Conflict and Subgroup Dynamics in Internationally Distributed Teams

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Agenda

- Overview of conflict study (with Mark Mortensen)
  » Background & theory
  » Study design
  » Findings

- Overview of current ethnographic study (with Catherine Cramton)
  » Study design
  » Preliminary findings
What we know about distributed teams...

• Distribution often yields…
  » Crises of trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999)
  » Harsh cross-site attributions (Cramton, 2001)
  » Unhealthy subgroup dynamics (Armstrong & Cole, 2002)

  …all of which may increase conflict

• But, not all distributed teams have high conflict

• We set out to understand why
Building on Existing Work…

- Existing models of teams have little to say about moderators of the diversity-conflict relationship
- Social categorization and informational effects may mediate (moderate?)
We predicted...
Method

- R&D arm of multi-national organization in the natural resources extraction & processing industry
- Teams
  - 43 R&D teams (288 members)
  - Team size between 3-21 members (mean=6.7)
  - 21 teams collocated, 22 teams distributed
  - Providing technical development & technical services
- Data collection
  - Web-based survey of members and managers
  - Semi-structured follow-up interviews
Measures – Dependent Variables

Task Conflict
- How frequently are there conflicts about ideas in the TEAM?
- How much conflict about the work you do is there in the TEAM?
- How often do people in the TEAM disagree about opinions regarding the work being done?
- To what extent are there differences of opinion in the TEAM?

Affective Conflict
- How much friction is there among members in the TEAM?
- How much are personality conflicts evident in the TEAM?
- How much tension is there among members in the TEAM?
- How much emotional conflict is there among members in the TEAM?
- To what extent do people take the arguments in the TEAM personally?
- How much jealousy or rivalry is there among the members of the TEAM?
Measures – Independent Variables

Shared Identity

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Shared Context

- Incompatibility between different team members' tools and/or work processes
- Team members having different priorities
- Differences in the information held by team members
- Incomplete or inaccurate information about what other team members are doing

Spontaneous Communication
We found...

Geographic Distribution

Task Conflict

Affective Conflict

Shared Identity

(\( \beta = -2.09 \), n.s.)

(\( \beta = -2.59 \), p<.05)
We found...

Geographic Distribution

Task Conflict

Affective Conflict

Shared Context

(β=-2.10, p<.05)

(β=-1.90, p<.10)
We found…

Geographic Distribution

Spontaneous Communication

Task Conflict

Affective Conflict

(β=-1.45, p<.05) (β=-174, p<.05)
We found…

- Distribution
- Affective Conflict
- Shared Identity
- Task Conflict
- Shared Context
- Spontaneous Communication

(\(\beta = .40, p < .05\))

(\(\beta = .56, p < .01\))
In conclusion...

- Shared identity, shared context, and spontaneous communication all moderate the distribution-conflict relationship
- Models of teams may need to be augmented to capture these moderating effects
What about ethnocentrism?

- Looked at team-level, not subgroup conflict
- Instead of cross-national learning, we noticed ethnocentrism across sites within teams
- Led to an ethnographic study with Catherine Cramton
Study Design

Europe

3 teams

3 teams

U.S.

3 + 3 teams

India
Study Design

- Multi-national research team
- Year 1
  » 181 interviews on site
  » Concurrent observations of 6 of the teams
  » Manager performance surveys
- Year 2
  » Second interviews with team managers
  » Team meetings
  » Manager performance surveys
Cross-National Learning

- Cross-national learning did occur, but so did ethnocentrism
- We aim to understand why
Next Steps

- Continue to code and analyze data
- Perhaps add Japan-based teams
Thank you!!