & Mannix,

2001; Porter & Lilly, 1996). The current study was undertaken to explore one explanation for their co-occurrence, with the aim of providing a practical way for groups to gain the benefits of conflict while mitigating the costs. The current study examined the impact of conflict management styles on perceptions of relationship conflict. To do so, we manipulated the conflict management employed by one party and measured their partner's perceptions of relationship conflict both before and after a group meeting. Results indicate the conflict style one individual uses to resolve a task issue affects the amount of relationship conflict perceived by the partner. Conflict styles also affected perceptions of task conflict and group satisfaction.

These findings suggest the manner in which groups harness conflict is a decisive factor in

Table 5  
*Means and Standard Deviations for Relationship and Task Conflict by Conflict Condition (N = 135)*

Conflict condition	<i>N</i>	Relationship conflict-post		Task conflict-post		Satisfaction	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Accommodating	26	2.56 <sup>a</sup>	1.12	2.78 <sup>a</sup>	1.12	4.15 <sup>a</sup>	1.07
Compromising	26	2.88 <sup>a</sup>	0.87	3.29 <sup>ab</sup>	0.98	4.35 <sup>a</sup>	0.69
Competing	32	3.21 <sup>b</sup>	0.96	3.80 <sup>b</sup>	0.80	3.08 <sup>b</sup>	1.30
Avoiding	26	2.65 <sup>a</sup>	0.93	2.88 <sup>a</sup>	0.83	3.94 <sup>a</sup>	0.80
Collaborating	25	2.19 <sup>a</sup>	0.98	3.00 <sup>a</sup>	1.30	4.27 <sup>a</sup>	1.04

*Note.* Means with superscript "a" indicate that they were not significantly different from one another based on Tukey's test, but were significantly different from means denoted "b." A superscript "ab" indicates the mean was not significantly different from means denoted "a" or "b."



determining the extent to which a group can function as a coherent unit. Results support our central thesis that the manner in which a purely task conflict is handled affects the emergence of relationship conflict. The level of relationship conflict perceived by the receiver was assessed both before and after the group meeting. It was predicted that senders who used disagreeable styles (i.e., competing and avoiding) to resolve the conflict would increase the amount of relationship conflict perceived by the receiver more than those who used agreeable styles (i.e., collaborating and accommodating). Results showed the conflict style did have a substantial net effect on relationship conflict perceptions even after premeeting relationship conflict perceptions were controlled. However, the pattern was not cleanly differentiated based on agreeableness. Rather, there was a clear difference in the amount of relationship conflict between groups in which competing was used versus those in which any other style was used.

We also examined the effect of conflict management on postmeeting perceptions of task conflict. The premeeting level of task conflict was controlled, so that the change could be examined. Essentially, these findings speak to the efficacy of each management style in resolving the original conflict that was presented. Results suggest the groups who used accommodating, avoiding, and collaborating perceived less unresolved task conflict than did those who used competing. Notably, compromising did not engender more or less task conflict than did any of the other styles. Compromising is a popular style because it appeals to norms of fairness (Aquino, 2000) but this finding leaves open the possibility that it might not be as effective as collaborating in actually resolving differences.

A final analysis examined differences in postmeeting satisfaction as a function of conflict management. The pattern of results was identical to that of relationship conflict, indicating groups who used competing were less satisfied than those who used any other style. Affective outcomes like satisfaction are important both in examining the efficacy of conflict resolution strategies and in determining a group's ability to continue working together. This finding suggests groups should avoid the use of competing or forcing in attempting to resolve conflict. This idea has been supported by other researchers, such as Tjsovold (1998), who have recom-

mended the use of cooperative techniques for managing conflict as opposed to competitive ones.

Another interesting finding of this study was that the intercorrelations between task and relationship conflict changed dramatically after the group meeting. When group members read a written description of the conflict, they were able to cognitively distinguish relationship and task conflict, as evidenced by the small and nonsignificant correlation between the two measures. However, after only a brief discussion took place, the correlation between task and relationship conflict was large and significant, indicating that the two were less distinct once conflict management became a salient factor. Since relationship conflict has so consistently been shown to harm group productivity and affective reactions (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b), the only way for task conflict to be productive is for it to remain distinct from relationship conflict.

