
THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TRAINING ON MANAGERS' SELF-ASSESSMENT OF THEIR CONFLICT KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: Training is considered as the most powerful tool for successfully dealing with workplace conflict. The benefits of training of managers are visible – conflict is a less common occurrence, employees feel confident raising issues about conflict, managers help team members to resolve conflict quickly and effectively and build healthy team relationships. Conflict management training may increase managers' confidence in their ability to deal with workplace conflict.

The purpose of the paper is to present the results from a study on the impact of conflict management training on managers' self-assessment of their conflict knowledge. The survey questioned 300 Bulgarian managers from different organizations. Respondents were asked to indicate on a dichotomous scale (0 – "no" and 1 - "yes") if they have received conflict management training in the organization they work in. Managers were also asked to assess their knowledge of conflict. For the purpose of the study ten key areas that conflict management training should be focused on were identified. The respondents were asked to evaluate on a five-point scale (1 – to a small extent or not at all, 2 – to some extent, 3 – to a moderate extent, 4 - to a great extent, 5 - to a very great extent) to what extent they feel prepared in each of the ten areas of conflict knowledge.

Findings showed a significant lack of investment in conflict management training for managers. Less than a fifth of managers (14%) had received training provided by the organization they work in. Significant differences were found according to the organizational size and the type of settlement. Findings showed that there was a significant relationship between managers' self-assessment in nine of the areas of conflict knowledge and conflict management training in organizations. These results support the hypothesis that the confidence of managers in their conflict knowledge is significantly related to the conflict management training provided by the organization.

The present study has several implications for organizations. First, it was shown that training is the key point to manage conflict effectively. Organizations need to invest in conflict management training to support managers in their management role. Second, when determining the areas that conflict management training should be focused on, organizations can use the defined key areas of conflict knowledge.

The present study contributes to the literature of conflict in organizations by examining the relationship between conflict management training and managers' confidence in their conflict knowledge.

Keywords: training, conflict management, managers' self-assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

Managing conflict is a major organizational⁷⁰ issue as the negative impact of conflict on individuals can be substantial. Recent studies show that the greatest negative effects of conflict on people at work is on their well-being (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2015, 2020). Some of the most common consequences are stress, drop in motivation or commitment, anxiety, loss of self-confidence, unworkable relationships and drop in productivity. At the same time organizations experience barriers in managing conflict as lack of trust by employees in line and senior management, lack of leadership and role-modelling by senior management, lack of confidence by managers to challenge inappropriate behaviour, inadequate training and guidance for managers (CIPD, 2020).

To address all these issues, organizations need to provide employees with adequate conflict management training. Training is considered as the most powerful tool for successfully dealing with conflict. Previous studies have confirmed the added value of conflict management training in organizations. According to the global survey by OPP, Ltd.⁷¹ on conflict in the workplace training helped 95% of employees in some way. Specifically, training helped employees to look for win-win outcomes from conflict (58%) and made them more confident in managing disputes (27%) (OPP, 2008). Furthermore, the survey has proved a link between training in conflict management and conflict's positive impact - where employees have been trained, people are more likely to see positive outcomes of conflict, such as a better understanding of others or a better solution to a workplace problem.

⁷⁰ Conflict is a significant issue at both organizational and macroeconomic level (Tsanov, 2015; Zlatinov, 2019).

⁷¹ The survey questioned 5,000 full-time employees in nine countries around Europe and the Americas (Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

As far as managers often play crucial role in addressing conflict at work (Bankova, 2019; Mihaylova, 2017, 2020a; Raykova, 2012), organizations need to focus on training of managers to develop their capacities to manage employees effectively. Managing conflict is as an essential leadership skill (Dimitrova, 2017; Petkova-Gurbalova, 2020). Previous research has emphasized the benefits of training of managers⁷². Conflict in organizations that invest in people management training is a less common occurrence, employees feel confident raising issues about conflict, line managers help team members to resolve conflict quickly and effectively and build strong, healthy team relationships (CIPD, 2020).

