A Study of Preferred Conflict-Management Behaviors Among Small-School Principals: Effects of Gender and Experience

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.

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It cannot be overstated the broad skill set managers must have to manage conflict in modern organizations (Lang, 2009; Ramani & Zhimin, 2010;). Few studies have explored this topic in smaller organizational settings where leaders often assume a greater number of roles and responsibilities. For this reason, this study analyzed preferred conflict management behaviors for small-school principals. A sample of head school principals answered a series of questions on a modified Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (TKI) – an instrument widely used in conflict-management studies. Behavioral preferences for male and female respondents were compared as in addition to exploring the effect of leadership experience. Although the gender of the principal had no statistical effect, leadership experience significantly explained preference for competing and compromising behaviors. Implications for conflict resolution skill development and research are discussed.

It cannot be overstated the broad skill set managers must have to manage conflict in modern organizations (Lang, 2009; Ramani & Zhimin, 2010). The varied interpersonal abilities leaders need to resolve employee disputes are in large respect a reflection of the dynamic workplace context. Relationships between employees within and across layers of the organization are vastly more complex given the virtually unfettered access to information and technology (Senge, 1994). Findings from one report reflect the magnitude of workplace conflict and suggest the need for a renewed focus on conflict-management (Consulting Psychologists Press [CPP], 2008). The study found 85% of respondents reported having to cope with conflict on the job and 29% reported conflict as "always" or "frequently" (CPP, 2008, p. 3). The same report (CPP, 2008) noted 70% of the employees surveyed perceived managing conflict as a "very or critically important leadership skill while 54% of employees [thought] managers could handle disputes better by addressing underlying tensions before things go wrong" (p. 3). Also within this report, managers rated their abilities to handle conflict more favorably than their employees' perceptions of how well the managers managed conflict. School leaders, like most managers, must learn to be adaptive in their behaviors to account for the new realities of the workplace and to properly serve organizational interests and goals (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007).

For this reason, researchers examined preferences among school principals as to how conflicts should be managed. Leadership preferences for conflict-management were studied within small school district contexts. Prior work reveals the unique context of smaller, less bureaucratic school systems. In smaller schools, management/leadership tends to reflect a greater level of interpersonal intimacy among workplace participants and leaders are usually more engaged in and have a broader understanding of the day-to-day operations of the school compared to leaders in large school settings (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Mohr, 2000; Wasley, et al., 2000). Experience and gender were explored in the study as possible factors influencing perceptions related to preferred conflict-management approaches as both variables have been linked to leadership effectiveness. The early work of Blake and Mouton (1964) still seems relevant today: leaders seem to still need a dual focus characterized by concerns for both tasks and people.

To begin, a rationale for the analysis is presented as well as a review of prior research related to the gender and experience of the leader and conflict-management. This study employs a well-established school leader conflict-management survey, the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument, and is discussed briefly in the following sections. Results and a discussion of the findings are presented in turn.

Rationale for Exploring Conflict-Management in Small Schools

Conflict is not only inevitable for groups but one that is often viewed as natural and necessary. Conflict has been described as "a critical mechanism by which we navigate the variety of personalities, goals, interests, and values in social interaction" (Oore, LeBlanc, & Leiter, 2015, p. 306). To be sure, conflict management is both a complex and evolving domain of study. Recent studies draw attention to enduring differences among conflict management theories but have found that there is greater agreement among types of strategies employed for resolution (Carton & Tewfik, 2016). Recent work also reveals advances in analyzing the management of conflict as well as anticipated outcomes associated with the use of different modes of resolution in the workplace. This has led to the development of a four framed typology that captures the modalities of conflict resolution strategies (i.e., relational [interpersonal], status [hierarchical],

process [role meaning], and task [specific job related issues]) – each frame is different yet mutually impactful (Carton & Tewfik, 2016).