The main finding of this study was that there were notable differences in the perception of relationship conflict based on the conflict style used by the partner. Perceived levels of relationship conflict were significantly higher if competing was used than if any other style was used. A similar result was found with task conflict. Use of competing resulted in a greater amount of perceived task conflict than did collaborating or accommodating. This finding was particularly interesting because previous research has only shown an interactive effect between the level of relationship conflict perceived and the activeness of the conflict management style used in influencing satisfaction and performance (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001). The results of this study suggest that the agreeableness of the conflict management style used also plays a key role in conflict perceptions.

An important question in the small group conflict literature concerns the nature of the relationship between cognitively based task conflict and affectively manifest relationship conflict. Although the negative effects of relationship conflict have been found with some degree of consistency, the effects of task conflict have varied greatly from study to study (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003b). Equally puzzling are the highly variable correlations between the two types of conflict across studies (Simons & Peterson, 2000).

The current study contributes to the conflict literature by testing a behavioral explanation for the task-relationship conflict linkage. Though additional tests of this mechanism are needed, initial evidence suggests task conflicts handled using collaborating, accommodating, and compromising styles produces less unintended and harmful relationship conflict than task conflicts handled using a competing style. If this finding is replicated using alternate methodologies and in more applied settings, it will contribute both to organizational conflict theory and to our base of practical knowledge on managing inevitable conflicts in social settings.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Although the current laboratory task afforded a high degree of control in cleanly manipulating conflict styles, and controlling extraneous sources of variance, it also introduced a number of limitations which we now consider. First, our manipulation check did not support the efficacy of our avoiding condition, and so we refrain from making conclusions about conflict avoidance. However, certainly in practice many groups utilize this style, and prior research has shown it is disagreeable (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Thus, future research needs to explore the affects of avoiding on subsequent perceptions of relationship conflict. We suspect our difficulty in manipulating this style stemmed from the contrived laboratory setting. Ideally, future research needs to examine avoiding and the other four styles in existing groups with established patterns of interaction.

A second limitation of the current study was our inability to quantify group performance. Past research suggests groups may benefit from task based conflict (Jehn, 1995, 1997). Task-based conflicts encourage group members to question their assumptions about the task, to incorporate divergent perspectives, and in doing so, have the potential to improve the performance effectiveness of small groups. De Dreu and Weingart's (2003b) meta-analysis showed highly variable correlations between task conflict and team performance across studies, indicating that this relationship is more complex than previously thought, and urging future research to delve deeper into the mechanisms and boundary conditions. This work makes a meaningful contribution by demonstrating one expla-

nation for the co-occurrence of task and relationship conflict, but stops short of linking that process to tangible group outcomes. This is an important next step for future work in this area.

A third aspect of our task that may impact the generalizability of our findings was the use of the roles president and vice-president. Although perceptions of equality were addressed through telling participants that they were collectively in charge of a student organization and were instructed to make a joint decision, the use of these particular roles may have introduced a power differential into the conflict dynamic. The president was the conflict sender, and the receiver was the vice-president; essentially, we manipulated the style used by the higher member and then measured perceptions of the lower member. This may limit our generalizability to groups with a semihierarchical role structure. This role structure is likely to be similar to what Hackman (1987) defines as a manager-led work team. Manager led teams are the most traditional team type, where the manager or leader is responsible for monitoring and maintaining the team. Future research is needed that explores this conflict dynamic in flatter self-managing groups.

A fourth aspect of our study we consider was the way we manipulated the conflict styles. We attempted to create a sense of equality by informing participants that they were collectively in charge of a student organization and instructing them to make a joint decision. Nonetheless, our use of the roles president and vice-president may have introduced a power differential into the conflict dynamic. Examining the styles distinctly was essentially like choosing five important locations on the continua and examining the effects of those five styles on conflict perceptions. An interesting direction for future work would be to adopt Van de Vliert, Nauta, Euwema, and Janssen's (1997) complexity perspective, and examine the impact of specific combinations of styles such as collaborating and competing.

