

The Amsterdam Effect

Report from EAWOP's 2nd WorkLab, 2013

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About the author

Kieran Duignan is a Chartered Psychologist and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, based in Surrey in the UK. The principal of The Positive Measures Partnership, he grapples with practical dilemmas about leadership and conflict, developing interventions to assist leaders and followers and to support workplace safety through every stage of individual and organizational life and all stages of the employment cycle.

Abstract

Sixteen participants attended the 2nd European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology WorkLab in Amsterdam, on the northern coast of the Netherlands, from 14-16 November, 2013. Participants were offered a structure with flexible boundaries for making sense of the practical elements of the WorkLab theme; Leadership and Conflict. Three speakers addressed issues around the

tasks, processes and relationships of leadership, conflict and imbalances of power which they addressed in terms of these themes: social processes of conflict and of mediation interventions; emotional self-regulation and influencing as a leadership accomplishment; and conflicts emerging from insufficiently controlled 'dark' facets of personalities of some leaders. In sum, this was a great opportunity for psychologists to consider ways to reconfigure and recalibrate interventions about leadership and conflict at work.

Introduction

EAWOP organised its 2nd WorkLab at the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy, in Amsterdam on the theme of '*Leadership and Conflict*'. The 17 participants were Psychologists with two or more years of professional experience and membership of a national professional association of psychologists that are Constituent members of EAWOP. In total,

WorkLab delegates representing some 10 different countries.

In the manner that an excellent musical or theatrical performance the WorkLab is the joint product of considerable skill and effort on the part of an unseen director and production team. The quality, energy and fun of the WorkLab were the outcome of practical ingenuity on the part of members of the WorkLab Programme Committee: Chair, Prof. Angela Carter; and Co-Chairs Dr Diana Rus and Sarah Brooks. The committee was supported by Helen Baron, Treasurer and Practitioner Representative of EAWOP's Executive Committee.

Presentations

Three presentations formed the 'hard' skeleton of the enriching WorkLab:

Professor Dr. Martin Euwema, from the Catholic University of Louvain, spoke on *Conflict and Conflict Mediation at Work* enlarging on a published definition of conflict (van de Vliert, Euwema, & Huisman, 1995): Conflict behaviour is an individual's reaction to the perception that one's own and another party's current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously. Martin explained how

conflict behaviour is effective to the extent that it reduces the conflict issues at stake, improves the relationship with the other party or both parties, through attention to task, process and relationship elements of conflicted issues. In distinguishing three levels of conflict (escalation, stalemate, settlement), he noted no less than nine potential levels of escalation. His talk was rich in relation to how a psychologist's mindful interventions (listening, questions, and proposals, in that order) can influence appropriate balances of power in work contexts. He profiled seven different perspectives on conflict mediation: intercultural, systems, rules, social exchange, social identity, social constructionist and psychodynamic. Martin's model of conflict analysis included seven focal points: issues, individuals, interdependence, interaction, implications, institutions and interventions. He discussed these aspects through the use of illustrative examples (one of which included a candid acknowledgement of a non-trivial, serious, personal lapse) and humorous anecdotes. Martin also emphasised the tough cultural challenge to psychologists arising from an apparent inclination of senior

executives in organizations to turn more readily to lawyers and accountants and other professions in preference to psychologists who may actually be better equipped to address the difficulties gripping the executives and the social milieu within their organizations.

Professor Dr. Barbara Wisse, from the University of Groningen, spoke on *The good, the bad and the ugly: Making emotions work for you*. She conducted a deft, elegant and colourful exploration of moods and emotions that contribute to the 'affect' dimension of conflicts in organizations and elsewhere at work, without explicit reference to the conventional icon of 'Emotional Intelligence'. In relation to moods, she touched on PANAS (*Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule*, Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) as a useful measurement tool relevant to recognising and managing one's own emotions. Addressing the social function of emotions with reference to Morris and Keltner (2000), she suggested that they consist in other-directed, intentional (if not always consciously controlled) communicative acts that organise social interactions. In considering

how leaders can use emotions as a tool with reference to Bono and Ilies (2006) and Damen and colleagues (Damen, van Knippenberg, & van Knippenberg, 2008), she drew on experimental evidence referring to 'charisma' and other influences on emotions by leaders. Usefully she addressed group mood contagion by leaders (Sy, Cote & Saavedra, 2005). 'Emotional regulation', she explained, refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them and how they experience and express them. In this way she differentiated between the concepts of surface acting, deep acting and naturally felt emotions.

