

Teacher Leaders and Colleagues Assessing Conflict Resolution Skills: A Comparison of Perceptions

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Abstract

The focus of this study is on teacher leader perceptions concerning conflict resolution skills. Teachers included within the study (N=70) examined their skills for resolving conflict at the workplace, which included teachers employed at public and private preschools, elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools. A conflict resolution survey was administered to the teachers, who were enrolled in a teacher leader masters degree program. Colleagues of those teachers completed conflict resolution surveys for comparison purposes. Results were analyzed to check alignment of perceptions. Analysis of the surveys indicated no statistically significant differences in teacher self-perceptions and teacher colleagues' perceptions of conflict resolution skills. Thus, self-perception of teacher leaders and perceptions of their colleagues reveal consistent findings. Study participants used the results of the analysis to work on improving weak areas in conflict resolution.

Key Words: Teacher Leaders, Conflict Resolution, Skills, Leadership

1. Introduction and Purpose of Study

Folger et al (1995) describe conflict at work as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals” (404). Typically, conflict is marked by some degree of tension and unpleasantness, but to counter this tendency, theorists stress the productive potential of conflict. The school is no different than any other workplace. Teachers recognized as formal and informal leaders realize that conflict may consume resources, time, energy, and affect morale. There are times when educators must come to agreement on issues, procedures, and policies that affect individuals and teams. Yet conflict can often block dialogue, be considered interpersonally threatening, and undermine supportive working conditions (Austin & Harkins, 2008).

Research indicates that collaborative working conditions and supportive relationships are highly valued by teachers and administrators, but collaboration requires constructive conflict resolution (Senge, 1990). It would be unrealistic to expect or assume students to resolve conflict peaceably, unless adults in the schoolhouse model these behaviors themselves (Austin & Harkins, 2008). Fortunately, teacher leaders that are considered influential and respected contributors by their peers and supervisors sense a responsibility to mediate and ideally help resolve differences in opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. (Roby, 2009). This study involves teachers working on graduate coursework to obtain a masters degree in teacher leadership. They are pursuing their leadership potential, partially by analyzing their skill levels in several leadership areas. These teachers have set goals to be teacher leaders at their school. This study will focus on their conflict resolution skills, as perceived by the study participants, and colleagues associated with the participants.

2. Review of Literature

There have been considerable research studies and theories focusing on conflict resolution at the workplace. (Jehn, Greer, & Levine ,2008; Frost, 2001; Katz, 1960; Mack & Snyder, 1957; Dion, 1986; Levine & Campbell, 1972; Taylor & McKirnan, Kempes, 2008; 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Borisoff & Victor, 1989; Vayrynen, 1991; Morais, 2009; Wilson, 1993). Definitions of conflict vary, but for school culture we will use Hughes' (2006) conviction that conflict occurs when at least two opposing parties have interests or goals that appear to be incompatible. Fisher (1990) notes that there is continuing interest in understanding and improving relations among groups, and that has been the basis for assessing and creating plans for improving conflict resolution skills for those participating in this study. Resolving conflict has become an area of study in which researchers and experts have given specific guidelines for resolution (Nippold et al, 2007; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Umbreit, 1995; Borisoff & Victor, 1989; Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Morton, 2000; Burton & Dukes, 1990; Ross, 1993; Sharp, 1973; Singer, 1990; Burton, 1990; Capozzoli, 1995; Burgess & Burgess, 1996; Kosmoski & Pollack, 2000; Boyd & Wheaton, 1993; Ury et al, 1989; deReuver, 2006; Schellenberg, 1996).

