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Depending on the Angle:
Perspectives on Conflict and Workplace Climate

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Abstract

This study closely examines the relationship between managerial perspectives on conflict and workplace climate during a time of great organizational change. That change, in this case, is the implementation of electronic medical records (EMRs) in nursing homes. A case study of eight nursing homes (on average 255 beds) in the New York City area is used to identify different workplace issues and managerial approaches to dealing with conflict. The research question examined is how organizations with the same types of conflict can experience vastly different workplace climates. Preliminary findings indicate that different perspectives, not merely types, of conflict were what shaped either a positive or a negative workplace climate. Two managerial approaches to dealing with conflict are identified, and workplace climate is illustrated in feedback from personal interviews with both managers and front-line staff at the eight homes. The findings are used to create a model for forecasting the likelihood of successful organizational change. Scholarship would benefit from additional research that tests the proposed model.

Introduction

The guiding research question examined in this paper is how organizations with the same types of workplace issues are able to experience vastly different organizational climates. This paper supports previous research that has demonstrated a positive relationship between management style and organizational climate; furthermore, it adds to the literature by suggesting that perspective on conflict is a key feature of management style that cannot be ignored, as it has a distinct role in shaping workplace climate. By looking at how different styles are reflected in approaches to a variety of workplace issues—including the way discipline problems are handled, how decisions are typically made, and the use of teamwork—we will be better equipped to articulate this link.

Workplace climate is delineated here by the nature of workplace relationships and environment, whether positive or negative. Previous research has suggested that certain types of conflict are good, while others are bad, having either a positive or a negative effect on workplace climate (Jehn 1995, Jehn and Mannix 2001). Current literature also suggests that different management styles shape different workplace climates. This paper builds on the well-established conflict literature to demonstrate that focusing only on whether conflict is good or bad is insufficient for understanding the nuances of organizational life and that a deeper investigation of the link between conflict and climate is warranted. It also focuses on articulating the link between management style and workplace climate by examining where conflict comes from and what contributions management makes to help conflict get diffused throughout an organization.

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A case study of eight nursing homes in the New York City area is used to address this bigger question of conflict in organizations and how management influences perceptions of conflict in nursing homes. By fleshing out the feedback from personal interviews with administrators and front-line employees, I use this data to inductively come up with several findings. A model is proposed to better understand the question at hand, which will ultimately serve as a springboard for an analysis of the role that managerial perspective on conflict plays in the process of organizational change.

Literature Review

Perspectives on Conflict

Organizations in any industry have to deal with conflict, but not every organization views or addresses conflict in the same way. Some see it as an absolute negative, with the goal of preventing and eliminating it at all costs. This perspective, which has been referred to as the classical view of organizational conflict, is shared by theorists such as Fayol (1916/1949) and Weber (1929/1947), and implicitly assumes that conflict is detrimental to organizational efficiency and therefore should be minimized in organizations (Rahim 2001). Robbins (1974) describes this perspective as the philosophy of the classicists or traditionalists, which is based on the assumption that conflict is detrimental to an organization and should be reduced or eliminated (Rahim 2001).

Others think that conflict is inevitable—part of the behavioralists' philosophy, as well as the institutionalists' in industrial relations—and, rather than focusing on how to get rid of it, try to come up with systems for managing it effectively. Mary Parker Follet noted the value of constructive conflict in an organization in saying "we can often measure our progress by watching the nature of our conflicts" (Follett, 1926/1940, p. 35). She strongly advocated for a problem-solving method for managing organizational conflict and believed that other methods of handling conflict, such as suppression, avoidance, dominance, and compromise, were ineffective in dealing with conflict. Similarly, Whyte (1967) reiterated that conflicts are an inevitable part of organizational life and stressed the importance of building conflict resolution procedures into the design of an organization (Whyte 1967).

There are still others who view conflict as a positive, essential for sparking communication and innovation, which promotes efficiency at both individual and organizational levels. Conflict becomes an instrument of social change and influence, rather than a symptom of a breakdown in social relationships. Miles (1980) took a functional approach to conflict, viewing it in terms of how its presence inspired such things as feedback, coalition formation, growth, and innovation, which revealed something about both the centrality of conflict in organizational life and the complexity associated with its management, making it absolutely essential to understand the context in which organizational conflict occurs and the variety of techniques available for use in its management. Rather than strive to eliminate conflict, this approach recognizes the necessity of conflict in facilitating positive growth in the workplace.

