

Friendly fire: How conflicts can reduce stress in the workplace

November 28 2022, by Kareyst Lin



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Stress and conflict are unavoidable aspects of life and can be highly destructive forces when left unchecked. A survey conducted by the UK government found that work-related stress led to a loss of 17.9 million

working days in 2019, which directly affected the country's economic productivity.

Previous studies also detailed the negative consequences of [work-related stress](#), such as low job satisfaction, high turnover rates, and negative impact on employees' psychological well-being and health status, such as an increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

"A major source of work-related stress is [interpersonal conflict](#), and that has been well-documented," said Singapore Management University (SMU) Associate Professor of Psychology Tsai Ming-Hong, in a recent seminar organized by SMU's Behavioral Sciences Initiative. During the seminar, he shared his findings from his new research paper.

According to Professor Tsai, there are two common types of conflicts: task-related conflicts, which refer to a disagreement in opinions regarding work-related issues, and relationship conflicts, which refer to tension between people. Both conflict types are positively correlated with stress responses, including job stress, and somatic symptoms, such as headaches and stomach distress. In his research, he sought to determine if task-related conflicts could reduce stress.

"When task-related conflicts happen, they are of varying degrees of intensity. Some conflict expressions can be mild, usually when people debate, deliberate, or express different ideas. On the other hand, certain expressions can be deemed as intense, such as when people argue, clash over different opinions, and criticize each other's suggestions," Professor Tsai explained. "What my study proposes is that mild forms of conflict expressions can reduce work-related stress, whereas intense forms of conflict expressions have the opposite effect."

Threats are what we perceive them to be

Based on the theory of conflict expression, people are less likely to undermine the influence of others during mild forms of conflict expressions compared to when more intense conflicts are expressed. They are also less likely to stay attached to their own opinions and perceive others as a threat to themselves.

Mild forms of conflict expressions provide the opportunity to bring up essential information that can reduce uncertainties deemed as threats to one's personal goals. For example, when individuals engage in debates and identify different viewpoints, they acquire relevant information to help them understand each other. Debates within project groups are also known to foster information sharing.

"This demonstrates that mild types of conflict expressions can stimulate information processing to resolve the uncertainty that may elicit threatening responses," Professor Tsai shared.

On the other hand, more intense conflict expressions can lead individuals to perceiving others as threats because the expressions and statements that emerge during the conflict are often motivated by [self-interest](#). When engaged in such conflicts, people tend to be more strongly entrenched in their positions, with a heightened motivation to undermine the influence of others. This results in them staunchly defending their opinions and attacking dissenting viewpoints.

"In such situations, we often encounter forcefully stated arguments for one's position. There is also less listening to the alternative perspective, with each side repeating his or her own position several times. These self-focused actions tend to communicate a threat to perceivers," Professor Tsai described.

Fostering a culture of collaboration through conflicts

When working in collaborative teams, conflicts are inevitable. However, Professor Tsai's research shows that expressing differences in an open-minded manner could determine how the conflict would unfold. In addition, he found that people who express milder forms of task-related conflicts are more likely to achieve collaboration and task performance than those who express more intense forms.

"Contrary to our common assumption that conflict is detrimental to collaboration, the research indicates that mild types of conflict expressions, such as debates and deliberations, can stimulate collaboration by signaling receptivity to divergent opinions," he emphasized.

Intense expressions of [conflict](#), however, convey resistance to alternative viewpoints and, thus, discourage collaboration. The findings suggest that individuals can achieve collaboration more effectively when framing their tasks as debates or including communication instructions for expressing mild task conflicts. By doing so, people will be more focused on enhancing their perception of each other's openness to diverging viewpoints, instead of trying to influence each other's emotions.

"The positive impact of mild task-related conflicts on collaboration can be helpful to organizations looking to build a culture of openness in the workplace," Professor Tsai added. "Organizations can reframe their decision processes as a problem-solving task instead of a judgment-making assignment, and present discussions as debates."

More information: Ming-Hong Tsai, Can conflict cultivate collaboration? The positive impact of mild versus intense task conflict via perceived openness rather than emotions., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/xap0000448](https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000448)

Provided by Singapore Management University

Citation: Friendly fire: How conflicts can reduce stress in the workplace (2022, November 28)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2022-11-friendly-conflicts-stress-workplace.html>

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