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Engaging with Purpose Styles of Conflict Engagement Among Academic Deans

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ABSTRACT

Conflict engagement is an integral part of higher education leadership. This study examined conflict engagement styles among a sample of academic deans in a large Midwestern state college and university system using the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II). The research question that was analyzed in the study was whether there is a prevalence of any particular approaches to conflict for academic deans of these institutions. Results suggested that training, both formal and informal, was common among the academic deans and that they tended to utilize an integrative style when engaging in conflict. Recommendations for further research and practice are offered, including how further application of conflict engagement best practices may apply within the online realm that has permeated most facets of life due to the current global pandemic.

Keywords: conflict, higher education, leadership, dean, college

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1. Introduction

Conflict is a part of every person's life. Conflict occurs along cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Mayer, 2000). Under the cognitive dimension, "conflict is a belief or understanding that one's own needs, interests, wants, or values are incompatible with someone else's" (Mayer, 2000: 4). In the emotional realm, conflict consists of an emotional reaction to a situation or interaction that signals some type of disagreement (Mayer, 2000). Finally, Mayer wrote:

> "Conflict also consists of the actions that we take to express our feelings, articulate our perceptions, and get our needs met in a way that has the potential for interfering with someone's ability to get his or her needs met." (Mayer, 2000: 5).

Understanding conflict at a fundamental level is paramount in moving through the process that surrounds conflict.

2. Conflict

2.1. Conflict Resolution

Although conflict is common, its resolution is not inevitable. It might be that individuals do not want a resolution for fear that it may feel too shallow of a goal, or they might not even think of themselves as being in a conflict (Mayer, 2004). The study of conflict resolution implies a conceived ending in which all parties involved agree that matters have been resolved. Simerly stated that "conflict occurs when there is a disagreement over such things as ideas,

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goals, methods, and values" (Simerly, 1998: 2). It is perhaps not surprising that conflict permeates higher education and is something that must be dealt with by leaders within the field.In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, it can be expected that the increased anxieties about personal health, concerns about fiscal resilience, and uncertainty caused by ongoing societal functioning will increase the potential for conflict. Within the field of education, this crisis has forced changes of course delivery methods on instructors, respond to demands from students and parents, and force educational administrators to reconsider budget plans for years to come.

As Simerly (1998) indicated, even in the best of times, conflict resolution within higher education does not always happen and that *conflict management* is a more appropriate term to use when it comes to speaking about conflict. Simerly also attested that successful educational leaders should not merely solve problems for subordinates or resolve every conflict. Rather, leaders should instruct subordinates in being comfortable engaging in the process of conflict. The reason for this is that conflict is a natural an inevitable part of our daily existence as we interact with other people.

2.2. Neutrality

A common misconception about conflict is that an effective approach to conflict situations is to remain *neutral*. On the surface, remaining impartial may seem prudent, but it can also lead to inaction. It might even be interpreted as being dishonest. Mayer affirmed that "people often do not trust our neutrality. They are suspicious of the concept and question, often correctly, whether we can genuinely be as neutral, impartial, and unbiased as we say we are" (Mayer, 2004: 17). Leaders that strive to remain entirely neutral in conflict may really be doing a disservice to their institutions, their colleagues and subordinates, and especially themselves. They could be denying the possibility of holistic growth that might arise from conflict instead of engaging with it to promote resolution, if not actual growth.

2.3. Conflict Engagement

Conflict Engagement carries with it an empowering quality that truly values not only the process of conflict, but also the parties involved. Mayer wrote that "engaging in conflict means accepting the challenges of a conflict, whatever its type or stage of development may be, with courage and wisdom and without automatically assuming that resolution is an appropriate goal" (Mayer, 2004: 184). When resolution is the inevitable assumption, something is lost. While resolution may be desired, it may not always be possible. As Mayer noted "people want to win, to build a movement, to carry on an important struggle, to achieve meaning, to address basic issues, to gain political advantage, or other similar goals. Resolution implies too shallow of an outcome or goal to many" (Mayer, 2004: 15). When people choose to engage in conflict they allow themselves and others to fulfill this inner desire.