More recently, Karen Jehn has written on types of conflict, identifying which ones produce negative outcomes and which ones produce positive outcomes (Jehn and Mannix 2001). She makes a distinction between task conflict and relationship conflict and discusses how high and low levels of each type affect workplace outcomes in different ways. Jehn claims that task conflicts tend to be positive, as they spark debates that can lead to organizational improvement. Relationship conflicts, on the other hand, tend to be negative, as they deal with heated interpersonal issues that often make people feel angry or frustrated in the workplace. She also suggests that different conflict norms—having different levels of openness in the process of addressing conflict—have various implications for the organization. Sometimes having open and honest communication facilitates the effective resolution of conflict, primarily if it has to do with tasks. Other times, this same process can increase anxiety and frustration, proving counterproductive—as is the case with relationship conflicts (Murnighan and Conlin 1991, Jehn 1995).

Rather than attempt to identify positive and negative types of conflict, this study identifies common types of workplace issues in nursing homes and then discusses how management's perspective on conflict, as a part of management style, influences the workplace climate. This is illustrated through interview feedback

received from nursing home administrators regarding their particular styles of management and from front-line employees regarding workplace relationships, and how work gets done, in their homes.

Workplace Climate

A good portion of the literature on workplace climate debates how it compares and contrasts with the literature on organizational culture because the two are often, mistakenly, used interchangeably. Thus, a brief explanation for the specific reference to workplace climate in this study is warranted. The vast consensus is that culture is rooted in values, beliefs, and assumptions held by organizational members, which reproduces a symbolic world that gives culture great stability. Climate, on the other hand, is more temporary and subject to direct control, limited to those aspects of the social environment that are consciously perceived by organizational members.

Culture researchers have looked at the evolution of social systems over time (Mohr 1982, Pettigrew 1979, Rohlen 1974, Schein 1985, Van Maanen 1979), the importance of underlying assumptions (Kunda 1992, Schein 1985), individual meaning (Geertz 1973, Pondy et al. 1983) and the insider's point of view of the organization. Climate researchers have looked at the impact of organizational systems on groups and individuals (Ekvall 1987, Joyce and Slocum 1984), members' perceptions of organizational life (Guion 1973, James and Jones 1974), along with the categorization of these practices and perceptions.

While both accord value to the individuals' view of the organization, climate deals with a more day-to-day perception of organizational life. How management implements, and how workers respond to, change in the organization is undoubtedly influenced by the values and beliefs of those therein. But how they experience those changes depends on many other factors that are not as deeply embedded, such as their perceptions of how and why a particular decision is being made, the extent to which they get along with their coworkers, and even socioeconomic issues.

In addition to the culture versus climate debate, a good portion of the literature discusses the link between management styles and workplace climate, although it does not discuss the role of management's perspective on conflict as an important piece of their style. The literature also looks at the link between workplace climate and workplace outcomes—for example, that a positive or negative climate will have different implications for job satisfaction and so on. This study relies on previous research that demonstrates the climate–outcomes relationship and instead focuses on the role of managerial perspective on conflict in shaping workplace climate.

Methods

The Nursing Homes: Location, Selection, and Size

This paper takes an inductive, qualitative approach to studying eight nursing homes in the New York City (NYC) region that received a grant in 2006 to implement EMRs. As a member of a small research team at Cornell that was asked to evaluate the project, I conducted approximately seven to 10 interviews at each of the eight homes, with members of both labor and management. Each of the nursing homes we visited was part of a 140-home bargaining unit represented by SEIU 1199, and the pilot project to adopt EMRs in fact grew out of a collective bargaining agreement in which a Quality of Care Oversight Committee (QCOC) had been established. The average number of beds in each home was 224. The lowest occupancy rate was 88 percent, and all of the others ranged from 93 percent to 99 percent. Table 1 breaks down the number of beds, number of residents, and occupancy rate in each home (www.ucomparehealthcare.com).

The Interviews: Structure and Intentions

Going into each of the homes, the goal was to get a sense of what life was like before the technology was implemented. Knowing that we would be dealing with a variety of employees—labor and management, those with supervisory roles and those without—we prepared three separate sets of interview questions: one for administrators, one for front-line employees, and one for union representatives. These questions allowed us to get a sense of what the managerial style was like in each home and what the climate was like for employment and labor relations.

