

An Exploratory Study of the Conflict Management Styles of Department Heads in a Research University Setting

Christine A. Stanley · Nancy E. Algert

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Abstract Conflict in the university setting is an inherent component of academic life. Leaders spend more than 40% of their time managing conflict. Department heads are in a unique position—they encounter conflict from individuals they manage and from others to whom they report such as a senior administrator in the position of dean. There are very few studies that seek to ascertain the conflict management styles of department heads and how these impact leadership and professional development. This qualitative research study explored the conflict management styles of 20 department heads across a variety of disciplines and with varying levels of experience at a public research extensive university in the South. Based on an analysis of conflict management styles, the article offers implications for the professional development of department heads.

Key words conflict management · department heads · conflict style · professional development

The word conflict conjures up a variety of images for many people. Some of us think of it as something to avoid while others think it can be healthy if managed well. Regardless of the image, management of conflict is complex (Algert & Watson, 2002). This complexity is heightened even more so in a university setting where tenure, priority of discipline, and lack of clear accountability measures limit conflict management tools available to leaders and managers. Further, unprecedented pressures such as declining public funding for higher education, increasing student enrollments, increasing external demands for accountability,

Christine A. Stanley B.Sc.(Hons) (Prairie View A&M University), M.Sc, Ph.D (Texas A&M University), is the Executive Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs and Professor of Higher Education Administration, College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University. Her research interests are administrator development, college teaching, faculty development, and multicultural organizational development.

Nancy E. Algert B.Sc., M.Ed., Ph.D. (Texas A&M University) serves as President, Center for Change and Conflict Resolution, 115 Royal Dr., Bryan, Texas 77801 USA and Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University. Her research interests are conflict resolution, diversity and social justice, and conflict management and diversity.

C. A. Stanley (✉) · N. E. Algert
College of Education and Human Development, Texas A&M University,
College Station, TX 77843, USA
e-mail: cstanley@coe.tamu.edu

and rising expectations for increased external funding require superior leadership to shape constructive responses to conflict. The leadership position that offers and requires interaction with faculty is the department head or chair. Given the above challenges, the leadership of the department head in transforming the faculty is critical to an institution's future and mission. Furthermore, the department head, the individual in titled leadership at this center of this transformation, is often the one trying to manage all of the various sources of conflict (Stanley, Watson, & Algert, 2005).

The department leadership and management on a university or college campus are usually classified as a department chair or head. Although these titles are often used synonymously in practice, there are some clear distinctions with respect to the origin and etiology of the titles. For example, the title "department chair" is used most often in academic settings and has a connotation of collegiality while the title "department head" is used most often in military and governmental settings and has a connotation of a hierarchy. For the purposes of this study, we used the term department head.

The role of the department head is often characterized as "ambiguous" because of the differing roles and responsibilities inherent in the position. For example, McLaughlin, Montgomery, and Malpass (1975) described three roles that department heads play in colleges and universities: academic, administrative, and leadership. Academic duties include teaching, advising, facilitating research, and developing the curriculum. Administrative duties include managing the budget, managing faculty and staff, keeping records, and advocating and representing the department in the college and the institution as a whole. Leadership duties include supporting, motivating, and developing the faculty (Wilson, 1999). Bowman (2002) argued, "In the broadest sense, are they expected to function as managers or leaders, or both? In a narrower sense, are they expected to serve in roles as diverse as resource manager, instant problem solver, spokesperson, deep listener, motivator, enabler, meaning maker, systems designer, and cultural rainmaker?" (p. 158). After a brainstorming session with faculty in a department of education at Winona State University, Bowman (2002) noted that, "Faculty members identified more than fifty discrete roles and leadership demands central to key aspects of the department's daily operations" (p. 158). Given these daunting and comprehensive expectations, it seems safe to presume that department heads not only play a critical leadership role within the academic setting; they are also expected to fulfill a variety of responsibilities that may or may not be realistic.

Some researchers maintain that the department head is perhaps one of if not the most challenging positions in higher education (Bennett & Figuli, 1993). Lumpkin (2004) emphasized that the position almost demands that department chairs come prepared with skills necessary to manage, assist, and mediate intrapersonal as well as interpersonal conflicts. Therefore, conflict management is an important skill for a department chair to have. However, most department chairs, as is to be learned from this study, are neither equipped with these skills nor aware of their conflict management style. In this article we explain the background for the study, provide an overview of the literature on conflict management and department heads, discuss the methodology and theoretical framework used, present the findings of our study, and address implications for the professional development of department heads.

Background

Faculty become department heads for a variety of reasons. For example, a few assume this position because no one else in the department wants it; some are encouraged by their

colleagues to do so because of admired accomplishments as a scholar; and others seek this leadership opportunity to learn more about administration with the hope of assuming even higher administrative responsibilities in the future (Lumpkin, 2004). Regardless of the motivation or reason for becoming a department head, it can be a lonely place to reside.