2.4. Sources of Conflict

To successfully navigate a conflict situation, one must be able to properly identify the source(s). Mayer (2000) described that human needs are at the center of all conflicts. If these needs are not sufficiently met, a person will remain in conflict. Mayer organized these central needs into three sub-categories. These sub-categories were identified as *survival needs, interests,* and *identity-based* needs. Survival needs consist of food, shelter, health, or anything that would be required to sustain life. Interests represent the next level of needs. Mayer stated that "interests are the needs that motivate the bulk of people's actions" (Mayer, 2000: 17). It is imperative to uncover each party's true interests in a conflict, or resolution becomes highly unlikely. Interests can be further classified in three different sub-categories. Substantive interests are characterized by concerns people have about tangible benefits. For leaders, this could be obtaining a particular person to join their team that another institution wants or getting that next potential promotion. Procedural interests are concerns people have that deal with communicating or decision making. Psychological interests are concerns people have about how they are acknowledged, treated, or respected. This type of interest can weigh quite heavily for some leaders, as one can be concerned with how one is regarded by those that follow. Finally, identity-based needs represent the deepest level of concerns with conflict. These needs vary from how one considers meaning and their place in the world, but they also tie into an individual's ever-present struggle of balancing the need for intimacy but maintaining one's own autonomy (Mayer, 2000).

Mayer (2000) also identified five sources of conflict that trigger the various types of need: *communication, emotions, history, structure,* and *values.* Communication can often be viewed as a transaction between sender and receiver. When the message traveling between the two becomes distorted, the possibility of conflict increases.Leaders and followers that exchange emails back and forth can sometimes distort meanings within this form of communication. This can lead to confusion and utter frustration. Emotions also

play a crucial role in determining the path a particular conflict might take. Mayer characterized emotions as "the energy that fuels conflict" (Mayer, 2000: 10). Emotions are often viewed as a source that escalates conflict, however, they can also aid in deescalating them as well. History is another potential source of conflict. Mayer (2000) argued that conflict does not exist within a vacuum or in an isolated point in time. It is important to remember that conflict often resonates from previous actions and manifests itself as a result of these previous encounters. It is equally important to remember that just because a conflict occurred in the past, it is not always indicative it will continue in the future. Yet, the influences of history do not manifest in a vacuum. Structure is the external framework that a conflict takes place within (Mayer, 2000). The structure might range from the process two parties follow to how chairs are arranged around a table that disputants will gather around. A prime example of structure is the process of voting. Voting can be used to resolve considerable differences about an issue, however this process has the possibility of further polarizing people and breaking down communication. Finally, values represent the last outer source of conflict. Mayer characterized values as "the beliefs we have about what is important, what distinguishes right from wrong and good from evil, and what principles should govern how we lead our lives" (Mayer, 2000: 11). It can be incredibly difficult (if not impossible) for individuals to compromise when values are involved, because they can feel as though they are compromising themselves.

2.5. Styles of Conflict

The concept of conflict styles was initially developed when Blake and Mouton (1964) provided the basis of classifying approaches to interpersonal conflict. The five styles identified were smoothing, forcing, withdrawal, problem-solving, and sharing. Blake and Mouton's concept was later re-classified by Thomas and Kilmann (1974). This adapted version of conflict styles was identified as competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. In addition, Thomas and Kilmann sought to identify to what degree a person's interpersonal conflict style ranged in both cooperativeness and assertiveness. Rahim (1983a) later developed a similar model by adding a distinction that differed from the previous-mentioned models. Rahim (1983a) identified key factors in styles as they related to both concern for self and concern for others. Within this model, Rahim and Bonoma (1979) further classified the five styles of approaching interpersonal conflict that exist along two dimensions (i.e. concern for self and concern for others; Rahim, 2001).

The *integrating* style of conflict has a high concern for both self and others. Problem solving tends to be the focal point of this style. Rahim (2001) stated that "it involves collaboration between the parties (i.e. openness, exchange of information, and examination of differences to reach a solution acceptable to both parties)" (Rahim, 2001: 28). Integration seeks to fulfill the interests of both parties so neither feels they are giving something up. Prein (1976) added that this style contains two specific elements. These elements are problem solving and confrontation. Rahim (2001) said that "confrontation involves open communication, clearing up any misunderstanding, and analyzing the underlying cause of conflict" (Rahim, 2001: 29). This element of confrontation lays the foundation for problem solving. True problem solving includes identifying and providing a solution to the actual problem. From there, both parties can realize the highest degree of satisfaction for their respective concerns.

The characteristics of the *obliging* style illustrate a low concern for self and high concern for others. A person exhibiting this style tends to downplay the differences between him/her and the other party. Rahim (2001) wrote that "there is an element of self-sacrifice in this style. It may take the form of selfless generosity, charity, or obedience to another party's order" (Rahim, 2001: 29). This person can pay a relatively high cost of neglecting their own interests and essentially absorb the conflict.