TABLE 1
The Nursing Homes: Number of Beds, Number of Residents, and County

Home	No. of beds	No. of residents	Occupancy rate (%)	County
1	320	303	95	Manhattan
2	270	267	99	Kings
3	240	236	98	Bronx
4	200	191	96	Bronx
5	200	189	95	Bronx
6	200	176	88	Queens
7	183	177	97	Queens
8	180	167	93	Nassau

Using the questions simply as a guide allowed the conversation to develop according to the unique perspective of the interviewee—for example, what the person perceived to be the main issues at the home or what the biggest concerns were for her or him personally. In addition to the feedback we got in response to specific questions, such as how work was done at each home, these tangential conversations were particularly interesting, as some employees expressed outlooks that were vastly different from other employees within the same home. In our interviewing at all levels, from administrators to nurses to CNAs and union representatives, several patterns started to emerge.

First, we found that a few common workplace issues were most frequently alluded to throughout our interviews and in our observations while touring the inside of each nursing home. Second, while these issues existed in each of the homes, not every home had the same type of workplace climate. In this section, we extend our understanding of conflict and organizational climate by identifying these issues and discussing their role in the nursing home context and how they can be dealt with differently depending on one's perspective on conflict.

Identifying Types of Nursing Homes

Combining direct interview feedback with our impressions of the more subtle workplace nuances, we began to notice both similarities and differences that either bridged homes or set them apart from one another. In one home, it appeared that decisions were made to gain tighter control of the staff. In particular with the implementation of electronic medical records, the goal was to heighten surveillance and discipline. Given the apparent desire of management to get rid of conflict by attempting to eliminate problem areas and dismiss other workplace issues, I identified such homes as having a negative perspective on conflict. Another home aimed to stay abreast of technology and improve overall efficiency of the organization, while at the same time improving the quality and skill set of the staff. Management attempted to empower employees through involvement in decision-making and teamwork on the floor. Such organizations are identified as having a positive perspective on conflict. Both types of homes had the ultimate goal of achieving higher quality of care, but each had its own unique style and approach to doing so.

Continuing into the rest of the homes, it was evident that each one tended to display managerial characteristics and perspectives similar to at least one of the initial two homes, demonstrating a potential pattern. Based on impressions and feedback obtained in the first round of interviews, this pattern could be categorized by the two types of managerial perspective on conflict—negative and positive. The conclusion cannot be drawn that there must be only two specific types of nursing homes, or that there are only two particular types of management style. Rather, by providing an interpretation of the observations collected throughout the interviews, a model can be formed for understanding how perspectives on conflict relate to workplace climate.

Negative perspective on conflict. Each of these homes had the common feature of having administrators who put control at the center of how they ran their organizations. This came out particularly in what they had

to say about their decision-making processes and their relationships with the staff, union members, and officials. The managerial style was paternalistic, and the tactics for discipline were punitive. It seemed the approach to dealing with workplace issues was to minimize, if not entirely get rid of, anything that could potentially be problematic. Given these observations, the following is proposed:

> *Proposition 1: Administrators with a negative perspective on conflict will have a management style of top-down decision-making and view mistakes as an opportunity for discipline, creating negative implications for workplace climate.*

Positive perspective on conflict. In each of these homes, key themes that emerged were employee empowerment through active involvement and a high degree of both teamwork and communication. Mistakes and errors were viewed as an opportunity for both individual learning and organizational improvement, and all employees were regarded with dignity and respect.

> *Proposition 2: Administrators with a positive perspective on conflict will have high employee involvement in decision-making, with the goal of empowerment, and view mistakes as an opportunity to improve their organizational systems, creating positive implications for workplace climate.*

To illustrate these different perspectives, and subsequently how they influence organizational climate, in the following section I discuss how similar workplace issues are viewed by managers in each type of home. A good portion of the research in nursing homes has been conducted through the lens of anticipating technological change and its effect on organizational structure and workplace relationships. Within this, valuable insights can be gleaned from statements regarding how people feel about their roles in the workplace, what limitations they have, what opportunities exist for advancement, and how they relate to their peers and managers.

