

A NEW APPROACH TO THE CONFLICT-CHANGE-CREATIVITY RELATIONSHIP IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: *With the emergence of the Coronavirus pandemic, the world has entered a new economic, cultural, educational and social period. Changes in all areas of activity have led to the creation of a new way of applying knowledge, innovation, but also conflicts. Thus, the great challenge for organizations has become to create core competencies that maintain a high level of performance by consolidating knowledge, increasing the staff capacity to create and innovate, increasing the resilience and the ability to manage conflicts. Conflict is the most common social phenomenon in organizations, enhanced by the permanent changes to which they are subjected.*

Conflicts can lead to a compromised job satisfaction, low motivation and lack of commitment; and thus to a lower employee performance. At the same time, properly managed, implementing adequate strategies of the change management and enabling people to use their creativity, the conflict could stimulate constructive debate, which could enhance employees' knowledge and competence. This not only improves employee loyalty and job satisfaction but also creates improved individual and corporate performance. More and more modern organizations are advocating for the development of people-oriented strategies, the relationship between the conflict management, the change management and creativity being very important for long-term goals.

Keywords: change management, conflict management, creativity, pandemic context

JEL Classification: H12, O10, O40

INTRODUCTION

The recent period, marked by the global crisis caused by the SarsCov2 virus, has shown us that the success of organizations depends on the creative ideas of their employees, as researchers in the field have argued since previous years. (Anderson, Potočnik and Zhou, 2014; Zhou and Shalley, 2011).

As the importance of creativity increases, organizations rely more on teams to bring diverse ideas and solutions to complex problems (Bell, Kozlowski, & Blawath, 2012). Teams are formed because they have various abilities to perform a task that the self-employed individual may not be able to perform effectively (Widmer, Schippers, & West, 2009). In doing so, teams are commonly used because they are suitable for creating and producing new and innovative collective knowledge (Wuchty et al., 2007). But, team members should cooperate

and share information with each other. However, when team members interact, they have different thinking that can lead to conflict (Huang, 2012).

At the level of teams facing organizational change, two predominant types of conflict are identified (Parayitam, Olson and Bao, 2010):

- **Relationship conflict** refers to incompatibilities between members regarding personal issues that are not related to tasks (Jehn, 1994). It is an example of a relational factor that contributes to increasing the creative potential of teams.

- **Task conflict** (or cognitive) is the difference in opinion or perception of the task that the team member performs (Yong, Sauer, & Mannix, 2014). It represents “the conflict over the distribution of resources, procedures and policies and the interpretation of facts” (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003, p. 741), and has been frequently examined due to the significant impact on the creativity of organizational change implementation teams. (Yong et al., 2014). This form of conflict facilitates the emergence of different ideas and / or points of view and improves dialogue and debate between team members, thus leading to increased team creativity (De Dreu, 2006).

Conflict and its impact are either positive or negative (Jehn, 1997). There has been a lot of research on the beneficial or harmful aspects of conflict in teams, and the results are inconsistent. On the one hand it can lead to the creation of routines, reduce productivity and satisfaction (Gladstein, 1984; Jehn, 1995; Wall and Nolan, 1986). On the other hand, it can increase creativity, decision-making quality and performance within organizations (Jehn, 1997; Leung & Tjosvold, 1998; Tjosvold, 1998). Various researchers have studied the effects of team conflict on performance in general (e.g., De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Mannix, 2001) and creative performance, in particular (e.g., De Dreu, 2006; Farh, Lee and Farh, 2010; Miron-spektor, Erez and Naveh, 2011).

But in the conditions of the Coronavirus pandemic, the relationship between change, conflict and creativity within teams has undergone multiple transformations, mainly due to moving activities in the digital environment, working from home and making employees' work schedules more flexible.

Work and its role in society have become the subject of considerable public comment and debate in recent years. Some people believe that the world of work is changing so fast and fast that we should consider ourselves pioneers of a new historical era. The gradual and evolutionary changes in the nature of work show us that society is facing changes in many respects: demographic and technological changes, market variations, organizational structures, employment practices and, last but not least, health crises.

During the Coronavirus pandemic, the concept of flexible working evolved rapidly, and its permutations proliferated. According to Forbes magazine, flexibility is the umbrella term used to describe any program that violates the traditional norm of eight hours a day, five days a week (Burnford, 2019) and Hassanain (2006) considers flexible work as: “the concept of physical appearance and functional workplace opportunities (and) the concept of organizational flexibility as to where and when staff would work regardless of the employment contract.”

Under these conditions, an increasing number of organizations have tried to offer employees various variants of work schemes, flexible, considering that in this way they can have motivated and efficient employees, but also that they can further reduce operating costs. However, there were also aspects that were not initially taken into account: relationship and task conflicts, which occurred due to the change of the physical work environment with the digital one, due to physical distance, unfair distribution of tasks or lack of collaboration and work in team.