There is a growing body of literature on the leadership provided by department heads in managing conflict in a university setting (Comer, Haden, Taylor, & Thomas, 2002; Findlen, 2000; Gmelch, 1991a; Hickson & McCroskey, 1991; Lumpkin, 2004; Trombly, Comer, & Villamil, 2002). However, research on the conflict management styles of department heads, in particular, is rather sparse (Gmelch, 1995; Gmelch & Carroll, 1991). In addition, a common thread which connects these sources is that the ability to recognize and manage conflict is a skill that most chairs lack and one that is needed to enhance their effectiveness as leaders (Gmelch, 1991a; Hickson & McCroskey, 1991; Lumpkin, 2004). Furthermore, the literature shows us that department heads are practicing conflict resolution styles learned in childhood (Algert & Watson, 2002), whether adaptive or maladaptive, unless they have made a conscious decision to reflect and evaluate their conflict management styles.

Furthermore, the literature on the conflict management styles of department heads would substantiate this perception because there are so few empirical studies (Booth, 1982; Lumpkin, 2004; Williams, 1985). It is assumed that department heads know all there is to know about being effective leaders. Indeed, the critical event that drove the impetus for this study was participating in a 40-hour basic mediation-training program for faculty. It was there that we learned of the wide range of experiences among the faculty on how to recognize and manage conflict. Yet high on the list of responsibilities of the department head is constructively resolving conflict in the department. The literature is replete with information and studies on how to recognize and resolve conflict in a variety of settings (Carmichael & Malague, 1996; Gmelch, 1995; Gmelch & Carroll, 1991). However, there are very few publications on how conflict is managed at the departmental level (Findlen, 2000; Gmelch, 1991a; Gmelch, 1995; Gmelch & Carroll, 1991; Hickson & McCroskey, 1991; Trombly et al., 2002), and few of these report data from the individual most often managing conflict in this domain—the department head (Gmelch, 1991b; Hickson & McCroskey, 1991).

Academic departments are not unlike many organizations. Many claim to be a “community.” However, a challenge that department heads face is how to create a climate where individuals who have different viewpoints can agree to disagree with each other and still feel that they are a part of the community. This is not easy. Bowman (2002) argued that the real work of the department head is learning how to “invite and orchestrate the very penetrating, perceptive, probing questions that can often give rise to the tension, dissent, and constructive stress that are absolutely essential to both defining reality and creating positive organizational change” (p.160).

Many faculty members assume that conflict is a negative force and has no place in a department. It is not healthy, “not natural and is simply a telltale sign of interpersonal dysfunction within an organization” (Bowman, 2002, p. 160). For example, in a study of 808 department chairs in 101 research and doctoral granting colleges and universities across the United States, Gmelch (1991a) reported that 60% of their dissatisfaction with their jobs came from dealing with different sources of conflict among the faculty. There were six sources of conflict that chairs described in the study: (1) inter-faculty conflict, (2) faculty attitude, (3) unsupportive faculty, (4) unsupportive chair, (5) role of evaluation, and (6) role of mediation. The remaining 40% of conflict situations were related to the administration. These situations were described, using phrases such as “lack of support,” “not sharing information,” “excessive paperwork,” “unrealistic deadlines,” “opposing values,” “feeling

unappreciated,” and “input not accepted” (Gmelch, 1991a). Despite the negative forces that are often assumed to exist around conflict, many scholars concur that, if managed properly, it can enhance working relationships and build a positive departmental climate (Bowman, 2002; Gmelch, 1995; Gmelch & Carroll, 1991; Trombly et al., 2002). Conflict, if not managed properly, “can also increase faculty antagonism, lead to inter-department tension, disrupt normal channels of communication, and divert faculty’s attention from a department’s goals and mission (Gmelch, 1995, p. 35). Furthermore, if departments believe and model the concept of community, then conflict can be a positive factor. We should then come to welcome discussions, expect arguments, and tolerate challenges (Trombly et al., 2002).

Gmelch (1995) asserted that one of the first steps that a department chair must take toward a positive and constructive conflict style is “to recognize the nature and causes of conflict in the department and university setting” (p. 35). However, ultimately it is the department chair’s responsibility to identify the conflict culture for that department and to equip all employees with an understanding of the conflict culture, expectations for resolutions, and provision of the necessary conflict management skills. There are several models, which are useful to our understanding of how the institutional culture influences departmental conflict and ultimately the department head’s ability or inability to manage it (Baldrige, 1971; Birnbaum, 1988). First, the *bureaucratic* model assumes that conflict occurs but can be managed through bureaucratic roles and procedures. Second, the *political* model states that conflict is inevitable and is normal between and among individuals who have different needs and interests. Third, the *collegial* model views the academy as a “community of scholars” where conflict is “abnormal” and when it is identified, steps should be taken to eliminate it. The fourth and final model, *anarchical* is present in institutions that succeed in conditions of abundant resources and enter into decline when resources are limited. The latter then forces administrators to make difficult decisions, which can then lead to conflict (Gmelch, 1995, p. 36).

