From Team Heterogeneity to Team Conflict: Mechanism of Action and Management Suggestions

Qiong Liu and Lei Zhao

ABSTRACT

The heterogeneity of team members is undoubtedly a “double-edged sword”. It provides a variety of knowledge and skills which may stimulate the creative thinking and innovative behavior of the team members. It also leads to the conflicts between team members which may endanger the overall performance of the team output. From a perspective of the conflict dichotomy, our research summarizes the effect of team heterogeneity on task conflict and relationship conflict, and gives the management suggestions related to heterogeneous team.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, in terms of the universality of the team work model in organizations, the related research about team theory also shows an increasing trend. The heterogeneity of the team is the inherent attribute of the team members. Based on the related concepts and classification standards of team heterogeneity and team conflict, this paper analyzes the team composition factors and explores the influence of team heterogeneity on team conflicts.
GENERAL ANALYSIS OF CORE CONCEPTS

What is Team Heterogeneity?

The team is usually composed of a variety of members who have a diversity of characteristics with different age, character, educational background, functional background and values, which is heterogeneous team. According to Finkelstein, Team heterogeneity refers to the distribution of team members in terms of demographic factors, that is, differences in age, gender, education, experience, personality and values [1].

According to the diversity of the factors that form the team heterogeneity, different scholars divided the team heterogeneity from different angles. Jehn and other scholars divided the heterogeneity into social category heterogeneity, value heterogeneity and information heterogeneity[2], Pelled suggest that team heterogeneity include slow work-related heterogeneity and high work-related heterogeneity[3]. Jackson divides heterogeneity into relation-related heterogeneity and task-related heterogeneity[4]. This classification is highly similar to Pelled’s research. Based on the above analysis, this paper divides the team heterogeneity into two categories: high work-related heterogeneity and low work-related heterogeneity.

What is Team Conflict?

As a branch of team interaction, team conflict generally refers to a process in which members become more and more nervous because of real or perceived differences[5].

There are many types and manifestations of team conflict. For example, Jehn divides team conflict into relationship conflict and task conflict[6]. Amazon thinks the conflict has two categories: emotional conflict and cognitive conflict[7]. This paper divides the team conflict into relationship-oriented conflict (emotional conflict) and task-oriented task conflict (Cognitive conflict).

TWO MECHANISMS OF ACTION

Team Heterogeneity and Relationship Conflict (Emotional Conflict)

There are two main factors in the evolution from the team heterogeneity to the conflict (emotional conflict): the degree of classification and the degree of permeability[3]. The classification refers to individual members subconsciously classify others. Permeability refers to the degree to which individual attributes can be changed, and it is the second key factor in determining whether team heterogeneity can lead to relationship conflict.

Some heterogeneity such as age, gender, race and other characteristics of the population attributes, has a higher degree of class ability. At the same time it is not easy to penetrate (can not be affected by the impact of the change), often easier to
lead to relationship conflict. In addition, some scholars believe that values and other characteristics of heterogeneity can lead to relationship conflict. Jehn and other scholars believe that the team members with greater value differences are more likely to lead to conflict of relationships, they also conducted a quasi-experimental field test, the research conclusion also proves that the value heterogeneity has a positive correlation with the relationship conflict[2].

**Team Heterogeneity and Task Conflict (Cognitive Conflict)**

Most of the scholars’ researches on task conflict focus on the team conflict caused by educational background, functional background and values and other factors, they believe that educational background, functional experience and the task conflict have a positive correlation. For example, foreign scholars Eisenhardt concluded that the heterogeneity of educational background and functional background had a significant positive correlation with task conflict[8].

In addition to the education background, functional background, there are scholars believe that value heterogeneity is also easy to lead to task conflict. Scholar Jehn found that value heterogeneity of the executive team and the task conflict showed a positive correlation [2].

In summary, it can be argued that educational background, functional experience, professional information knowledge and values are high work-related heterogeneous which may lead to team members’ cognitive conflict.

**THE MANAGEMENT REVELATION BASED ON BENIGN INTERACTION**

In view of the above analysis of the mechanism of team heterogeneity and heterogeneity on team conflict, it becomes very important how to play the role of team heterogeneity and coordinate the effective function of the various mechanisms within the team.

**Standardize the Personal Cognition and Behavior of The Team Members**

In the team, standardizing the members personal cognition can proceed from three perspectives. There are three stages, that is, before the conflict, in the conflict and after the conflict. Before the conflict, team members should take the initiative to self-cognition and self-analysis objectively, control personal emotions and attitudes reasonably, avoid unnecessary relationship conflict by greatest possibly. In the event that the conflict has inevitably occurred, team members should also be modest and gentle, minimize the negative impact of relationship conflict, and make efforts to eliminate the conflict. After the conflict has occurred and resolved, team members should take the initiative to reflect, maintain a good cognitive attitude, continue to
sum up experience from it, and avoid the negative impact of similar conflicts in future work.

**Strengthen the Team Leaders to Coordinate the Control Role and Improve the Ability of Conflict Management**

Team leaders act as indicators in the team play a vital role in encouraging team members to learn from each other and work together. In a team, it will lead to the formation of decentralized pattern that like scattered sand in the team. It is difficult to create a higher team performance because of the lack of effective leadership. The role of team leader can not be underestimated, and he can make the team members pull together. Therefore, the team leaders should strengthen the overall team coordination and play a control role, and create a harmonious atmosphere of team work.

Regular interviews and anonymous communication are more effective means of communication in order to play a leading role in leadership and conduct a reasonable coordination and control for the team members. On the one hand, these two kinds of communication methods are easy to make team members and leaders establish a relatively close contact, and enhance the sense of belonging to the team of the team members. On the other hand, leaders can also keep abreast of members’ work and mental state through communicating with team members through a regular interview and anonymous communication, which effectively curbs the occurrence of potential conflicts in work, avoids unnecessary misunderstanding caused by the poor misunderstanding between the team members, and dodges the negative impact of the conflict in the greatest possibility.

**Enhance Team Interaction, Moderate Control and Stimulate Mission Conflicts**

Team conflict has an important impact in the team management as one of the forms of team interaction. It is an important process for team members to understand each other and inspire more creative thinking to achieve reasonable control of the degree of task conflict within the team, and stimulating a moderate task conflict can create a more active communication atmosphere for the team.

Enhancing team interaction is not only conducive to improve the creativity of the team members, but also on the promotion of team cohesion is important. At the same time, controlling and stimulating the task conflict moderately within the team is conducive to the efficient implementation of the task and team’s cooperation. Excessive task conflict can also have a negative impact on team performance. Therefore, the control and inspiration of team task conflict should follow the principle of moderate. Managers should proceed from an overall perspective, analyze the current situation of the conflict objectively within the team, find out the extent to which the team can maximize the effectiveness of the conflict, and then control and simulate reasonability.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Fund Project: National Social Science Fund Project (16BGL170).

REFERENCES