Thus, organizations had to find short, medium and long term solutions to optimize the relationship between the new conflict, the drastic change they were subjected to in a very short time and the creativity of work teams, so necessary in these difficult times.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the conditions of the Coronavirus pandemic, many organizations have moved their activity to the digital environment, which has led to a new approach to the conflict-change-creativity relationship. Team members specializing in different fields have the potential for creativity (Keller, 2001; Lovelace, Shapiro and Weingart, 2001). They bring different ideas to find new and useful solutions (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Oldham and Cummings, 1996). But the change caused by the transition to online activities, the flexibility of the program or even work at home, led to conflicts, which generated new conditions for the emergence of creative, innovative ideas in work teams.

This study addresses the conflict-change-creativity reality through the prism of a creative team from an organization that had to move its activity in the online environment and work from home throughout the state of emergency.

Hypothesis: The more efficient the management of conflicts generated by organizational change (caused by the Coronavirus pandemic), the higher the level of creativity of the team.

Figure 1. Hypothesis model



Research tool: To measure the impact generated by the conflicts generated by the organizational changes imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic on the creativity of the teams we applied a questionnaire with 17 items, adapted to current working conditions according to items proposed by researchers in the field, using a scale Likert in 5 points:

- 5 = Total agreement
- 4 = Agreement
- 3 = Indifference
- 2 = Disagree
- 1 = Total disagreement

The questionnaire was structured on four dimensions:

- Team creativity
- Relationship conflict
- Conflict of tasks
- The impact of change

Team creativity. We adapted five of the items formulated by Zhou and George (2001) to the pandemic context. We chose those items that measure creativity manifested in ideas and solutions to improve performance and adapt them to the flexible working context.

Relationship conflict. We adapted four items from Jehn and Mannix (2001) to assess the perceived level of relational conflict within a team, generated by

Conflict of tasks. We adapted five items formulated by Jehn and Mannix (2001) and assessed the perceived level of disagreement on task issues within a team.

The impact of change. We have created three items that measure the level of adaptation to change of human resources in the context of the digitalization of work and the flexibility of the work schedule.

Demography

This section includes the gender characteristics, career level, professional experience and education of the participants as shown in Table 1. The sample studied consists of the creative team of an organization, with six members.

Due to the small number of respondents, the case study implies a qualitative approach to the answers received.

Table 1. Statistics of demographic variables

Characteristics	Level	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	2	33,33%
	Female	4	66,67%
Position in the organization	Art Director	1	16,67%
	Copywriter	2	33,33%
	Junior copywriter	1	16,67%
	Junior Art Director	2	33,33%
Age	Less than 1 year	1	16,67%
	1 year - 5 years	4	66,67%
	5 years - 10 years	1	16,67%
	10 ani – 20 ani	0	0%
	More than 20 years	0	0%
Education	Secondary education	0	0%
	University studies	2	33,33%
	Postgraduate studies (master's degree)	4	66,67%
	Phd	0	0%
Total number of participants	6		

3. THE RESULTS OF THE CASE STUDY

The responses to the questionnaires applied provided the following data:

3.1. Team creativity. We averaged the answers given to the five items to create a measure of the team's creativity. Cronbach alpha for measuring the team's creativity is 0.76, the coefficient having a good consistency.

As can be seen from the table below (Table 2) the highest scores are when identifying new technologies, processes and techniques (28) and new problem approaches using digital technology (27), proving the team's openness to new, to the digital environment, facilitated by the flexibility of the work schedule (26).

Lower scores (22) were recorded when identifying creative solutions to problems, through digital applications and suggesting new ways to perform work tasks, shared through Social Media, mainly due to problems related to inefficient communication, misinterpretation of data or poor management of situations.

Table 2. Team creativity level

Team creativity	The initials of the members of the creative team						Total score
	.A.	.R.	.T.	.M.	.R.	.T.	
Creative solutions to problems are often identified through digital applications							22
A new approach to problems is often found through the use of digital technology							27
The team suggests new ways to perform work tasks, shared through social media							22
We are looking for new technologies, processes, techniques and / or product ideas							28
New ideas and practices to improve performance often appear when the work schedule is flexible							26

3.2. Relationship conflict. Cronbach's alpha for measuring relationship conflict is 0.83 the coefficient having a good consistency.

The data in the table below (Table 3) show an increased level of frustration of employees surveyed due to emotional conflict in the team, facilitated by the distance brought by digitalization and telework (14), but also frequent conflicts of ideas due to online collaboration defective (13). With an average score (13) we find the item the existence of relational tension in your work group, due to the limitation of face-to-face meetings, score due to lack of employee commitment by limiting meetings between employees, employees-customers, employees-managers.

At the other end of the spectrum is the item People on your team get annoyed frequently, motivating technical, connectivity or security issues of personal data with a low score (8), which is justified by the involvement of the management team in ensuring the technical

conditions, the necessary digital means and the implementation of an effective policy for the management of personal data.