Results

The homes were located in a cross-section of socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods, and, assuming that this has an impact on each home's access to resources, one might expect there to be a disparity in terms of capacity for organizational change. Our semistructured interview process allowed for questions that addressed whether or not administrators would have done more or less if they were in a different socioeconomic situation. This is addressed in this study through feedback to questions regarding motivation for adopting the new technology and whether administrators would have made the change without the grant. While some stated that they would not have participated in the project without the grant, others proclaimed that they would have done it regardless—if not at that exact time, then some time in the near future. Interestingly, some of the homes in the latter category were economically on par with the homes who said it would be too expensive to implement EMRs without outside help.

In the homes that were financially and geographically better off, we asked administrators and directors of nursing services if they felt their socioeconomic status influenced their choice to participate in the project. One home stated that they would have participated anyway because they felt this was the next necessary step in improving resident care and the working lives of their employees. Another home, although not as quick to answer, suggested that they, too, would have likely gone ahead with it. The inconsistency among these answers raised some skepticism as to whether socioeconomic issues played a primary role in management's choice to adopt the technology. In other words, socioeconomic status did not immediately appear to hinder or improve capacity for organizational change, at least not on the point of access to resources. Where it did seem to be reflected was in the attitudes of employees regarding their preferences for a certain type of management style, their desire for change, and what they felt they were capable of. Management decision-making had less to do with socioeconomic drivers and more to do with values and beliefs about how to run an organization and the perceptions held by employees as to the type of climate created by this process.

Illustrating Managerial Style

Negative perspective on conflict. In the first home we visited, the administrator's need for control came through in how he spoke about his staff and residents, with a heavy paternalistic tone. His expressions focused around knowing what was best for everyone, making decisions without input from others, and having impressive means for supervising both staff and residents. He took pride in the fact that he had over 50 video cameras placed throughout the nursing home and that he knew what was going on at all times because he would come in during the night to check up on people and have his staff report everything to him directly.

The disciplinary style here was punitive, and measures for monitoring employees were implemented with the specific goal of identifying wrongdoers and punishing them accordingly. This created a tense atmosphere of fear and hesitation, with workers afraid to do anything outside of their job descriptions in case they were to make a mistake and get in trouble. Decision-making was more top-down than it was collaborative, and employment relations were poor, with a clear divide between those with supervisory roles and those without, sometimes even within those subgroups. There were issues of accountability, with each person out for him- or herself, doing only what was required and quickly pointing the finger at someone else when anything went wrong.

The following statement by the Director of Nursing Services (DNS) at the second home with a similar perspective on conflict (designated "Negative2") indicated that her primary purpose for supporting the adoption of EMRs was indeed for the benefit of tighter surveillance and monitoring:

> Negative2, DNS: "I want to know if and when residents are getting their meds. If there's a problem, I want to know which nurses are involved. I may give them an in-service, then a warning. If they don't like that, they can find a job somewhere else. There's going to be better quality of life because people can be kept in check. If it's not good for them, let them be afraid. The residents' lives are in our hands. Now I will be having more eyes to see what is going on."

This provided some insight into the punitive disciplinary style and the state of employment relations at the nursing home, as tactics for discipline stem partially from levels of cooperation between management and front-line stuff. That is, management that perceives staff as being lazy, uncooperative, or difficult to manage will likely implement more punitive styles of discipline (e.g., warnings, terminations, watching for mistakes) rather than learning styles (e.g., in-service, re-education, looking at how the organization itself can improve).

At another point during our meeting, one of the kitchen staff came in to bring us some milk for our coffee, and the DNS asked if she was excited about the technology. When she hesitated (the technology really wasn't going to impact her job), the DNS pressed on:

> Negative2, DNS: "You're excited about it right? It's going to be great, right?"

> To which the staff member (*Negative2, Kitchen staff) relented:* "Yes, it's going to be really good."

Positive perspective on conflict. Instead of top-down or even collaborative decision-making between labor and management, employees in homes with a positive perspective on conflict were largely involved in these workplace processes. Designating go-to leaders on each of the floors became a more effective way to reach employees, gain trust, and ultimately achieve great productivity.

> Positive1, DNS: "We use employees' leverage to get others to perform, not my own."

When we spoke with the DNS at the first of these homes, she described how her managerial style had changed over the years to accommodate this high performance–type work system. She had recognized over time that this reaped greater organizational benefits than a more hierarchical system where management and staff were constantly at odds. She also noted that the administrator had experienced a similar transformation and that the home overall was now more geared toward empowering employees.