In contrasting fashion, the *dominating* style exhibits a high concern for self and a low concern for others. Another way to view this style is competing. This style is often referred to as a "win-lose" situation. Rahim (2001) stated that "a dominating or competing person goes all out to win his or her objective and, as a result, often ignores the needs and expectations of the other party" (Rahim, 2001: 29). A dominating stance does not always correlate to the somewhat negative light it occasionally is cast in. Standing up for one's rights or defending a position believed to be true are also examples of a dominating style.

The *avoiding* style exhibits a low concern for self and for others. Individuals who utilize this trait might withdraw from a conflict situation, postponing a conflict until a later time, or even acknowledging that a conflict exists. Rahim (2001) reiterated this in that "this style is often characterized as an unconcerned attitude toward the issues or parties involved in the conflict. Such a person may refuse to acknowledge in public that there is a conflict that should be dealt with" (Rahim, 2001: 29–30). There can be circumstances in which the avoiding style might be necessary. For

instance, a participant may choose to utilize this style in a dangerous or abusive situation. Physically removing one's self in these types of situations may be necessary to preserve a component of one's survival needs (Mayer, 2000).

The final conflict style is *compromising*. This style exhibits partial concern for both self and others. It includes a give-and-take element where both parties essentially relinquish part of their overall goals in order to arrive at mutually agreeable solution. Rahim wrote:

> "A compromising party gives up more than a dominating party but less than an obliging party. Likewise, such a party addresses an issue more directly than avoiding party but does not explore it in as much depth as an integrating party" (Rahim, 2001: 30).

This approach tends to focus on the "middle ground" in between both parties.

It is important to remember that individuals are not merely confined to one particular conflict style. Even though one might exhibit a primary conflict style, he/she often will combine other styles, depending on the situation. Munduate, Ganaza, Peiro, and Euwema proposed the concept that "effectiveness in conflict handling depends on a combination of different styles, not just on the presence or absence of one behavioral style" (Munduate, Ganaza, Peiro and Euwema, 1999: 12). The study conducted found that the conflict styles (Rahim, 1983b) are interrelated and do not operate independently. This is of significance, because higher education leaders must understand that both they, and others they interact with, may have a primary conflict style.

3. Implications for Higher Education

Conflict is no stranger to higher education, and academic deans might be most likely to encounter conflict due to their roles positioned between faculty and executive administrators. Academic deans are often thrust into situations of conflict due to their unique role in mediating between students and faculty. Academic deans are the fiscal and procedural conduits through which faculty-led departments and executive leadership interact. As a result, academic deans have typically developed a unique perspective regarding the conflict they encounter. In many cases, academic deans are required to follow institutional policy and interpret it so that the student and institution are served. This puts the academic dean in an interesting position, one that has been recognized for decades (Feltner and Goodsell, 1972), as they are neither faculty nor administration. Often an academic dean's approach to conflict will govern these encounters even if an established conflict engagement protocol is not present. This established protocol is even further disrupted when a situation (e.g. a global pandemic) completely alters every facet of how a campus functions and interacts. In the current COVID-19 situation, deans need to try to fulfill their duties to administration while still trying to quell fear by communicating the right information at the right time to their people (Perlmutter, 2020). In addition to utilizing other similar "soft skills" (Brungardt, 2011), these higher education leaders are often forced to go forward with the present knowledge they have about conflict management systems when benefits of such systems cannot always be fully appreciated (Lipsky, Seeber and Fincher, 2003). These "soft skills" may be even more difficult to rely on in a mainly online environment when face-to-face interactions may not even be possible. Because of this inherent position of exposure to conflict, it is imperative to gain better perspective of these higher education leaders. By better understanding this unique perspective, it might be possible to better equip academic deans of other higher education institutions.

4. Method

4.1. Research Question

Given the lack of research regarding conflict styles among leadership in higher education, the present study sought to explore the question of how styles of conflict manifest among academic deans. Cognizant of the potential differences in culture across four- and two-year institutions, care was taken to ensure perspectives of academic deans from each type of institution was recognized.

4.2. Subjects

Academic deans across a large Midwestern state college and university system comprised of 7 state universities and 30 community and technical collegeswere recruited via email to participate in the present study. Of the 222 academic deans in the system, 43 (19%) consented to participate and completed the relevant survey. The typical subject was a middle-aged (M = 49.85 years) female (60%) serving at a community or technical college (70%).