Gmelch (1991a), in his survey of 808 department chairs at 101 research and doctoral-granting universities found three philosophies that reflect managerial attitudes toward conflict: *traditional*, *behavioral*, and *principled*. The *traditionalists’* approach from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s, a view held in the management literature, says that, “conflict is destructive and therefore should be eliminated. In higher education, the traditionalist chair believed that conflict should be thoroughly analyzed, suppressed, and eliminated” (p. 5). The *behavioral* approach came forward in the 1950s. “Freud believed that aggressiveness was an innate, independent, instinctual disposition of people. Therefore, chairs should accept conflict as natural and inevitable” (p.5). The *principled* approach, which surfaced in the 1980s, “views conflict as a necessary and encouraged condition of administration. Principled conflict management promotes integrity and high standards in the resolution of disputes such that both parties exhibit righteous, upright, and trustworthy principles in attempting to satisfy both parties differences” (p. 6). We argue, within the findings of this study, that the development of conflict management skills can lead to a deeper self-awareness of not only one’s conflict management style, but also a healthier and more productive work-life for faculty, staff, and students.

Gmelch (1995) argued that, “No matter what the answer or reaction, one of the chair’s main functions is to adjudicate these conflicting situations by creating a healthy web of tension....Chairs need to realize that regardless of the causes, it is their personal responsibility to respond to these conflict situations” (p. 40). We believe differently. This may be one role that the department head can play. More importantly, it is the department head’s responsibility to discuss the department’s conflict culture and to provide the skills faculty and staff need to effectively manage conflict. Department heads are tensely placed

between the demands of the administration and the faculty. Many feel trapped between the pressures to perform as a faculty member and as an administrator. Angela Lumpkin, Dean of the School of Education at the University of Kansas, emphasized this point very poignantly in her article, *Enhancing the Effectiveness of Department Chairs*. She stated that, “Learning to lead may be one of the most difficult challenges awaiting the new department chair during the transition from a faculty role” (Lumpkin, 2004, p. 44).

Trombly et al. (2002) stated that “Managing conflict is an arduous but necessary task” (p. 533). Much of the literature on conflict calls for the resolution of conflict, rather than managing conflict. It is easier to manage conflict than it is to control the people, places, and things that produce conflict (Algert & Watson, 2002). Within the context of this study and the university setting in which it was conducted, we prefer to use the term, “conflict management.” This term recognizes the complexity of the nature of conflict situations and, allows that some of these may result in “progressive achievements, while others do not have an ideal win–win situation” (Trombly et al., 2002, p. 533).

Scholars argue that communication is at the heart of conflict management (Hickson & McCroskey, 1991; Trombly et al., 2002). In a survey of 47 department chairs in the southeast and midwest to identify communication problems, the results indicated that conflict management was one of their communication concerns (Hickson & McCroskey, 1991). Highlights from the findings of this study included the following: (1) most chairs do not like being an arbiter between faculty members, (2) most chairs do not like being an arbiter between faculty and staff, (3) most chairs find assessing faculty against one another quite difficult, (4) most chairs do not know what to do with “dead wood faculty,” and (5) it is hard for most chairs to tell a faculty member, “No.” We believe that department chairs need a range of options for managing interpersonal conflicts, of which one is arbitration. However, there are other options available such as modeling, coaching, facilitated dialogue, mediation, and negotiation. These options, more than arbitration and judging, provide faculty members greater input and responsibility for managing the conflict while directly reducing the pressure placed upon the department head. This is counter to the traditional myth that faculty have to be against one another while in conflict.

While there is literature emerging on conflict management as it relates to the role of the department head, the authors have found few studies on strategies that department heads use to manage conflict. In addition, the majority of existing studies are quantitative in nature. The state of the literature on the conflict management styles of department heads, as it is currently, is problematic for several reasons. First, if the role of department heads is as crucial to the overall leadership of the institution as the literature seems to portray, we need to learn more about how conflict is managed at the department level. Furthermore, there is a lot of decision-making at the departmental level that is critical to the overall health of the work-life for faculty in our colleges and universities. Second, the nature of conflict management is so contextual that learning more about the process can only be beneficial to the professional development of academic leaders such as department heads. Third, determining the styles that department heads use to manage conflict will not only advance the dialogue in the current literature, it could open more productive dialogues about conflict.

The Study and Participants

In 2004, we conducted an exploratory, qualitative study of 20 department heads across a variety of departments and colleges to learn more about how they manage conflict. Specifically, we wanted to learn how they described their conflict management style and

how this style enabled them to manage all types of conflict: faculty–faculty, faculty–staff, faculty–student, and staff–staff. All the department heads in this study reaffirmed the significance of conducting this research. We were pleasantly surprised to find that not only was everyone eager to participate; they also wanted to learn about what we had discovered from the interviews with other department heads. For the purposes of our study, we are going to organize the department heads’ understanding of conflicts using a *Mediation Process* framework developed by Moore (1996). This framework is built on the premise that conflicts are usually data, interests, structural, value and/or relationship based (Moore, 1996). Based upon the review of literature, we see a common thread of conflict themes, namely, data, value, and relationship conflicts. Therefore, one could hypothesize that most conflicts are not necessarily negative and can be managed through effective communication.