Fisher (1990) presents an eclectic model which divides conflict into high and low intensity, and then focuses on group process, intergroup relations, and intensity indicators for settlement, including accommodation, withdrawal, negotiation, and/mediation. Ury et al (1989) offers a model that focuses on the interrelationships among interests, rights, and power, making note that not all disputes end with resolution. Withdrawal may be an option. The advantage of this “systems” approach is that it addresses not just a single dispute, but potential ongoing disputes in any organization or relationship. A strategic choice model for resolving conflict has been identified by Pruitt and Rubin (1986). This model specifies five kinds of behavior that are available when people have conflicting interests – engaging in contentious behavior, problem-solving, yielding, becoming inactive, or totally withdrawing from the controversy. The dual concern model, with its origin in Blake and Mouton’s (1964) managerial grid, and adapted by various conflict resolution authors (Filley, 1975; Gladwin & Walter, 1980; Rahim, 1983; Ruble & Thomas, 1976; Thomas, 1976; Blake & Mouton, 1979), postulates two concerns: concerns about own outcomes, and concerns about the other party’s outcomes. The model uses yielding, problem solving, inaction, and contending.

Problem solving is strongly encouraged when there is high interest in both own and others’ outcome. Yielding is the primary route for resolution when there is a strong concern about the only the other’s outcome. Contending is considered the best choice for self-interest. When concern about both party’s conflict outcome is weak, inaction is encouraged. The model makes no provisions for withdrawing. Umbreit (1995) specifically describes resolution of conflict through mediation. He believes that mediation is problem solving intervention that can be effective in a wide range of disputes and conflicts that are interpersonal in nature. His model focuses on the mediator encouraging empowerment of the conflicting the parties (self-determination in deciding how to resolve their dispute), and promoting the parties’ mutual recognition of each other as human beings, even though they have adverse positions concerning an issue or disagreement. Umbreit discusses school mediation’s in his text, *Mediating Interpersonal Conflicts: A Pathway to Peace* (1995). The focus is clearly team oriented, with mediation of conflict program coordinators instituted as a means of dealing with school-based conflict in an organized manner. This includes the creation and implementation of a team and coordinator, program planning, faculty and staff orientation, student orientation, selection of mediators, and mediation training (Smith & Sidwell, 1990). Mediator tasks are outlined, using a research-based approach to resolving conflict.

Schellenberg (1996) discusses the different attitudes (reactions) that can be taken for resolving social conflict. They are characterized as avoidance, acceptance, gradual reform, nonviolent confrontation, and violent confrontation. He offers the frequently used technique of negotiating as one primary avenue for resolving conflict. Teacher leaders working on their negotiating skills should consider the following:

1. Frequent and complete communication between the conflicting parties will more likely lead to mutually satisfying agreements.
2. When conflicting parties anticipate future interaction in similar situations, they will be more likely to reach mutually satisfying agreements.
3. Agreements are more likely to be reached at points where there is a sense of equity – a reasonable balance in what both conflicting parties will gain.
4. The primary focus of resolving the conflict should be focused on interests, not positions.
5. Always strive for a sense of fairness, using principles and objective criteria as a framework for an agreement.

Individuals are more likely to feel committed to their workplace if they perceive they can act out of their own free will (Salancik, 1977). This posit is important in dealing with conflict, as those involved see their behavioral choices they make as self-initiated, as opposed to being externally imposed. This can influence the escalation of conflict, and the feelings of entrapment by the conflicting parties (Brockner & Rubin, (1985). The concept of entrapment is found frequently in workplace settings. Conflict involving decision making often find individuals needing to save face, especially when someone’s personal welfare and/or reputation is at stake. Several studies have focused on this phenomenon of entrapment, as a variable to be seriously considered as conflicts are addressed (Staw, 1979; Rubin, 1985; Farrell & Rusbult, 1981; Rusbult & Farrell, 1983). Burton and Dukes (1990) discuss the absence of empathy variable in the resolution of conflict. Teacher leaders need to be conscious of this, because in some instances of conflict, the capacity for dehumanization of the conflicting party affects the ability to judge the response to one’s actions. This is a principal cause of miscalculation in intergroup conflict.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Teachers pursuing a masters degree in teacher leadership (N=70) from school districts throughout western Ohio participated in the study. Over eighty percent were female.