Without question, the burden of nurturing positive workplace behaviors falls largely on leadership. Be that as it may, a litany of social factors continues to shape the traditional managerial-subordinate relationship in the workplace (Lang, 2009). Increasing globalization (Lipsky, Avgar, & Lamar, 2016; Prause & Mujtaba, 2015), diversity of religion (Gebert et al., 2014), immigration, trade, and advances in technology have altered the status quo of workplace obligations and production (Lipsky et al., 2016). Consequently, leaders are expected to act responsively to the various needs of a diverse workforce while at the same time render fair judgment. Seemingly, the nature of conflict in the workplace, as Prause and Mujtaba (2015) describe, is shifting from the "authoritative approach with ignorance towards other parties to cultural awareness, value creation and skills advocacy, listening, and negotiation" (p. 14).

Growing evidence points to a need for managers in today's organizations to be more aware and sensitive to difference. One such area of research addresses the varying generational impact (Hillman, 2014; Messarra, Karkoulian, & El-Kassar, 2016). For example, findings from one study (Hillman, 2014) suggest leaders today must have the capacity to resolve conflict stemming from differences in values and acceptable norms between generation groupings (i.e., Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y). Hillman (2014) suggests managers skilled at understanding generational differences are more apt to establish workplace policies and procedures that accommodate differences in attitudes and preferences across birth-year cohorts, which, in turn, may diminish the likelihood of conflict. Other research points to the need for today's leaders to foster greater awareness of the emotional dimensions associated with conflict (Hopkins & Yonker, 2015; Oore et al., 2015). One study found leaders are relying to a greater degree on emotional intelligence behaviors such as social responsibility, problem solving, and impulse control when addressing workplace conflict (Hopkins & Yonker, 2015). According to Hopkins and Yonker (2015), encouraging leaders to "deconstruct the thought process" (p. 240) for themselves and for those of others may yield more impactful responses to conflict.

At the same time, the nature and scope of work in school settings continues to evolve (Lieberman, 2005). Principals charged with managing campuses face an increasingly diverse set of expectations from various parties (Tschannen-Moran, 2009; Wolcott, 2003). For example, it is now the norm that schools are accountable for student learning across all groups and must show evidence of growth or face the threat of sanctions. Evidence suggests schools are struggling to respond to demographic shifts in the workplace and have advanced only slightly in challenging "normative" (p. 51) ideas about people and their abilities in the workplace (Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014). In light of this more recent expectation and others too numerous to list, the principal is challenged to maintain a task-oriented strategy in his/her managerial approach.

For the campus principal, fulfilling organizational goals demands not only a strong task-orientation but requires relational skills and a stronger focus on climate and culture (Lumpkin, 2008). The principal's ability or inability to meet the needs of teachers is linked to teacher attitudes and work-habits. To earn trust and build support among teachers, the school leader must have at minimum skills to persuade, convince, and motivate. The ability of leaders to build consensus and retain steady support in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic organization is an aspect worthy of greater scrutiny within the conflict-management sphere.

There is much agreement in the literature that workplace communication is a key leadership aspect (Gronn, 2000; Maxwell, Scheurich, & Skrla, 2009; Spillane, 2006). Norms and customs of communication are often organization specific, each organization reflecting

differentiated roles and power dynamics. Principals and teachers hold varying orientations (personal and professional), which bring about conflicting priorities (Balay, 2006; Blase & Blase, 2002; Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; Louis, 2007; Marshall, 1991; Tschannen-Moran, 2009, 2007;). Be that as it may, the failure to meet teachers' needs may lead to undesirable organizational outcomes, such as diminished student academic performance. Effective principal-teacher conflict-management skills (Berry, 1994) and positive relationships (Currall, 1996; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002) appear to enable more positive outcomes in the workplace. While fostering relationships and effective communication may be powerful levers for organizational progress, little is known as to what effect the gender and experience of the leader might have on managing conflict in particular organizational contexts.