In the homes with a positive perspective on conflict, to the extent that the technology would monitor behavior, it was viewed by management as an opportunity to learn how to improve what they were doing, on both individual and organizational levels.

> Positive1, DNS: "Expectation is positive rather than punitive. Can use [EMRs] as an audit tool but it needs to be more of a teaching tool. The way it was years ago, it would be *punitive*, but we have open management here. It will give more of a self-appreciation, confidence, and more time to chat. We use employees' leverage to get others to perform, not my own."

While both types of home had the overall goal of improving productivity and resident care, the medium through which homes with a positive perspective on conflict aimed to achieve this was by empowering their employees through learning and skill development.

> Positive1, Administrator: "Education from this will be phenomenal. It will make people better at doing their jobs."

> Positive2, Director: "[It] needs to be presented as a tool for them and less paperwork, etc. Enhances the camaraderie, team. In designing a care plan, they can do it at their own convenience."

> Positive3, Assistant Administrator: "It will be easier to find trouble spots and patterns. This makes you look at your system."

As mentioned earlier, employees in these homes were more involved in the decision-making and the everyday work routines on the shop floor. Management found that this served as a more effective means of reaching employees, gaining trust and achieving greater productivity.

Illustrating Workplace Climate

Negative perspective on conflict. Having a negative perspective on conflict undoubtedly played a large role in creating a poor organizational climate in some of the homes. Handled from a negative perspective, conflict can damage relationships between labor and management or within subgroups of employees. It can reinforce status differences, lending itself to hostility and breakdowns in communication that disrupt the flow of important information, ultimately weakening organizational efficiency.

When our research team arrived at the first home, which I later identified as having a negative perspective on conflict, the meeting room had been set up with a long table, and there was a group of six staff members—two Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs), two Registered Nurses (RNs), a union rep, and the DNS. We met as an entire group, something the team hadn't anticipated, and we immediately felt the tension in the room. The CNAs were quiet, sitting back with their arms folded across their chests, looking concerned and perhaps a bit disgruntled. The RNs seemed bitter, talking about the extra work they had to do to make up for what other staff should be doing and then having to face the consequences for something that wasn't their responsibility. After discussing a few questions about employment relations at the home and talking about their impressions of the technology, the RNs and DNS left the room. Almost instantaneously, the CNAs broke out:

> Negative1, CNA: "They're the ones that are the problem. They do nothing and expect us to do everything. We have too many residents to look after, and if we miss one thing, they won't help out with it and we end up hearing about it. They're so lazy and think they're above everyone else."

There was a lack of teamwork and cooperation because of the employees' fear of repercussions. If someone helped out and something went wrong, he or she would be to blame. This fear of discipline, deriving from a punitive managerial style, led to a lack of accountability and breakdowns in communication that left staff at odds with each other.

Negative2, Physician: "I don't know if we'll ever get rid of the communication problem between staff, RNs, and physicians, especially at a top level."

The staffing situation was poor in each type of home, but there was very little teamwork in these homes in order to ease the workload or improve the climate for recruitment and retention. Communication was low, as were levels of trust and attitudes toward temporary and older employees.

Negative2, DNS: "We don't take temp CNAs from outside because they don't know what's happening. Sometimes I will take 1 temp [LPN] and she's mine. I know how to keep their mouth shut so it's okay."

Negative2, LPN/charge nurse: "We have a younger crowd [of employees]. They don't like rules and regulations, so they bounce [go away]. The [older] group . . . is more nervous. . . . They feel like it's too late to learn."

Curiously, our meeting with the CNA from the labor–management committee was set up in the office directly adjacent to the DNS's office, with the door propped open. She seemed mildly hesitant but, when asked how she felt about the new technology, she responded:

Negative2, CNA from labor–management committee: "It's about time the nursing home does something. Sixty percent of the staff is enthusiastic; the others are not as excited [older heads]. Older heads don't like it, to adjust from paper. They feel like they won't grasp it."

Nurses were concerned with the high turnover of staff from the agency (i.e., temporary staff). Someone would come in one day and the nurses would be in charge of training him or her, only to have the person return intermittently, if at all. To the nurses, this produced poorly informed employees on the shop floor and was a waste of the limited time they had to take care of their own routine tasks. Not only did this include providing care to the residents but, as we've mentioned, staying late to complete overwhelming amounts of paperwork.