Findings from previous studies also showed that managers tend to be least confident about the “people” aspects of their managerial role such as handling employees’ conflict and having difficult conversation than about the technical aspects (CIPD, 2020). All that evidence supports the need of investment in conflict management training of managers to increase their confidence in their ability to deal with workplace conflict.

The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of conflict management training on managers’ self-assessment of their conflict knowledge.

Based on previous research on how training influence the confidence of employees (OPP, 2008), we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis: Managers who have received conflict management training in the organization will be significantly more likely to feel prepared (or confident) in their knowledge of conflict compared with those who have not been trained.

The hypothesis implies that managers’ confidence in their conflict knowledge is related to the training provided by the organization.

Our study is the first we know of to examine the relationship between conflict management training and managers’ confidence in their conflict knowledge and thus it contributes to the research of conflict in organizations.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A questionnaire, consisting of three section, was given personally in a printed form or sent via e-mail to managers from different organizations in Bulgaria. In the first section respondents were asked to indicate on a dichotomous scale (0 – “no” and 1 - “yes”) if they have received conflict management training in the organization they work in.

In the second section managers were asked to assess their knowledge of conflict. Based on a literature review on conflict in organizations ten key areas of knowledge are identified (Mihaylova, 2020b): nature of conflict in organizations, types of conflicts, sources of conflict, structure and dynamics of conflict, individual behaviour in conflict situations, conflict management strategies, outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization, analysis and diagnosis of a conflict, analysis of the post-conflict situation and forecasting and prevention of conflict. We consider that conflict management training should be focused on these areas. The possession of good knowledge in the above areas will guide managers towards the most effective methods of dealing with workplace conflict. The second section included 10 items corresponding to the key areas of conflict knowledge. The respondents were asked to evaluate on a five-point scale (1 – to a small extent or not at all, 2 – to some extent, 3 – to a moderate extent, 4 - to a great extent, 5 - to a very great extent) to what extent they feel prepared in each of the ten areas. Cronbach’s α for the self-assessment scale is 0.94.

In the final section managers provided demographic information, including their gender, age, educational background, years of working experience, and years of managerial experience, and information about the organization (type of settlement, sector, and size).

The sample consisted of 300 managers⁷³ of whom 53.3% were female and 46.7% are male. Approximately two thirds of respondents were between 31 and 40 years old (33.3%) or between 41 and 50 years old (31.3%), 19% were up to 30 years old and 16.4% were older than 51 years old. Most managers had master’s degree (71.3%), 16.7% - bachelor’s degree, 7.3% - doctoral degree and 4.7% were high-school graduates. The work experience of respondents was as follows: 40.3% had worked from 11 to 20 years, 34.3% - from 21 and more years, 17% - from 6 to 10 years and 8.4% - from 1 to 5 years. Four out of ten managers (39.3%) had managerial experience from 1 to 5 years, 27.3% - from 6 to 10 years, 25% - from 11 to 20 years and 8.4% - from 21 and more years. Respondents had an average of 18 years of work experience and an average of 9 years of managerial experience. A third of managers worked in large organizations (34%, of whom 21% worked in very large organizations and 13% worked in large organizations), 24.4% - in medium organizations, 23.3% - in small organizations and 18.3% - in micro organizations

⁷² In general terms training of managers is crucial for realizing better outcomes in organizations. For instance, studying various behavioural aspects that could affect decision-making may support managers in their everyday activity (Nedev, 2018, 2019).

⁷³ The questionnaire was given or sent to 592 managers. The usable responses were 300.

