Organizational Conflict and Knowledge Creation: A Multiple Method Study in the Italian Health Care System

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between organizational conflict and knowledge creation in the Italian health care system in order to identify the main determinants and effects of this relationship. The paper defines this relationship and investigates the interaction between conflict levels, management conflict styles and their effects on knowledge. Considering the innovative characteristic of the subject, the authors propose a multiple method study. First, the authors conducted a qualitative study on the dynamics of conflict and knowledge creation using the focus group technique (38 nurses selected from the Italian health care system). Second, the authors conducted a field study (180 nurses from Italian hospitals). The results show that the participants consider conflict more as a beneficial instrument for the creation of organizational knowledge and, at the same time, there is not always a significant and linear relationship between conflict characteristics and knowledge creation dimensions. Recent theories on organizational conflict underline the strategic role of conflict, as neither positive or negative, but always necessary to preserve and further the survival of a firm. Therefore, the outcomes of the application could prove very important in improving the organizational effectiveness and day-to-day efficiency of hospitals.

Keywords: Conflict Levels, Conflict Management Style, Health Care System, Knowledge Creation, Organizational Conflict

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the relationship between organizational conflict and knowledge creation in the health care system in Italy, and seeks to identify which factors are the main determinants and effects of this relationship, analyzing in particular organizational conflicts as an effective source of knowledge creation in organizational settings. In particular, we
intend to study conflict in terms of levels (intrapersonal, intragroup, and intergroup), styles (avoiding, obliging, dominant, compromising, and integrative), and knowledge in reference to three main dimensions (personal, relational, professional).

The most important goal is to ascertain whether there is a positive relationship between constructive conflict management and higher knowledge creation, and what the different dynamics of the relationship are for each conflict level and each conflict style.

Considering the innovative character of the subject, we conducted an exploratory study on the dynamics of conflict and knowledge creation, with focus groups of 38 nurses selected in the Italian health care system. In Italy nursing profession has changed significantly due to recent reform legislation, which has multiplied the professional categories to reduce the duplication of jobs and tasks and to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of hospitals, but the effects of this law have been unexpected, with increasing conflicts, turnover, and absenteeism and the reduction of job satisfaction. Accordingly, we chose for our focus groups a sample of nurses who were following advanced university masters courses to develop relational and technical abilities to become the future coordinators of their colleagues at their hospitals. The results from the focus groups showed that nurse participants think of conflict as something beneficial that can be managed in order to create organizational knowledge.

The constructive management of organizational conflict may well transform it from frictional to strategic conflict, not consisting of random errors in coordination and job assignment and that do not impact on the structure, but in natural processes by which the strategic management staff may intentionally reallocate authority, resources and functional responsibilities.

Recent theories on organizational conflict underline the strategic role of conflict as not positive or negative, but always necessary to preserve and develop the survival of a firm. Considering the relevance of this issue, and using the focus group results, the second and final step of the research focuses on the relationship between each conflict level and each knowledge dimension, and between each conflict style and each knowledge dimension. To this end, we submitted questionnaires to a sample of 180 nurses (135 respondents) operating as nursing coordinators at an Italian hospital located in Naples.

The results showed that there is not always a significant and linear relationship between conflict characteristics and knowledge creation dimensions. In particular, we observed strong variation among the results depending on the different functional areas and different hierarchical levels of the respondents.

In the future, we could consider the possible moderating relationship between the levels and styles of conflict and the mediating role of trust and friendship, with reference to knowledge creation by developing the qualitative and quantitative composition of the sample, in order to investigate the phenomenon better.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICTS: TYPES, LEVELS, AND STYLES

Organizational conflicts represent a complex phenomenon that involves many actors and different process variables, linked through circular relationships of cause and effect.

Considering the social nature of the subject, “conflict means perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously” (Rubin, Pruitt, & Hee, 1994, p. 5). In organizational contexts, conflict arises when the cognitive and emotional frameworks of the parties have no trust in a common ground sharing the same interests or realizing different subjective goals simultaneously in a win-win game (Deutsch, 2006).

In the past century, March and Simon (1958) stated that conflict is a functional problem in the decision-making process. Pondy (1967) described organizational conflicts as a dynamic process which characterizes the organi-
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