The methodology used for this study is based within the qualitative research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). For this reason and because we wanted to learn how department heads crafted their own understanding of conflict and conflict management, we chose a qualitative, ethnographic methodology as the basis for the data collection and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The participants in this study consisted of 20 (out of a sample of 65) department heads at a public research-intensive university in the South. Of these 65 department heads, 5 are women and 60 are men. Therefore, in order to achieve a fair representation in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, number of years in the position, and academic college, 20 participants were purposely selected for the study. Three of the participants were women, and the remaining seventeen were men. The experience levels as department head ranged from 1 month to 23 years. Two of them were serving in the capacity of “Interim” department head at the time this study was conducted.

The study met the requirements and approval of the institution’s board for human subjects research. The data sources for this study were in-depth, semi-structured interviews. (Fontana & Frey, 1994) stated, “Interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings. ...It can be used for the purpose of measurement or its scope can be the understanding of an individual or a group perspective” (p. 361). We asked each participant a series of four, pre-established open-ended questions: (1) How would you describe your conflict management style?, (2) Do you think department heads need training in conflict management? Why or why not?, (3) Describe the nature of the conflicts you have encountered in the department, and, (4) How could the university further enhance departmental leadership skills in conflict management? These questions allowed us breadth to probe, based on the responses received during the interviews. The interviews lasted from one hour to two hours. Before we began the interviews, we explained the purpose of the study and the importance of informed consent. The participants were then asked to sign a consent form as well as an audiotape consent form. Each participant was given a copy of the consent form for his or her records. We audiotaped the conversations and wrote notes during the interviews.

Theoretical Framework and Data Analysis

We used the Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) to determine the conflict management styles of the department heads. The TKI measures a person’s behavior along two dimensions: (1) *assertiveness*, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his or her concerns, and (2) *cooperativeness*, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other person’s concerns. These two dimensions can be used to define five specific methods of handling conflicts (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). The five modes are:

competing, avoiding, compromising, collaborating, and accommodating. The goal for each mode is: competing—“to win,” avoiding—“to delay,” compromising—“to find a middle ground,” collaborating—“to find a win–win solution,” and accommodating—“to yield.” The TKI is a versatile instrument, which helps individuals analyze a given situation and apply the appropriate conflict-handling mode that will help to resolve the conflict. It is used for a variety of purposes including conflict management, leadership development, enhanced communication, staff retention, performance improvement, team building, and increased employee satisfaction.

There is no best or one single method of dealing with conflict, and the instrument is used to help individuals understand how and why they use a particular mode in a given situation. The TKI assesses one’s preferences for style and not one’s competence in managing conflict (Algert & Watson, 2002). Conflict behaviors are the result of both personal predispositions and the requirements of the situations in which one finds oneself. Also, one’s social skills may lead one to rely upon some conflict behaviors more so than others (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). More importantly, individuals learn how to increase their conflict management capacity for a variety of styles.

The TKI is widely-used and reportedly, in some venues, “the world’s best-selling instrument for understanding how different conflict-handling styles affect personal and group dynamics for learning how to select the most appropriate style for a given situation” (Institute for Leadership Excellence & Development, Inc., 2005). It is also widely used in both conflict resolution training and research (Putnam, 1988; Womack, 1988a). Reliability and validity studies show that the average alpha coefficient for the TKI is .60 (Kilmann, 1988). Womack (1998b) reported that TKI scores are strongly uncontaminated by social desirability, a serious problem found in many conflict instruments. The reliability of the TKI averages is in the mid .60s for the five conflict modes, demonstrating moderate reliability for the assessment. The validity of the TKI has been vigorously studied and found to be sound. Evidence of external (predictive validity) is generally the most rigorous and demanding of the test of the usefulness of an instrument in empirical research. External validity for the TKI modes ranges from 0.50 to 0.82 (Womack, 1988b).

The data consisted of interview transcripts and field notes taken during the interviews. The interviews were then transcribed. Transcripts were coded independently, using a taxonomy developed inductively from the first set of completed notes. The categories were then reviewed for consistency and displayed for themes, across the five modes of conflict management styles. After carefully analyzing the transcripts, we used the TKI instrument to assess the conflict management style of each department head. We carefully reviewed how the department heads described and subsequently managed the conflict situation shared during the interview. We had decided not to give them the TKI because we wanted them to describe the types of conflicts they encountered at the departmental level and their perceptions of how they handled each conflict situation. Further, we wanted to pay attention to the participants’ voices and feelings to the open-ended questions we asked of them as they described how they managed conflict (Marcus & Fischer, 1986).