(18.3%). Organizations from the service industry represented the biggest group of the sample (61.3%), followed by organizations from the manufacturing industry (15%), organizations from the commercial sector – 14.3% and organizations from the public sector - 9.4%. Most organizations were in the capital of Bulgaria (72.7%), 21.7% - in district cities, 4.6% - in small cities and 1% - in villages. The data have been processed in IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings showed that organizations underestimate the value of training in conflict management. Less than a fifth of managers (14%) had received conflict management training provided by the organization they work in. Significant differences were found according to the organizational size and the type of settlement. Very large organizations (27%), large organizations (20.5%) and medium organizations (16.4%) are significantly more likely to invest in training of managers compared with small organizations (5.7%) and micro organizations (1.8%): $\chi^2(4, N = 300) = 21.33, p < .05$. Organizations located in the capital (17.9%) are significantly more likely to provide training for managers than organizations from district cities (4.6%) and organizations from small cities and villages (0%): $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 10.26, p < .05$. We can speculate on why organizations do underestimate the value of training in conflict management. The primary reason may be the lack of acknowledgement of the significance of conflict as an organizational phenomenon and the failure to use organizational mission and values for its management (Atanasov, 2016; Bankova & Atanasov, 2002; Titov, Virovere, & Kuimet, 2018).

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between managers' self-assessment in the ten areas⁷⁴ of conflict knowledge and the conflict management training provided by organizations. The results are as follows:

- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the nature of conflict in organizations and the conflict management training was significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 30.16, p < .05$. Managers who had been trained (66.7%) were significantly more likely to feel confident in their knowledge of the *nature of conflict* than managers who had not been trained (25.2%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the nature of conflict in organizations by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the nature of conflict in organizations	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	36.4%	9.5%
To a moderate extent	38.4%	23.8%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	25.2%	66.7%
$\chi^2 = 30.16, df = 2, p < .05$		

- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the types of conflicts and the conflict management training was significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 22.60, p < .05$. Respondents who had received training in the organization (45.2%) were more likely to feel prepared at a great or a very great extent in *this area* than those who had not been trained (19.8%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the types of conflicts by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the types of conflicts	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	45.3%	9.6%
To a moderate extent	34.9%	45.2%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	19.8%	45.2%
$\chi^2 = 22.60, df = 2, p < .05$		

⁷⁴ To meet the requirements for the use of a chi-square test of independence (the expected frequencies for each cell should be at least 1 and the expected frequencies should be at least 5 in 80% of the cells) the ten variables for the key areas of conflict knowledge were recoded in a three-point scale (1 - to a small extent or not at all + to some extent, 2 - to a moderate extent, 3 - to a great extent + to a very great extent).

- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the sources of conflict and the conflict management training was significant, $\chi^2 (2, N = 300) = 16.23, p < .05$. The confidence in the knowledge of the *sources of conflict* was significantly higher among trained managers (73.8%) than among untrained ones (43.4%) (Table 3).

Table 3. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the sources of conflict by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the sources of conflict	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	25.2%	2.4%
To a moderate extent	31.4%	23.8%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	43.4%	73.8%

$\chi^2 = 16.23, df = 2, p < .05$

- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the structure and the dynamics of conflict and the conflict management training was significant, $\chi^2 (2, N = 300) = 24.84, p < .05$. Respondents from organizations where training was delivered (54.8%) were more likely to report a high confidence in their knowledge of the *structure and the dynamics of conflict* compared with respondents from organizations that did not provide any training (20.2%) (Table 4).

Table 4. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the structure and the dynamics of conflict by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the structure and the dynamics of conflict	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	41%	14.2%
To a moderate extent	38.8%	31%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	20.2%	54.8%

$\chi^2 = 24.84, df = 2, p < .05$

- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the individual behaviour in conflict situations and the conflict management training in organizations was significant, $\chi^2 (2, N = 300) = 10.02, p < .05$. The self-assessment of the knowledge in *this area* was significantly higher among managers who had been trained in conflict management (66.7%) than among manager who had not received training (41.1%) (Table 5).

Table 5. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the individual behaviour in conflict situations by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the individual behaviour in conflict situations	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	23.6%	9.5%
To a moderate extent	35.3%	23.8%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	41.1%	66.7%

$\chi^2 = 10.02, df = 2, p < .05$

- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the conflict management strategies and the training in organizations was significant, $\chi^2 (2, N = 300) = 17.74, p < .05$. Respondents who had received training (59.5%) were more likely to feel prepared about the *approaches for addressing conflicts* compared with respondents who had not been trained (30.2%) (Table 6).