4.3 Material

Participants were asked via a demographic questionnaire to identify their age, gender, type of institution (i.e.

two-year college or four-year university), and number of years in position. Participants were also asked to respond to the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II; Rahim, 1983b). The ROCI-II is a 28-item measured design to identify the respondent's prominent conflict style (i.e. obliging, avoiding, integrating, dominating, and compromising). In his validation study, Rahim (1983a) found acceptable levels of internal consistency (.72 - .77) and test-retest reliability (.60 - .83) across all five conflict styles across a sample of more than 1,200 managers. Rahim and Magner (1995) similarly found that strong support for the five-factor model of the scale (for all chi-squared, $p < .001$) among samples of subjects in business and universities.

For the purpose of the present study, the items of the ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983b) were adapted to provide wording appropriate for the respective deanships, as opposed to referring to their *subordinates* as such. Thus, academic deans answered each question in relation to their respective *faculty members* (e.g. "I try to investigate an issue with my faculty members to find a solution acceptable to us").

4.4. Procedure

Academic deans within a Midwestern state college and university system comprised of 30 community and technical colleges and 7 state universities were recruited via an email letter that invited them to participate in the present study and directed them via a link to an online survey using Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). The survey began with an informed consent statement. Subjects indicated their consent to participate by clicking on the button that took them to the demographic questionnaire. Based on their response to an item regarding current position, subjects were directed to the items of the ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983b). Subjects completed the ROCI-II via online survey, the specific wording of the instrument's 28 items were adapted in verbiage ("academic dean") by their identification of role. Due to a clerical error at the time of survey dissemination, subjects were only presented with the first 27 items of the scale. For these subjects, the missing 28th item was constructed by deriving the mean score of the other six integrating-based questions in the relevant ROCI-II scale. Demographic data were analyzed to identify measures of central tendency regarding subject gender, age, years in position, and whether they serve at a community/technical college or state university. Responses to the ROCI-II were analyzed to see if there was a particular approach(es) utilized by the sample of deans. All statistical analyses were conducted via JASP.

5. Results

In order to explore how conflict styles manifest in higher education, academic deans (N = 43) were studied across a large Midwestern state college and university system comprised of 7 state universities and 30 community and technical colleges.

In response to the ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983b), academic deans at the four-year universities (see Figure 1) rated their conflict style as predominantly *integrating* (n = 15, M = 4.39, SD = .37).

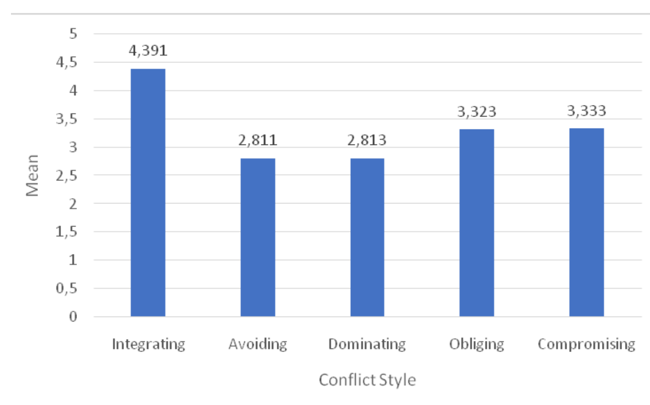

Figure 1. Conflict style means for four-year university academic deans

Academic deans at the two-year community and technical colleges across the same system (see Figure 2) similarly rated their conflict style as predominantly *integrating* (n = 35, M = 4.58, SD = .40). Indeed, the data for both sets of academic deans appears quite congruent regarding all five conflict styles.

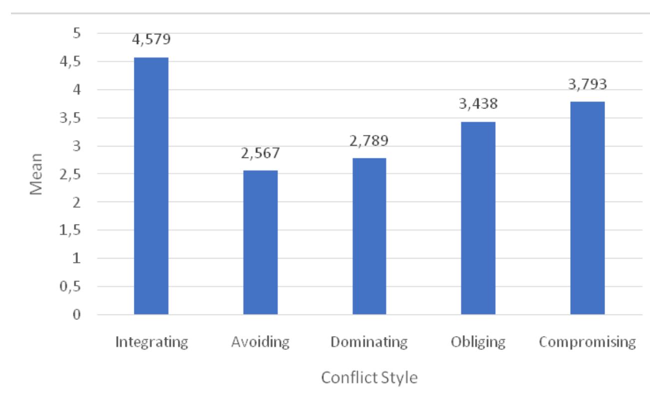

Figure 2. Conflict style means for two-year community and technical college academic deans