Findings

The department heads discussed different types of conflicts and used a variety of conflict modes. A more detailed representation of the conflict modes used among the 20 department heads is shown in Table I.

Table 1 Conflict Management Styles of Department Heads by College

Participant number	TKI conflict mode	College
1	Collaborating	Education
2	Compromising	Education
3	Accommodating	Business
4	Compromising	Veterinary Medicine
5	Collaborating	Engineering
6	Collaborating	Liberal Arts
7	Compromising	Geosciences
8	Compromising	Government
9	Competing	Architecture
10	Collaborating	Liberal Arts
11	Avoiding	Liberal Arts
12	Compromising	Agriculture
13	Compromising	Engineering
14	Compromising	Science
15	Collaborating	Agriculture
16	Competing	Science
17	Compromising	Engineering
18	Compromising	Business
19	Compromising	Veterinary Medicine
20	Compromising	Architecture

The data in Table 1 illustrate that, of the five modes identified on the TKI, 11 of the 20 department heads used the compromising mode most for managing conflict. The modes least used were “avoiding” and “accommodating.” All of the department heads described situations where they thought they had to “negotiate” or make concessions in order to resolve the conflict. Their management style was dependent on the nature of the conflict and the individuals involved. For example, one department head, in response to the question, “*How would you describe your conflict management style?*” attempted to describe the compromising mode of conflict management in the following manner,

Basically, what I try to do is to first recognize that a legitimate issue exists and make sure that we have as much clarity about the issue as possible. This is what I call ‘discussing the un-discussible.’ It was so contentious between the two different faculty members who teach in this program that they would blow up from time to time and we would end up attacking each other instead of attacking the issue. ... Ultimately, we created a shared position. I think that is what conflict management is all about. It is creating compromising solutions where all interests are recognized and dealt with. You may only get 60%, 70%, 80% satisfaction of all parties. Nobody gets 100% of what they want, but they get 80%; and you serve the net best interest of the department.—*Government*

In comparison, the department heads who used the collaborative mode seemed to express a high level of confidence in recognizing and managing conflict. For example, one described these skills rather poignantly.

I try to get people to actually come to an agreement or resolution that they can both live with. Sometimes I will propose an agreement, and it just depends on what it is. If

someone is really stepping out of bounds and if they really want a third person... for example, I try to get each person to air their concerns and needs. I am more collaborating. I did a survey at mid point of my term. It was like a five-page survey. Most people filled it out because I told them that it was not going to go to the Dean, it's to be used by me; but I didn't want to wait because the Dean does a survey of the faculty at the end of your term after four years. ... You know if something is festering I don't want to wait.... I gave them areas for comments and things like that, so it [the feedback] was really good. –*Engineering*

The department heads who described their conflict management style as avoidance were clear and forthright in explaining the reasons why. This is how they responded to the same question.

It would not be very good. I think I am terrible at conflict management. I think that I don't know how to do it. Now maybe I am better than I think, but I don't want to get in there and literally be the mediator between two people. I would rather have some kind of process and try to set up some sort of fair process, but I often think that I don't even know how I should do conflict management. I am certainly not a confrontational person. I do try to get people to see reason. Occasionally, I try to suggest strategies to individuals about how they can solve their own conflict with somebody else. –*Liberal Arts*

The competing mode of conflict management was not widely used as shown in Table I. The department head who ascribed to this particular style communicated the following,

Conflict is when people don't do what I say. It can be debilitating or good. My job is to convince people to participate in healthy exchange of ideas. When I first joined the department, there were some faculty who should have been fired. I convinced them to retire. There are a lot of delusional behaviors on the part of some faculty. I use comparative data. I am passive-aggressive and I try to be direct. I give speeches at faculty meetings. How to deal with conflict is ingrained in your personality, and one is not likely to change their style. I would like to know how other heads in your study think about this. –*Science*

In describing the accommodating style of conflict management, the following department head had this to say.

Some level of conflict I think is better to just leave it alone and agree to disagree. If I sense that it is becoming dysfunctional, I try to do what I call jawboning, just maybe to go talk to one or both parties and suggest that, in some cases it is simply as, 'hey, it's alright to disagree, but let's be civil about it, professional about it.' Make sure that people aren't saying inappropriate things about others and so forth, and I would say in most cases I call it sort of jawboning work. –*Business*

It became apparent to us (within the TKI framework) that department heads reported a high level of cooperation and effective communication (assertiveness), implying strong compromising and collaborative skills. However, there is a tendency to be overly confident about one's skills in cooperation because we typically are not aware of the lens from which we approach conflict management. Therefore, we unconsciously manipulate other people to our mental model of what the appropriate resolution is to the conflict scenario. The reasoning behind the preceding statement is not to impose judgment on the department heads in this study, but to indicate, based on our experiences with self-reports, that one's mental models drive the conflict resolution process.