Professor Adrian Furnham from University College London spoke on; *The dark side of leadership: Management derailment*. Adrian used striking metaphors to characterise ineffective leaders, with whom he postulated that conflict is associated whether they are its prime movers or not. 'Dark' he observed, is a style that contrasts with the bright side, which is obvious and straightforward while 'derailment' suggests conflict associated with being thrown off

course due to having too much of a potentially productive characteristic and failing to control and balance it appropriately. Several participants were aroused by his recommendation of a psychological measurement tool, the '*Hogan Development Survey*' (HDS, Hogan, 2005), designed to measure the extent of 'personality disorders' to which leaders are prone and which incline to derail them. A 'spectrum' trait theory of personality underpins Adrian's model of 'derailment' behaviour and the associated prognosis for troublesome and troubled leaders. This seem possibly unduly cut-and-dried, when contrasted with the views of an authority on therapeutic treatment of personality disorders using the '*Structural Analysis of Social Behaviour*' diagnostic instrument (Benjamin, 1996) that applies a circumflex model of personality with three tiers (intrapersonal, interpersonal and reflexive). It became clear that access to studies comparing tools of assessment and associated interventions by skilled psychologists, would be useful to Work and Organizational Psychologists (WOP) who intervene in the delicate domain of conflict handling. Further, it would

be useful to examine social psychology studies that have been designed to test behaviours expressing personality disorder correlates of alternate conflict management strategies. This could possibly indicate the stages of conflicts when particular forms of personality disorder are likely to prove acute sources of vulnerability; and the social conditions in which some of them may be advantageous (provided individuals were paired with co-workers willing and able to moderate any adverse effects).

Tools for practical applications

Each of the speakers indicated, through exercises or monodrama, how conflict handling entails cognitive and affective experiences, dual concerns (concerns of one's own and that of another party) as well as conflict behaviour around an issue of issues. Their different contributions addressed an attribute of conflict behaviour sometimes labelled 'conglomerate'; that is to say where conflict is handled by a conglomeration of behavioral components characterised by a pattern of occurrence and covariation of its components, epitomised in movements, in diverse directions at

different paces. This is described by the Conflict Management Grid (CMG, Van de Vliert, 1997) presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Conflict Management Grid (CMG)

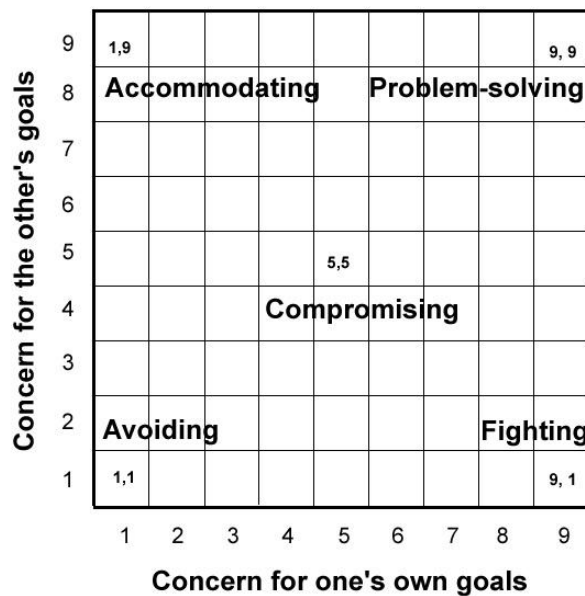


Fig.1.1. Conflict management grid (van de Vliert, 1997 - after Blake and Mouton, 1970)