Fifty-nine percent were between the ages of 26-35 years old, by far the dominant age range. This was followed by 16 percent of the teachers ages 36-45, 13 percent of those in the study were 46-55 years old, 25 and younger composed seven percent, and five percent were 56 years or older. Teachers participating in the study were represented by the following experience ranges:

1-5 years – 41.5 percent

6-10 years – 38.5 percent

11-20 years – 15.8 percent

21 + years – 4.2 percent

Approximately ninety percent of the participants were Caucasian, three percent half were African Americans, and three and one half percent of the study participants were Hispanic teachers. Thirty two percent worked in rural school districts, followed by 28 percent in suburban settings, and 10 percent in city schools. Most of the teacher leader graduate students were elementary teachers (61%). Thirty percent worked in secondary school buildings, and nine percent of the study group work as middle school teachers. Sixty percent of the teachers had less than six years of teaching experience, and had been in their present school building one to five years.

3.2. Procedure

Participant teachers were asked to complete a self-assessment survey focusing on perceptions of conflict resolution skills at this point in their career. Then, each study participant requested three colleagues to rate them, using the same survey of conflict resolution skills. The 15-item survey was constructed by the author, based on a review of variables affecting resolution of conflict (Fischer, 1997; McFarland, 1992; Weitzman & Weitzman, 2006; Coleman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2004; Stevahn & King, 2005). A Likert-type scale was employed. Graduate teachers rated themselves from one (1- seldom) through five (5 – always) for each of the fifteen statements (Table 1). Three colleagues also assessed each graduate teacher in the study, using the same survey and rating scale. Colleagues' assessments were averaged, and then compared with the self-assessment of each study participant. The analysis included survey means of the teachers and their colleagues, standard deviations of the two groups, and *t* test confirmation for significance (Table 2).

4. Results

Teacher leaders completing the resolution of conflict survey averaged 3.79 in skill acquisition, based on a 1.0 to 5.0 scale, indicating a positive skill level. Colleagues rating the teacher leaders averaged 4.19 in skill level perception. A *t* test confirmed the teacher participants and colleagues survey ratings were not statistically significant or dissimilar. This indicated the scores for survey statements were reliable and consistent among four different raters. Thus, participants used the survey to confirm and reflect upon skills that were strong, and then encouraged to use for helping other teachers. Skill areas that proved to be weak were specified, and plans for improvement were constructed.

5. Conclusion

Using the Conflict Resolution Skills survey, teacher leaders rated their skills at resolving conflict in the school setting. Results were compared with colleagues' averages.

Teachers were encouraged to take advantage of their gifts and talents when resolving conflict. Strategies for dealing with conflict were shared with other teachers during the course. In this collaborative environment, teachers felt open to dialogue about specific conflict situations.

Survey participants also analyzed their weaknesses in resolving conflict. Ideas for improving were discussed. Improvement plans were created, which included strategies, a timeline for improvement, and assessment measures to evaluate improvement. A sampling of strategies developed include the following:

- Consider using a steady, normal tone of voice
- Refrain from raising voice during conflict situation
- Gathering information from all parties before making conclusions
- Conscious effort to resolve problem in a positive manner by taking advantage of meeting time to have dialogue
- Give clear information to reduce incidents of misunderstanding
- Monitoring verbal and non-verbal cues
- Using appropriate body language

Although the study participants self-assessed above average in resolving conflict skills, specific areas of weakness indicate a continued need for focusing on this important leadership skill area. The teachers involved are candidates for becoming teacher leaders in their respective schools. Creating plans for conflict resolution skill improvement will continue to be suggested for strengthening their ability to mediate difficult situations at the workplace. The self-assessment analysis and the feedback from colleagues' provide valuable information that will be used for improving conflict resolution skills.

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Table 1: Conflict Resolution Skills Survey Statements

Consciously attempt to understand others point of view
Compromise my beliefs to accommodate others
Avoid those I tend to disagree with often
Blame others for issue or problem
Remain calm during disagreements
Willing to admit I was wrong
Attempt to change the subject if in disagreement
Blame myself for conflict with others
Prefer consensus over democratic resolution
Harbor bad feelings toward others
Willing to forgive others
Remain professional during resolution of conflict
Remain professional after a disagreement
Initiate resolution of conflict
Consciously strive to build strong, positive relationships with others

Table 2: Conflict Resolution Skill Comparison
(N=70)

Group	Mean	SD	SD	t
Teacher Leaders	3.79	0.459	0.768	1.44
Colleagues	4.19	0.500		