Conflict-Management and Gender

As females have formed a critical mass in workforce leadership in North America, interest in gender differences in conflict-management has intensified. A growing body of research addressing women's experiences in school leadership reveals this trend (Blackmore, 2013; Brunner, 2000; Eckman, 2004; Grogan, 1996). Previous studies have linked specific leadership characteristics with gender (Harriman, 1996; Hines, 1992; Marshall, 1993). One dimension of interest to this study is whether recent evidence confirms the traditional gender leadership archetypes that have been manifested over centuries. For example, beliefs persist that male leaders tend to exhibit behaviors that are more self-reliant, dominant, hard, impersonal, outer-focused, action-oriented, competitive, and assertive. The counter narrative is that female leaders are seen more in the vein of displaying more nurturing, passive, sensitive, compassionate, and family-centered behaviors. In many cases, this view reflects women as the person primarily responsible for the education of children in the household.

Tannen (1990) suggests differences in conflict-management styles of male and female may be largely due to socialization. Organizations are powerful socialization structures, which tend to reproduce and reinforce norms of power that largely reward men who promote those who are most like themselves (Grant, 1988). Prior work suggests women who have been able to advance in organizations have done so by embracing male behaviors (Blackburn, Martin, & Hutchinson, 2006). Gender conflict style differences in organizations have been widely documented (Brandt & Laiho, 2013; Holt & DeVore, 2005; Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012; Schuh et al., 2013;), but some studies have reached mixed findings (Putnam & Poole, 1987; Ruble & Schneer, 1994). Some studies have explored leadership styles women prefer (Cardona, 1995; Holt & DeVore, 2005; Sone, 1981). Schaubhut (2007) notes that when gender differences in conflict-management behaviors were identified in the literature, men seemed more inclined to exhibit more competitive behaviors. Eagly, Karau, and Johnson (1992) reviewed fifty studies comparing leadership styles between male and female principals. Females across the studies tended to be more task-oriented. There was little evidence to find differences between male and female on measures of interpersonal orientation. Findings also point to a pattern of female principals displaying a more participative style, while male principals demonstrated a more directive style.

Few studies have probed the link between gender and conflict-management among female school administrators. In one study, researchers examined perceptions of principals and teachers relative to gender, conflict-management style, and school culture (Blackburn et al., 2006). Male principal participants exhibiting a dominating conflict-management style received

lower school culture scores in the domain of teacher collaboration. Female principals, who were seen as having more integrated conflict-management styles, received higher school culture scores in the domains of professional development and teacher collaboration.

The present study employs the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument to measure modes of conflict-management among leaders – an instrument that has been used extensively in prior studies. Using the Thomas-Kilmann, researchers in one study examined conflict-management behaviors of participants in the private sector, governmental agencies, and a university (Shockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1984). Although no differences were found across avoiding, collaborating, or accommodating modes, significant differences were found among the compromising and competing modes, with females exhibiting more compromising behaviors and males more competing. The researchers, however, cautioned against generalizing the findings to other populations due to differences in student and non-student populations in the study.

One other study (Chusmir & Mills, 1989) found no significant differences between the conflict resolution styles of men and women managers at either home or work. The authors suggested differences in conflict resolution styles might be more a reflection of hierarchical placement within the organization than gender. The researchers also found both genders adapted their conflict behaviors to the situations at hand. Other studies using the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument suggest women may be more inclined to prefer compromising (Erickson, 1984; Holt & DeVore, 2005), accommodating (Sone, 1981), or avoiding (Cardona, 1995) behaviors. For example, one study reported men exhibited higher levels of competing behaviors, while women tended to utilize compromising behaviors more frequently (Holt & Devore, 2005).

Overall, prior research reveals an evolving association between gender and conflict-management. Although it has previously been argued that female administrators manage conflict more through compromise (Erickson, 1984), recent studies suggest a far less definitive link (Corral-Carlson, 2008; Dillard, 2005; Indelicato, 2005; Schaubhut, 2007).