Another interesting avenue for future research is to examine how the processes studied here are affected by factors such as gender, ethnicity, value similarity, and work experience. Perhaps perceptions of the acceptability of conflict styles like competing depend on characteristics of the sender and receiver. For example, competing might be more acceptable when employed by a male than a female, as research has

shown males utilize competition more frequently than females (Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002). Additionally, research has found women are higher in emotional intelligence than men (Van Rooy, Alonso, & Viswesvaran, 2005), suggesting the gender of the conflict receiver might affect the accuracy of the interpretation of various conflict styles. Perhaps females are less likely to misinterpret the source of conflict than males.

Future research is needed that addresses the limitations of this study, and that examines alternate explanations and mechanisms of the task to relationship conflict transformation process. A primary limitation of the current study is its use of a contrived task conflict in a college age sample. Future work is needed that replicates the current findings across multiple types of task conflicts and ideally, using participants' own felt conflicts.

### Conclusion

How conflict transforms has been an intriguing and perplexing issue in the conflict literature for some time (Smith, 1989). The current study examined the transformation of conflict rooted solely in different preferences for basing a decision into conflict rooted in interpersonal incompatibilities and emotions. As relationship-based conflicts have been shown to have such negative effects on the functioning of small groups (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001), working toward a more in depth understanding of conflict transformation mechanisms is critical if we are to fully realize the potential gains of small groups and teams. For those working in groups, the current study suggests handling task conflict involves heading the proverb, "It's not only what you say, but also the way you say it."

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(Appendix follows)

## Appendix

### Instructions to Conflict Senders by Manipulation Condition

#### *Compromising*

When you meet with the vice president, you should state your views, listen to his/her views, and then come to a solution. While you hope to persuade the vice president to use merit, you are willing to compromise if necessary. You want to maintain a somewhat agreeable tone in your discussions of the issues and you are willing to compromise with the vice president on this issue. If the vice president does not share your views of using merit, you should suggest meeting in the middle and selecting two members based on merit and two based on seniority. You are concerned about both the quality of your relationship with the vice president and the quality of the solution you develop so you will need to balance these concerns.

#### *Accommodating*

When you meet with the vice president, you should state your views, listen to his/her views, and then come to a solution. While you hope to persuade the vice president to use merit, you are more willing to use seniority to maintain the harmony in the group. Having a difference of opinions in the group makes you uneasy. You want to maintain a very agreeable tone in your discussions of the issues and you would rather accommodate the vice president on this issue than create any negative feelings that may harm your working relationship in the future. If the vice president does not share your views of using merit, you should agree to use his/her system. Your biggest concern in the coming meeting is to maximize the quality of your relationship with the vice president.

#### *Competing*

When you meet with the vice president, you should state your views, listen to his/her views, and then come to a solution. You *must* persuade the vice president to use merit and you are completely against using seniority in any way. You want to make sure your views are reflected in the ultimate decision, as you are absolutely convinced that this is the best decision for the organization. If the vice president does not share your views of using merit, you should *not* agree to use his/her system and should continue pressing your position

until you can convince him/her to use merit. Your biggest concern in the coming meeting is to maximize the quality of the outcome, and you will accept nothing less than selecting your four best members for the retreat. If you are unable to fully win and send your four members, then you would prefer to send no one.

#### *Avoiding*

When you meet with the vice president, you should avoid any lengthy discussion of this issue. You can choose one of the following options: send no one, randomly choose four members by flipping a coin, or discuss irrelevant matters like whether or not you'll run together next year. Your top concern is to avoid and derail any discussion of the merit/ seniority issue. Do not try to justify your position and do not entertain any discussion from the vice president of his/her views. Rather, try to avoid this issue entirely.

#### *Collaborating*

When you meet with the vice president, you should state your views, listen to his/her views, and then come to a solution. While you hope to persuade the vice president to use merit, you are willing to adapt your system to incorporate his/her views. While you originally believed merit was the best factor to consider, after some thought you realize both you and the vice president are trying to maximize the benefit to the organization. By using both of your ideas you can create an index of total utility by simply adding the number of semesters served to the rating of merit. Then you can send the four overall best members to the retreat. This new ranking is better than either the merit or seniority ranking since it tells you how much each individual has contributed in terms of *both* time and merit. This will allow you to satisfy all parties and make the best decision for the organization. In the coming meeting, you are very concerned about coming up with the best possible solution, and at the same time you want to maximize the quality of your relationship with the vice president.

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