Table 3. Level of relationship conflict within the team

Relationship conflict	The initials of the members of the creative team						Total score
	.A.	.R.	.T.	.M.	.R.	.T.	
There is often relational tension in your workgroup due to limited face-to-face meetings							2
People on your team often get annoyed, citing technical, connectivity, or personal data security issues.							
Emotional conflict is often present within the team, facilitated by the distance brought by digitalization and telework							4
Frequent conflicts of ideas arise due to faulty online collaboration							3

3.3. Conflict of tasks. In order to measure the level of conflict of tasks within the creative team surveyed, we took into account the fact that, in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, a sense of urgency prevails and a crisis atmosphere can easily arise, due to many unpredictable aspects: speed of spread. virus, the affected geographical area, political and economic reactions, human resource reactions, program flexibility, unfair distribution of tasks, etc. Thus, according to Table 4, the items with the highest scores were: There are often disagreements about the distribution of tasks within the team, enhanced by the flexibility of the work schedule (22) and Conflict over responsibilities is frequently present (21) .

Team members gave lower scores to items: Presence of disagreements about the task of the project (16), People often have conflicting opinions about the project in progress (14), Allocation of resources within the team creates frequent disputes (13), highlighting the relationships of quality between employees and between employees and the team manager, as well as effective communication.

Cronbach's alpha for measuring the conflict of tasks is 0.75 the coefficient having a good consistency.

Table 4. Level of task conflict within the team

Conflict of tasks	The initials of the members of the creative team						Total score
	A.	R.	T.	M.	R.	T.	
Presence of disagreements regarding the task of the project							16
People often have conflicting opinions about the project in progress							14
Disagreements often arise over the distribution of tasks within the team, enhanced by the flexibility of the work schedule.							22
Conflict over responsibilities over tasks is common							21
Allocating resources within the team creates frequent disputes							13

3.4. The impact of change. Organizational change involves all staff in the organization. It requires the alignment of individual objectives with organizational objectives. Employees must participate in the change initiative for it to work. However, notes Timothy J. Galpin (1994), companies often focus on the more predictable components of the equation, such as financial statements, operations, and technology, without sufficient consideration of the human factor.

The items in the questionnaire applied to the creative team tried to highlight this aspect by obtaining high scores according to Table 5: Relationship conflict occurs less often when the work schedule is flexible (29), Often people react negatively to change (26), most of the time the change generates conflicts in the distribution of tasks in the team (26).

Cronbach's alpha for measuring the impact of change is 0.73 the coefficient having a good consistency.

Table 5. Level of change impact within the team

The impact of change	The initials of the members of the creative team						Total score
	A.	R.	.T.	.M.	R.	T.	
Often people react negatively to change							26
Most of the time, the change generates conflicts in the distribution of tasks in the team							26
Relationship conflict occurs less frequently when the work schedule is flexible							29

CONCLUSIONS

Following the analysis of the answers on the four dimensions of the questionnaire, we can deduce several directions for optimizing the conflict-change-creativity relationship in the conditions of work digitization, imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic:

- Promoting flexibility in the workplace. Giving employees free time to think about strategies and ideas is a good way to increase their creativity. Today's young people around the world consider flexibility in the way and place they work to be a necessity for their happiness, because it reduces the imbalance between time spent at work and time spent in the family;
- The use of digital collaboration applications. Collaboration applications are tools needed by current organizations to reduce costs and accelerate the time to market of products. Team collaboration applications not only support the success of teams that can combine both workers face to face as well as remote workers, but also allow real-time communication. As organizations embrace digital transformation and new ways of working, collaboration applications can improve the type of open communication that supports creativity, overcoming conflicts, and implementing change.

Even in the absence of a pandemic, flexible working arrangements can improve employee recruitment and retention efforts, increase organizational diversity efforts, encourage ethical behavior, and help the organization be socially responsible. Employers can experience: reduced cost, improved attendance and productivity, and increased employee engagement.

Each organization's response to COVID-19 must be dictated by its unique circumstances, in order to build solutions that quickly address issues that did not even exist a week ago. Some figure out how to reduce key activities in light of operating restrictions or the general market slowdown. Others try to intensify every conceived part of their business while seeking to meet the exponential demand for their products and services. Organizations in all fields have found themselves unwittingly in an environment where no one - be it an individual, an organization or a government entity - is immune to change.

In this new situation, people in the organization are the key factor in adapting to change through the simple but complicated reason that they must also change: they must accumulate new knowledge, absorb more information, approach new tasks creatively, manage and to resolve conflicts, improve their skills and, very often, change their work habits, values and attitudes towards the way they work in organizations.

The economic environment during this health crisis has become harsh and unforgiving. Organizations have had to adapt to change in order to survive or, in the worst case, have failed.

Costly mistakes can create an unrecoverable situation. The margin of error varies from extremely small to non-existent.

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