Table 6. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the conflict management strategies by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the conflict management strategies	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	34.1%	7.2%
To a moderate extent	35.7%	33.3%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	30.2%	59.5%
$\chi^2 = 17.74, df = 2, p < .05$		

- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization and the conflict management training was significant, $\chi^2 (2, N = 300) = 11.91, p < .05$. Trained managers (69%) were more likely to feel confident in their knowledge in *this area* than managers who had not been trained (41.9%) (Table 7).

Table 7. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the outcomes of conflict for the unit or the organization	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	19.7%	4.8%
To a moderate extent	38.4%	26.2%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	41.9%	69%
$\chi^2 = 11.91, df = 2, p < .05$		

- A chi-square test of independence showed that there was no significant association between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the *analysis and the diagnosis of a conflict* and the conflict management training in the organization, $\chi^2 (2, N = 300) = 2.47, p = .29$.
- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the analysis of the post-conflict situation and the conflict management training was significant, $\chi^2 (2, N = 300) = 6.93, p < .05$. Respondents from organizations that provided training (47.6%) were more likely to feel confident in their knowledge of the *analysis of the post-conflict situation* than respondents from organizations that did not invest in training (36.8%) (Table 8).

Table 8. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the analysis of the post-conflict situation by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the analysis of the post-conflict situation	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	31.8%	11.9%
To a moderate extent	31.4%	40.5%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	36.8%	47.6%
$\chi^2 = 6.93, df = 2, p < .05$		

- The relation between the self-assessment of the knowledge of the forecasting and prevention of conflict and the conflict management training in organizations was significant, $\chi^2 (2, N = 300) = 8.58, p < .05$. Managers who had received training (40.5%) were more likely to feel prepared to *forecast and prevent conflicts* than those who had not been trained (26.7%) (Table 9).

Table 9. Self-assessment of the knowledge of the forecasting and prevention of conflict by training in the organization

Self-assessment of the knowledge of the forecasting and prevention of conflict	Conflict management training in the organization	
	No (n = 258)	Yes (n = 42)
To a small extent or not at all + To some extent	42.7%	19%
To a moderate extent	30.6%	40.5%
To a great extent + To a very great extent	26.7%	40.5%

$\chi^2 = 8.58, df = 2, p < .05$

The chi-square test of independence showed that there was a significant relationship between managers' self-assessment in nine of the areas of conflict knowledge and conflict management training in organizations. These results support the hypothesis that managers who have received conflict management training are significantly more likely to feel confident in their knowledge of conflict compared with those who have not been trained.

Findings prove the significance of conflict management training for managers. As managers are often at the forefront of addressing workplace conflict, they need to have the confidence and capability to be proactive and deal with conflict (CIPD, 2020). Our evidence shows that the provision of conflict management training affects the degree of confidence of managers in their conflict knowledge and is indicative for organizations not to underestimate the value of training.

A limitation to the generalizability of the results of the study is the used convenience sample that included managers who happened to be most accessible to the researcher.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The paper highlights the importance of conflict management training in organizations and arises awareness of its potential benefits for managers' ability to handle workplace conflict. Training can help managers in performing the people management dimension of their role by giving them more comfort and confidence.

The findings from the study reveal a significant lack of investment in conflict management training for managers in Bulgaria. Minority of organizations have provided managers with training. This lack is worrying given the positive outcomes that training brings. Our evidence proves a clear link between conflict management training provided by organizations and the confidence of managers in their conflict knowledge. It is indispensable that organizations invest in the competence and skills of managers so that they can handle conflict at ease.

The present study has several implications for organizations. First, it was shown that training is the key point to manage conflict effectively. Organizations need to develop conflict management training⁷⁵ programs to support managers in their management role. Second, when determining the areas that conflict management training should be focused on, organizations can use the defined key areas of conflict knowledge.

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⁷⁵ In addition, the competence and skills of employees, especially of managers, are considered as a major factor for the innovative activity of organizations (Bichurova, 2019).

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