Positive perspective on conflict. In homes with a positive perspective on conflict, teamwork and empowerment were key features of the workplace, communication was high, and temporary and older employees were regarded as an essential part of the organization. In these cases we saw how conflict was viewed as a positive. Conflict can force employers to look at their own systems in order to see what they can do differently to make life easier and more functional for all parties involved.

Staff at these homes recognized a basic need for positive relationships with each other, whether or not there was technology in place, for the overall well-being of the working environment. Employees at these homes reiterated the importance of teamwork without hierarchical discrimination. This was in stark contrast to the first authoritarian home we visited, where there were extremely low levels of accountability and resentment between employees with supervisory roles and those without.

Positive2, CNA: "We've got psych and bipolar residents. We're all here for a job. When you come in with an attitude, you can't work. We're got 40 females; we need to be able to go up and down on attitudes. There is no technology for that!"

Positive3, CNA/orderly (22 years): "This home is the best—staff, the whole environment, once this new management came in. We'd have patients who would come in here and couldn't do anything; then they walk out of here. It's good because you see how this place helps people get back to living a normal life."

Interpreting the Results

Status Differences

Within nursing homes, there are several classes of employees, both union and nonunion. Some of the nursing homes we visited used status differences to exploit other classes of workers, sticking only to what

they needed to do and pointing the finger when things didn't get done. Others saw less clearly defined lines between classes of workers, stressing the importance of everybody pitching in to keep the place running well and the residents cared for properly.

If status differences are viewed as consisting of a variety of roles that create an opportunity for efficiently fulfilling tasks and cooperating with each other, this workplace issue could potentially work to the advantage of both the organization and the individual. The improved efficiency of the organization would have a positive impact on performance and resident care. The individual would be less overburdened and more satisfied with his or her job. On the other hand, if the variety of roles in a hierarchy were to be viewed from the perspective of holding more or less power, the division of classes might foster hostility toward each other. Ultimately, this could have a negative effect on both the organization and the individual. Individuals dealing with heavy workloads and bitter relationships would be less satisfied with their jobs and complete fewer tasks than they could if there were more assistance. As such, organizational efficiency would decrease and negatively affect overall performance, which could have repercussions for resident care.

Staffing

The staffing situation in the nursing home industry is already poor, with recruitment getting tougher given what some perceive to be the declining state of the field. In each home we visited, staffing was an issue to the extent that there were too many residents per nurse which made people feel overburdened and overwhelmed. In some cases, nurses viewed this as a reason for doing only what was required of them, sometimes out of fear of being held accountable for something they might do wrong, and other times so as not to burn out. This often led to hostile relationships between employees, as few were willing to help each other. Additionally, while recruitment and retention were issues in each of the homes, when we asked why people stayed, it seemed that, in the homes with a negative perspective on conflict, the most common reason among nurses was out of job necessity and the feeling that they had limited options. In the homes with a positive perspective on conflict, people tended to stay because they were genuinely happy with their jobs, resulting from an emphasis on teamwork and on making staff feel appreciated. The attitude among nurses in these homes was that everyone was there to make sure the residents received the proper care, whether that meant covering for another employee or doing a task that was someone else's responsibility. This appeared to have a domino effect, where one person's willingness motivated others to pitch in as well. Even though many were overburdened, morale was improved knowing that a group of people was there as a support system.

Breakdowns in Communication

Communication breakdowns can happen in any type of organization. In some homes, not knowing what was going on created a sense of confusion and hostility among employees, who felt that decisions were being made only at the top. In other homes, this same situation was viewed as an opportunity to ask questions and become more involved. Where management chose to involve employees and open up the flow of information, there tended to be increased awareness, which facilitated a high level of trust. The more informed the employees, the more trusting they appeared to be, and the smoother the operation of the facility.

Implementing major organizational change is a prime example of a situation where good communication is necessary, especially where the implementation of technology is involved. As we've seen in other industries, the introduction of technology has a tendency to lead administrators to institute layoffs in an effort to maximize efficiency. Throughout the course of our research, several people outside of the project have inquired as to the involvement of the union. It seems counterintuitive that a union would be supportive of a major technological advancement in an organization that thrives on interpersonal interaction, communication, and hands-on care.