The CMG, an adaptation of the 'Management Grid' (Blake & Mouton, 1970) has emerged as a framework of analysis commonly used within the conflict management research community to examine structures and characteristics of conflicts as well as and the structure and options that permit and encourage resolution. As the CMG co-ordinates behavioural data within five categories, it has also been used to design and develop several instruments measuring styles of conflict handling (see validity studies

quoted in van de Vliert, 1996). The CMG can be useful to practitioner WOPs who wish to facilitate individuals or groups to take stock of their primary and secondary styles of negotiation, during their daily whirl of efforts to achieve. A practical example might be the use of the CMG in a coaching conversation with a team leader to consider their options in defusing complaints of favouritism of team members absent or late for work. Such work can stimulate the team leader take stock of the unintended costs of

'fighting', by considering options such as detailed rules or distribution of responsibilities these options can be considered alongside risks of potentially tarnishing individual or group commitment or misdirecting management time and attention. These options contrast those of problem-solving within the team to encourage task achievement through negotiated forms of co-operative task delivery, training for job enlargement and greater flexitime without abdicating sanctions. Another example may arise where the Operations function feels harassed by a safety specialist pressing for improved levels of compliance where the CMG can be used to lead to a negotiated problem-solving approach to collaboratively work out a new set of procedures that gather data on both safe behaviours and on error levels that can harmonise goals for both parties.

In the professional practice of WOPs, while 'leadership' may be relatively apparent in many settings, 'conflict' can surface in diverse forms and guises. Here Martin's definition highlights how conflict is not necessarily pathological and conflict behaviour initiated by a skilful, self-

aware leader with integrity and humility may well be necessary in conditions where boredom, lethargy or burnout have allowed habitual underachievement and drifting to take root. To the extent that this flip side of what some organizational cultures frame as 'negative' behaviour becomes a door to more fruitful, well-crafted interventions about conflict by participants in due course may identify this WorkLab as a point of new departure in psychological poise and momentum amongst practitioner members of the EAWOP.

To all participants, the WorkLab offered an occasion of socialisation into language and concepts that WOP uses to represent elusive facets of conflict in relation to leadership and followership. For some of them, it may turn out to be like those rare, unexpected moments in supportive conversations which inspire them to start learning a musical instrument that would gradually transform the texture of the rest of their lives in ways they couldn't foresee when they first handled it. If any areas of leadership and conflict behaviour were left untouched by the speakers, the scope of unscheduled conversations between

participants included exchanges of information and insights about methodologies and tools associated with interventions focused on leadership and conflict.

Fit-for-purpose design and fulfilment

If there were perhaps any intermittent shoots of discord amongst participants on occasions, the craft of the organisers went a long way to contain, direct and deepen the benevolent dispositions brought by participants. The organisers did so by orchestrating interactions between the ingredients of the WorkLab design and by monitoring them well, yet unobtrusively:

- Seed money from the EAWOP that subsidised the fees payable by individual participants willing to risk investing in an innovative experience;
- Advance publicity that presented feasible WorkLab objectives aligned to a tantalisingly ambiguous theme;
- Balanced diversity of national backgrounds and ages in a relatively small group of participants;

- Timely and informative advance briefings by email;
- Energising and friendly speakers who modelled courtesy and clarity in applying research during face-to-face interactions;
- Spacious and smart but non-luxurious accommodation;
- Bountiful catering that respected a variety of tastes and dietary requirements;
- A wisely paced timetable of alternating activities, mealtime and informal breaks within the WorkLab schedule;
- An immediate external neighbourhood (that included, in front of the hotel, a supermarket, a bar restaurant, a children's playground and a quay with ships moored alongside, and, to the rear, a tram station with radiating lines);
- And a location close to railway and airport connections with frequent links to other European countries.

In sum, the EAWOP WorkLab 2013 delivered the rejuvenating impact of a gently forceful 'bootcamp' experience that youthful spirits of all ages could enjoy and benefit from. To the extent that similar design-savviness is applied to the EAWOP 2014 WorkLab, it will be no surprise if available places are booked out early.

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