Conflict-Management and Experience

Minimal literature focuses directly on the topic of conflict-management preferences relative to the experience of a school principal. Experience and conflict-management have been studied in work-related situations, but few within the area of educational leadership. One study (DeTurk, 2010) examined the conflict resolution styles of Nebraska superintendents utilizing the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (2007; 1974). Findings in the study suggest more inexperienced superintendents tended to report an orientation toward more collaborative behaviors with peers than did experienced leaders. More experienced superintendents also reported more satisfaction with their conflict resolution behaviors. A separate study (Meier, 2007) found teachers having more experienced principals reported fewer instances of staff conflict, which, according to the researcher, may suggest more experienced principals may be more effective at enabling teachers to work together. Berry (1994), on the other hand, reported no significant differences between conflict-management styles of male and female elementary principals when examining the effects of age and years of administrative experience.

While prior research reveals gender and experience might play a role in the manner in which contentious workplace matters are resolved, much remains unclear as to how these two factors impact conflict-management behaviors in particular organizational settings. Given the importance of children succeeding academically and socially, more research is needed to better

understand what factors might predict the manner by which principals prefer to address and resolve workplace conflicts.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers employed the ethic of care (Gilligan, 2002, 1982; Noddings, 2002;) and Leader-Member exchange theory (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010; Scandura, 1999) to contextualize the study. Under the ethic of care, the emphasis is placed on relationship between the leader (i.e., the person caring) and the followers (i.e., the object of care) rather than "out of duty to carefully reasoned principle" (Noddings, 2002, p. 14). Motivations for caring emerge from a desire to fulfill obligations and respond to the needs of others. The ethic of care has been largely recognized as a female dominant perspective (Gilligan, 1982). Noddings (2002) when discussing the need for a female perspective on what it means to be good rejects the impulse to claim "moral superiority" but instead to call attention to a "perspective on ethical life" that uses "women's experience" to "help all of us lead better lives" (p. 107). The question arises as to whether this gender predisposition to caring behaviors results in preferred conflict resolutions for women leaders that are more relational and sensitive to the needs of others (i.e., accommodating and compromising modes of resolution).

Contextualizing leadership experience as it relates to conflict resolution presents a greater challenge. This is partly due to the rational supposition the more experience a leader has the more effective the leader will be in handling workplace conflict. Yet, evidence suggests leaders may be prone to resist adapting to the expectations of "new professionalism" and revert back to behaviors classified under "old professionalism" (Anderson & Cohen 2015). This is all to say that context may be a critical dimension to understanding preferred leadership behaviors. Little is known to what extent leaders give sufficient attention to norms of workplace interaction between managers and followers and what it means for managing conflict within a context of varying views of "fairness." Research related to leader-member exchange theory (LMX) offers a promising avenue to explore subtle relational nuances, particularly between leaders and subordinates (Erdogan & Bauer 2010; Scandura, 1999). According to Erdogan and Bauer (2010), "LMX theory refers to the idea that leaders form relationships based on trust, liking, and respect with some employees they work with, whereas with others the relationship does not go beyond the basic terms of the employment contract" (p. 1104). These types of relational manifestations warrant greater scrutiny without question. For these reasons, researchers set out to examine to what extent the profile of the leader according to gender and experience explained preferred conflict resolution behaviors.

Method

Participant Selection and Data Collection

The school districts in this study were located in the southwestern part of the United States having student enrollments ranging from 109 to 905 during the 2008-09 academic years. A total of 191 head principals were mailed surveys during the 2009-2010 term. The Thomas Kilmann Instrument was selected given its focus on conflict-management styles. Of the 191 surveys distributed, 91 were returned for a response rate of 48%. Several surveys were eliminated due to incompletion or errors resulting in a total of 76 valid cases. All 76 principals returning useable

surveys reported being the head principal at their campuses. Of those 76 principals, 47 were male and 29 female. Table 1 contains the age and experience of participants in the study.