Academic deans were also asked torespond to an open-ended question ("What has been your experience with formal or informal training in conflict resolution?"). Thirty-four of the total 43 (79%) deans answered the open-ended question.Their responses revealed five themes, three of them major: (a) training (*n* = 25, 73.53%), (b) education (*n* = 8, 23.53%), (c) experience (*n* = 4, 11.76%), books (*n* = 1, .03%) and culture (*n* = 1, .03%). These responses suggest that the academic deans measured in the present study had formal and/or informal education or training experiences around conflict.

6. Discussion

Academic deans daily encounter conflict in their professional roles, a topic of major potential relevance across leadership in higher education.This study sought to analyze the reported conflict styles of academic deans within a large Midwestern state college and university system in order to better understand how they approached conflict. Insight regarding how academic deans address conflict on their campuses might facilitate a better understanding of how conflict is approached within higher education.

Throughout this study, the predominant reported conflict style for academic deans was the *integrating* style. This was indicated by deans at both four-year universities and two-year community and technical colleges. Rahim (1983b) defined an *integrating* style as one that has concern for self and others and looks to satisfy the interests of both parties without either feeling they are giving something up. One possible reason for this is that with fewer personnel, fewer programs, and generally less bureaucracy, academic deans in these settings might adopt a style that focuses on taking the extra time to collaborate with other across campus. In addition, some of the smaller four-year institutions have similar student enrollments as many of the two-year community or technical colleges. Regardless, the predominance of an integrating style of conflict engagement would indicate that deans within the system reflect a progressive approach to engaging in conflict.

This finding represents a promising first step in better understanding how conflict is managed in higher education. However, there is opportunity to interact further with these deans in order to ensure that training in conflict continues. Training that exists in conflict reflected from the research in this study as well as others has been derived primarily from the private sector. While some of these philosophies have relevance in higher education, there should be a more focused effort. West wrote, "the answer is not to be found in borrowing the attitudes and methods of the private sector but, rather, in finding new ways of reconciling academic and managerial values" (West, 2006: 196). By designing this type of training, it would be the hope that all deans within this system could have the confidence to competently engage conflict.

Regarding the present study, both strengths and weakness were evident.A strength of this study is that it canvassed one of the largest state systems of higher education in the nation. It is conceivable that the findings from the system under investigation may be relevant to that of other large state systems. Another strength of the study is that the data in the present studyrepresented academic deansdiverse in both state geography and institutional type. Consequently, the findings may provide a meaningful snapshot of conflict engagement within the system.

Nonetheless, the present study manifested a small sample size. Of the 222 academic deans contacted for the present study, only43 (19.37%) deans completed the survey. In addition, utilizing an instrument that is based on the participant's self-report and may reflectmore competent perception than reality dictates.It is possible that academic deans, presumably being an intelligent and savvy population, might have responded more favorably in reflection than they are perceived by others at their universities and colleges.

7. Conclusions

Consequently, there are several recommendations that could be considered for future research. The first recommendation would be to replicate the study with a focus on the private higher education institutions within the state. While there could be overlapping responses between the public system used in this study and those of private institutions, private institutions might utilize other models (i.e. Christianity *etc.*) as the basis of approaching conflict (Ennis, 2008; Dee, Henkin and Holman, 2004). Studying the private institutions could prove valuable in creating a more holistic picture of conflict within higher education. Second, it is recommended that it could be advantageous to replicate the present study within other states in the region of the state of this study. As mentioned earlier, it appears that deans within this system navigate conflict with a certain degree of skill, largely due to some form of training. It would be most significant to utilize the individuals of this state to create a template or model that could be used to facilitate conflict engagement training to deans at other institutions in states of the surrounding region. This would

allow not only for the identification of how conflict is approached currently in these states, but it would also create an opportunity to expand conflict engagement training to better equip future deans. Third, a timely and important recommendation would be to explore the effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic on leadership in higher education. As a result, deans at higher education institutions will need to engage confidently and competently with their faculty (as well as other constituents) in conflict within an online environment.It remains unclear how long courses, student services, and other functions on campus will be affected by the need to socially distance. What is certain is that universities and colleges will function at least a little differently than they did before the pandemic. How will this affect the burdens of conflict on academic deans? It would be worthwhile to seek an answer to this question.

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