An important finding was that most administrators recognized just how crucial it was to have the union on board, so that employees didn't perceive the change as something management was arbitrarily imposing, thus increasing trust and lowering resistance. They recognized that their staff might be nervous with the idea of a major organizational change and that trust would be better built if they knew the union was working closely with management. Having the union on board facilitated collaboration among the variety of

groups in the nursing home, particularly in homes that were accustomed to having a good flow of information. In those that did not, it was not always clear to the employees what effect the new technology would have on their workloads or their positions in the homes.

Attitudes Toward Temps and Older Employees

With any organizational change, some employees are going to be more fearful or receptive than others. Issues of fear around change could lead to a decrease in employee morale, which may in turn have a negative effect on job performance. In the homes with a negative perspective on conflict, some employees expressed concern over the ability of the older employees to learn the new technology and adapt accordingly. They were worried about them making mistakes and, in a few cases, mentioned a concern that some might leave because they would be afraid of having to use something they wouldn't understand. They also voiced serious concern about the idea of temporary workers' being trained on the new technology. The thought of someone's coming in for a day and allocating time and resources to training only to have the trainee leave and never come back, was discouraging to say the least.

Employees at the homes with a positive perspective on conflict viewed temporary and older employees with all the dignity and respect of full-time or technologically savvy employees. They recognized the necessity of everyone's contribution to the home and were able to capitalize on this by allocating the appropriate time on training that each individual required in order to feel knowledgeable about the new technology and comfortable with it as well, whether that translated in to one week or four months.

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, research has shown that conflict can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, demonstrated in the work of theorists dating back to the early 20th century (Fayol 1916/1949, Follet 1926/1940, Weber 1929/1947). In this paper, I have proposed that these different perspectives on conflict lead managers to address workplace issues in different ways, which plays a significant role in shaping organizational climate. Table 2 illustrates how negative and positive perspectives apply to the workplace issues examined in this paper.

TABLE 2

Implications of Perspective on Conflict for Management Style and Organizational Climate

Workplace issues	Perspective on conflict	Management outcomes	Organizational climate
Status differences, staffing, breakdowns in communication, attitude toward temps and older employees	Negative: Conflict is bad. Eliminate it.	Top-down decision-making, punitive disciplinary style	Fear, hostility, low accountability, trust, teamwork, communication
	Positive: Conflict is good. Can be used to improve organization	High employee involvement, mistakes used for organizational self-check	Empowerment, well-informed staff, high trust, teamwork, communication

Implications for Different Types of Homes

Negative perspective on conflict. In these homes, the underlying assumption was that conflict can damage relationships between labor and management or within subgroups of employees. It can create status differences and hostility, lending itself to breakdowns in communication that disrupt the flow of important information, ultimately weakening organizational efficiency. These homes used punitive disciplinary tactics and paternalistic styles of decision-making to run their homes. The staffing situation was poor in both types of home, but there was very little teamwork in the homes with a negative perspective on conflict, preventing the possibility of easing the workload or improving the climate for recruitment and retention. Communication was low, as were levels of trust and attitudes toward temporary and older employees.

Decisions were made in order to gain tighter control of the staff, and in particular with the implementation of EMRs, the goal was to heighten surveillance and discipline.

Positive perspective on conflict. In these homes, the underlying assumption was that conflict can force employers to look at their own systems in order to see what they can do differently to make life easier and more functional for all parties involved. Management focused on working through problems and creating systems to prevent further conflict, always looking for better solutions and new innovative ways of doing things. Teamwork and empowerment were key features of the workplace, communication was high, and temporary and older employees were regarded as an essential part of the organization.

Conclusion

These observations illustrate that the existence of certain types of workplace issues alone does not necessitate negative consequences, unless the issues are viewed in a negative way. Administrators and organizational leaders have some influence in shaping workplace climate by changing their approach to dealing with workplace issues. That approach is proposed in this paper to be largely influenced by management's perspective on conflict. Where conflicts are viewed as opportunities for growth and improvement, the work environment will be more conducive to fostering a sense of empowerment and learning, on both individual and organizational levels. This is the type of climate in which employees can thrive and, subsequently, in which organizations are better able to embrace organizational change.

Acknowledgment

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