Table 1
Participant Descriptive Statistics by Age and Experience (N=76)

Descriptor	Minimum	Maximum	Female Mean	Male Mean	Overall Mean
Age	30	67	45.9	48.4	47.4
Years in Education	6	42	18.8	21.7	20.6
Years in Administration	1	39	6.4	9.7	8.5

Research Instrument

A modified version of the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (TKI, 2007, 1974) was used in this study. In short, the Thomas-Kilmann (TKI) instrument measures conflict-management behavior (2007; 1974). The original TKI consisted of 30 questions. The instrument employs statements representing five behavioral modes - competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance, and accommodation. The five behavioral modes are arranged according to two perpendicular continuums. The vertical continuum is assertiveness, while the horizontal continuum is cooperativeness (Thomas, 2002). Competing is the most assertive behavior, and the least cooperative. The object of competing is to win by satisfying selfish concerns at the expense of others. Collaborating is also a highly assertive behavior; however, unlike competing, it is very cooperative. With collaborating, every effort is made to satisfy the concerns of both parties with a win-win solution.

The other three conflict-management behaviors are less assertive, with varying degrees of cooperativeness. Compromising is a somewhat assertive, and a somewhat cooperative approach that seeks an acceptable solution that only partially satisfies each party's concerns. Unlike compromising, avoiding involves being unassertive as well as uncooperative; it often involves side-stepping conflict. Accommodating is also an unassertive approach, but it is cooperative in attempting to satisfy the other party's concerns at personal expense.

The Thomas-Kilmann Instrument contains statements within each of the modes that are posited against one another. The participant is forced to choose one statement over another or rather one mode over another. Participants receive a score for each mode ranging from 0 to 12. A scenario where a participant scores a twelve would indicate a clearly preferred mode; a score of six would show a preference for balancing behaviors. For this study, CPP, Inc. granted permission to add a stem to the TKI because of the study's goal of focusing specifically on the principal-teacher relationship. Whereas the original TKI (2007, 1974) generalizes the relationship between the participant and others the leader encounters in the workplace, only those items capturing information about the preferred behaviors between the participant principal and teachers on their campus were selected.

Demographic questions were added to the last page of the modified TKI to permit exploring the gender and experience effect. Beyond gender and leadership experience, questions

captured relative participant characteristics such as age and whether or not the participant was the lead campus principal.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (2007; 1974) was first normed in 1977 with a group of fewer than 400 participants. In 2007, a new group of 8,000 participants was sampled to assure representative numbers of people by organizational level and race/ethnicity (Schaubhut, 2007). The re-norming resulted in minimal changes to the low, medium, and high ranges in the TKI scoring graph (Thomas & Kilmann, 2007). Kilmann and Thomas (1977), reported a non-significant social desirability differential; a Pearson coefficient of .21.

Overview of Mode of Analysis

Logistic regression analysis was used to explore the influence of gender and experience on a preference for a particular behavior (Agresti, 2007). Binary logistic regression focuses on success and failure; its outcomes are not continuous, and contain two possible categorical responses (Agresti, 2007). A stepwise method (Agresti, 2007; Field, 2005) was administered to analyze the relative impact of the predictors (see Table 2).

Table 2
Structure of the Logistic Regression Analysis

Predictors	Level of Measurement	Outcomes
Gender	Nominal	Less v. More Competitive
		Less v. More Accommodating
Experience in Education	Scale	Less v. More Collaborative
		Less v. More Compromising
Experience in Administration	Scale	Less v. More Avoiding

Categorical Coding

Item outcomes from the Thomas-Kilmann were recoded into binary format to allow for binary logistic regression analysis. Cut-off points were established to indicate less or more of a behavior. To recode, a cut-off point was established for each mode. Each mode score was then converted from the standard zero to twelve score to a participant scoring in one of two categories: less or more of a behavior (e.g., scores falling below cut-off points indicated a lesser tendency to exhibit a behavior while scores above indicated a greater likelihood). While researchers acknowledge the limitation in reassigning scores to categories, steps were taken to

identify places in the distribution that best approximated a dividing midpoint. Table 3 shows how participants were categorized as far as preferring 'more' or 'less' of a behavior.