We also posed this question to the department heads. “Do you think department heads need training in conflict management? Why or why not?” Of the 20 department heads interviewed, 18 reported that conflict management training was essential to being an effective leader. The 2 department heads who did not respond, “yes,” were unsure as to whether conflict management training was necessary for departmental leadership or not. One of the 18 supporters, who was in strong support of conflict management training stated:

I never had any training in conflict management. I have been in a university for a long time..., but everyday is a new event; and so you wrestle with it to make sure that you do all the things that I am talking about. That you are fair, that you are listening, that you make sure that to the extent that you can, that parties walk away with a win–win situation. I would think that there would be a lot of value in giving somebody an opportunity to have to go through some training where some conflict management issues would be sorted out, you know, maybe in terms of some scenario development, situations that you would find yourself in so that it’s a little less of sort of learning on the job while you are doing it. That’s going to happen no matter what, but I think it would also be a situation where maybe you have some ideas or some tools that you would be able to keep in your bag of tricks that somewhere down the road would be useful. *–Agriculture*

We found that the TKI was helpful in allowing us to understand (1) how department heads framed conflict and (2) how department heads managed conflict in general. We were also able to get a deeper sense of how they perceived their level of comfort for managing conflict. It was also clear to us that many of the department heads understood that the nature of the conflict and the individuals involved influenced the type of mode used.

Table II reports responses to this question. “Describe the nature of the conflicts you have encountered in the department” The nature of the conflicts and levels of individuals involved vary. Faculty hiring decisions, space, and personality conflicts, for example, are fairly common themes for half of the department heads in the study (see Table II). It was clear to us during the interviews that the conflicts described were multidimensional. The participants were able to describe many variables with differing strengths, all of which were sometimes interacting in different ways at once. For example, when describing a hiring decision that created conflict among faculty members, the department heads talked about other issues that impacted the conflict such as the hiring history of other faculty, belief systems held by faculty, resources, faculty retention, and diversity issues. In addition, the primary individuals involved in the majority of the conflicts seem to be faculty–faculty.

As illustrated in Table II, the nature of the conflicts reported reflects findings similar to the research on organizational conflict (Gmelch, 1995). The research shows that institutional settings such as the one where this study was conducted are not unlike others in that they are “potentially plagued with conflict due to their many levels, rules and regulations, specialized disciplines, segmented rewards, autonomy, and high interdependence” (Gmelch, 1995, p. 36). Therefore, it is important that department heads are able to recognize and use appropriate strategies for managing conflict. The nature of the conflicts also tells us that department heads must understand how institutional rules and regulations can create conflict in the departmental setting. In addition, it is interesting to note, that the common conflicts reported by department heads are data conflicts (e.g., limited resources, inadequate personnel, space issues). We believe that these reported conflicts, although accurate, are typically positional statements by the individuals involved in the conflict. Therefore, if we view conflict from a social justice perspective, for example, we have to

Table II Types of Conflicts Reported by Department Heads

Participant number	Nature of conflicts	Individuals involved
1	Faculty needing money to do research; faculty evaluation.	Faculty–Faculty
2	Introduction of new ideas in the department.	Faculty–Faculty; Faculty–Department Head; Staff–Department Head; Faculty– Staff
3	Personality conflicts among people.	Faculty–Faculty
4	Departmental merger; student complaints about expectations.	Faculty–Faculty; Faculty–Student
5	Resources to do research; office space; graduate student space.	Faculty–Faculty
6	The university system, e.g., Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects Research; problem with a colleague; grade complaints; student complaints about faculty.	Faculty–Administration; Faculty–Faculty; Faculty–Student
7	Differences in philosophy; power struggles; compliance with regulations.	Faculty–Department Head; Faculty–Staff
8	Graduate degree programs.	Faculty–Faculty
9	Faculty hiring; faculty performance expectations; salary grievances.	Faculty–Faculty; Department Head–Staff; Staff–Staff
10	Implementation of policies and procedures.	Faculty–Faculty
11	Faculty hiring decisions.	Faculty–Faculty
12	Grade complaints; faculty teaching assignments; funding allocations; administrative procedures.	Faculty–Student; Faculty–Faculty; Faculty–Staff
13	Faculty rewards and incentives.	Faculty–Faculty
14	Faculty distribution efforts of teaching and research; teaching.	Faculty–Faculty
15	Budget reductions; reduction in staff; faculty hiring decisions.	Faculty–Faculty; Department Head–Staff
16	Space renovation; removal of space from unproductive faculty.	Faculty–Faculty
17	Personality conflicts among people.	Faculty–Faculty
18	Grades, disrespectful behavior	Faculty–Student
19	Case management; how to manage post docs	Faculty–Faculty; Faculty–Staff
20	Differences in value systems between research fields; course scheduling	Faculty–Faculty

look at the conflict from the interest and/or needs of the individuals involved. And, typically, we find that the underlying interest to be discussed about the conflict is related to the relationship or history of how the department has functioned over time. Furthermore, we need to think more deliberately about how we can support the professional development of department heads in the area of conflict management. This is particularly important in an era of declining resources for many higher education institutions. One department head in this study expressed this need very poignantly in the following statement.

I think that, as a university changes and as there are changes in the amount of resources that are available, the level of conflict actually increases because there is more fighting over and more competition over who gets what internally in the department; and

department heads are also the negotiator between other departments, between institutes and centers, between colleges and what's going to happen to the department and depending on what happens in the rest of the university are directly linked into all kinds of entities. —*Agriculture*

The results shown in Table II also show that faculty hiring decisions were another source of conflict among faculty in several departments, a finding supported by Lumpkin (2004), who stated that department heads provide three pivotal leadership responsibilities— personnel management, instructional leadership, and budgetary management. Personnel management includes hiring, supervising, evaluating, and rewarding faculty and staff. She argued that personnel management is time-consuming and a very important part of their responsibility. Instructional leadership entails all oversight of course curricula and programs and the recruitment and retention of students. Finally, budgetary management includes the proper procurement and allocation of funds, which comply with university policies and procedures. The department heads' responsibilities in this study were no different. For example, those who described conflict between faculty members that came about as a result of hiring decisions reported instances where there were faculty disagreements regarding which sub-area or sub-field should take priority within a department. In addition, a few described situations where they felt they had to work to ensure that faculty candidates had equal treatment in the hiring process before and during their campus visit.

Regardless of the nature of the conflict and the individuals involved, the department heads in this study seemed to be able to use their conflict management style to benefit the overall health of the department. They developed their conflict management styles in a variety of ways. The majority learned through “trial and error,” while others read books and took leadership courses. However, there were a few who said that managing conflict was partly intuitive. One of them captured their experience by “trial and error” as well as on instinct.

There may be some vicarious learning, but just like a lot of vicarious learning sometimes you are not aware that learning is going on. I think most of it has been from positive things that have happened and the lumps that you took when you were up against some things. So, I would say that it is mostly just do it, you know, get thrown into the fire and then using your instincts for what you make. I think that the most difficult thing about being in a position of power in respect to conflict is that you take for granted so much that your way of doing things, that your perspective is sort of the right one because no one ever challenges it. —*Liberal Arts*

Although several of the department heads readily admitted that they were not particularly effective at handling conflict, 19 out of 20 expressed the need for learning more about conflict management. Furthermore, all were very eager to talk about their professional development needs and, even more importantly, candid in the level of specificity for what they would like to see from the college and the university.

Professional Development of Department Heads

The last question that was asked during the interviews was, “How could the university further enhance departmental leadership skills in conflict management?”. Responses to this question seemed to fall along three very distinct themes: (1) *getting together to share best practices*, (2) *understanding when and how to lead and manage people*, and

(3) *developing a better understanding of the university's conflict culture.* Eighteen of the 20 department heads wanted more opportunities to get together to share best practices. Specifically, some suggested that conflict management training include, but not be limited to, case study scenarios through which they could learn how to identify conflict and develop appropriate strategies for managing the conflict.

The department heads in this study are in colleges and departments with varying missions, and they are one of several department heads in their college. Some do get together as a group within their college, while others do not. Therefore, on the occasions when the department heads do get together, they suggested that these meetings be devoted to professional development. Some thought that these meetings could occur at the college level, while others said that they should occur at both levels—the college as well as the university as a whole. As one department head stated,

Provide professional development on a regular basis. Conflict management is a daily activity. When you go from a faculty member to a department head, even though you may have done things with the organization [department], it is not the same because now the scale of conflicts is different and escalates. —*Engineering*

Eight of the 20 department heads wanted to learn more about how to be effective leaders and managers. Some of them found it difficult to distinguish between the two roles. In fact, a few said that these roles were not an “either/or” distinction. For example, one department head in particular said that it is not enough as a department head to be a good manager or a good leader, it has to be both. Here is how he expressed it within the context of the university providing professional development for department heads.

You can't be a good manager, and you can't just be a good leader; you have to be both. There is a skill set there, and we ought to be developing that skill set and conflict and working with conflict. In a certain way I don't even like the phrase conflict management, it's like you are managing the conflict. I'm more interested in what the conflict means; what it is about and how you understand it; how do you work on it so that you can create a positive, supportive, caring environment that is getting great work done. —*Education*

Of the three department heads who are women, one wanted to know if there are differences in leadership styles between men and women leaders when managing conflict. We could not find a preponderance of evidence in the current literature that would suggest any significant differences. For example, Collins (2001) argued that there are stereotypes of women as avoiding competition and “being more conciliatory or accommodating than men. This is not the case regarding conflict management of managers; in fact, gender differences have been found to be mediated through the socialization and experience of being a manager” (p. 19). In addition, further research on the effects of gender as an individual characteristic in the management of conflict has shown that “management experiences tend to reduce differences, and subordinate characteristics influence conflict management patterns”(Collins, 2001, p. 20; Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Shockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1984).

However, this particular department head, upon reflecting on her experiences as a faculty member and after working with and observing two former department heads in her department, shared the following during the interview.

We need more leadership development workshops. This is a stereotype, but I have wondered about gender and conflict management. I have been through a couple of

department heads; the head that hired me is male...his style of conflict management was, if he disagreed with you, he would scream at you and pound the desk and occasionally apologize, but mostly not. Then our subsequent department head was very good at listening and talking things through, and I don't know if he always came up with solutions that people agreed with. I very rarely yell at people, but you know if you are finding any gender differences or any people resisting you managing the conflict because of big guys and you are the woman... *–Liberal Arts*

Organizations like departments and universities have a conflict culture of their own. Ten of the 20 department heads in this study indicated that they would like to engage in deeper conversations about the university culture and how this impacts the management of conflict. One department head expressed this desire very poignantly.

I would like to know if there is an organizational conflict management style and how much that contributes to how conflict is handled and managed. In other words, is there a university style that we've all come to acknowledge or believe is sort of standard, and you've got to do it this way or else be perceived as an outsider? *–Education*

From our work with university faculty and administrators we have found that institutions, like many other organizations, rarely consider their "culture" for managing conflict until the conflict overwhelms the institution or individual. Therefore, we believe that institutions must engage in developing individuals at all levels in better conflict management if we want to be more responsive learning organizations and to model effective leadership for preparing students to live and function in an increasingly diverse and global society (Algert & Watson, 2002). In addition, the research shows that an organization will normally develop a dominant style for dealing with conflict (Algert & Watson, 2002). Furthermore, responses to conflict are learned, and people who stay in the organization usually adapt their personal styles to the organizations. The research also shows that conflicts are often driven by the majority over time, people in titled leadership positions such as department heads and persons with the greatest longevity in the organization, who frequently are higher level administrators (Algert & Watson, 2002).

Some of the department heads were forthcoming in their perceptions of the "upper administration" and, in particular, how these individuals valued their leadership. A few were quick to point out that deans were critical to influencing the leadership provided by department heads because they act as liaisons between the department heads and senior administrators. Eighteen of the 20 department heads wanted more opportunities to discuss issues with the central administration, which affected their leadership such as conflict management, the budget, and faculty hiring at the departmental level. As one department head said,

If we had more opportunities for department heads to get together, more social gatherings, it would help to exchange ideas. Faculty don't recognize department heads as faculty [members]. Upper administration does not recognize department heads as administrators. I've never met the President. They don't know what is going on at the departmental level. *–Science*

The conversations with the 20 department heads led us to believe that the majority of them thought that the university adhered to the *bureaucratic* model of conflict management. Many described instances where conflict was managed through bureaucratic roles and procedures such as filing grievances, facing a committee where there was arbitration and/or negotiation, or talking to the university ombudsperson, which at this particular university is

one of the responsibilities of the dean of faculties and associate provost (Stanley et al., 2005). Therefore, they want more opportunities for learning how to be effective leaders and managers. As we indicated earlier in this article, department heads perceive that they are often taken for granted when colleges and universities advocate for the professional development of faculty. Lumpkin (2004), dean of the school of education at University of Kansas wrote, “It is vitally important for department chairs to learn to manage their time, stress, and the conflict inherent in their role. ...Strong negotiation and conflict management skills are needed when dealing with faculty workload, assignments, professional development, and evaluation” (Lumpkin, p. 46). We believe, from the results of this study, that there need to be additional studies on the conflict management styles of department heads as well as other administrators in the institutional setting.

Conclusion

In this study it is clear that department heads reported a variety of modes to frame and manage conflict, and these styles are dependent on the nature of the conflict and individuals involved. Further, it became apparent that department heads are generally unaware of how their mental models’ influence their determination and framing of the nature of the conflict. Ten of the 20 department heads believe that they manage conflicts fairly well and develop their conflict management styles through trial and error. Thus, we found that, in general, department heads have no formal conflict intervention framework and no professional development training to organize their conflict intervention strategies. Although this study was limited to one university setting in particular, the themes that emerged from in-depth interviews of the 20 department heads, across a variety of academic colleges, point to some important implications as well as further research for the future professional development of department heads. Universities usually allocate resources for the development of faculty while often overlooking the professional development of department heads. It is assumed that they come to their position with all the required skills-sets for leadership success. However, the department heads in this study very clearly expressed the need for more professional development opportunities to discuss and implement best practices at the college as well as university level.

We need more studies that seek to ascertain how their leadership and management roles and responsibilities impact conflict. In addition, institutions should continue to support their professional development. Department heads are a vital and vibrant part of the leadership of the university. We cannot continue to place individuals in these positions and expect them to be successful leaders and managers without taking a long and hard look at how to challenge and support their professional development in our colleges and universities.

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