Table 3
Categorical Coding for the Logistic regression Analysis (N = 76)

Binary Category by Outcome	Raw Score Split	Category by Score	Number of Raw Scores
0: Less competitive	<5	0-4	51
1: More competitive	>4	5-10	25
0: Less collaborative	<8	3-7	33
1: More collaborative	>7	8-12	43
0: Less compromising	<7	0-6	35
1: More compromising	>6	7-11	41
0: Less avoiding	<7	3-6	42
1: More avoiding	>6	7-12	34
0: Less accommodating	<6	1-5	37
1: More accommodating	>5	6-9	39

Results

Descriptive Findings

Overall, 67% of the participants (N=51) fell into the less competitive category as opposed to the remainder, who reported a preference for a more competitive conflict management approach. On the whole, means across the constructs reveal that a majority of the respondents reported themselves as more collaborating, more compromising, and more accommodating. The descriptive findings also appear to reveal a consensus across the group for rejecting avoiding behaviors, the only indicator of the five possible modes of behavior that might be considered a marginal characteristic (see Table 4). The overall picture of the raw numbers in table 3 is that the small-school principals in this study were not very competitive, nor did they prefer to avoid conflict, but they preferred collaborative, compromising, and accommodating approaches to conflict-management with campus teachers.

To the question of male versus female differences in preferred conflict management behaviors, the study examined the average scores for each behavior (see Table 4). First, the overall average in competing between males and females was exactly the same. The overall average differences within collaborating and avoiding behaviors were also nearly identical between males and females. Females and male averages differed slightly more in the accommodating and compromising behaviors. The male and female averages differed the most in the compromising category – a difference of 9/10 of a point. Comparison of male and female average scores, descriptively, seemed to reveal minimal difference among the five behaviors. Competing, collaborating, and avoiding showed a difference of only one-tenth of a point or less. The average male score for compromising 6.3, as compared to the average female at 7.2, possibly indicating that females preferred more compromising than males, accounting for the largest mean difference. The average male accommodating score was 5.6 to a female score of 5.0.

Table 4
Comparison of Male and Female Behavioral Scores

Behavior	Overall	Male	Female
Competing	3.6	3.6	3.6
Collaborating	7.8	7.9	7.7
Compromising	6.7	6.3	7.2
Avoiding	6.5	6.6	6.5
Accommodating	5.4	5.6	5.0

Overall average scores for each of the five behaviors revealed a possible link between experience and competing (Table 5). The principals who scored highest in the competing category were all older and had more years of experience. Older and more experienced principals also scored lower in compromising, indicating that, as a group, they did not prefer compromise. Older and more experienced principals also appeared to be slightly more accommodating. Collaborating and avoiding averages appeared to show no link to age or experience.

Table 5
Age and Experience Profiles for Principals in the Study

Behavior	Average Age	Average Years in Education	Average Years in Administration
Less Competing	45.9	18.9	7.1
More Competing	50.6	23.9	11.2
Less Collaborating	47.7	20.9	8.5
More Collaborating	47.2	20.3	8.4
Less Compromising	48.5	22.2	10.1
More Compromising	46.6	19.2	7.1
Less Avoiding	47.7	20.9	8.9
More Avoiding	47.1	20.2	7.9
Less Accommodating	48.8	21.4	8.4
More Accommodating	46.2	19.8	8.5

Logistic Regression

The intent of this study was to explore the degree to which gender and experience predicted alternative conflict resolution preferences under competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance, and accommodation. For each behavior, a backward stepwise (conditional) was performed (see Table 6). "Years of experience in administration" was the only significant variable. It significantly predicted a preference for competition conflict-management behaviors (Wald=6.914, p<.05) accounting for 15.6 percent of the variance (RN2=.156). and compromising behaviors (Wald=4.585, p<.05) accounting for 9.7 percent of the variance (RN2=.097). Under collaboration, accommodating, and avoiding, none of the explanatory variables were significant.

In sum, small-school principals in this study showed a preference for competitive conflict-management behaviors as experience in administration increased. The principals also reported a decreased preference for compromising conflict-management behaviors as experience in administration increased.

Table 6
Rank Order of Strongest Predictors

Predictor(IV)	Outcome(DV)	Rank	S.E.	Wald	Sig.a	Exp(B)	RN2
Yrs. Admin.	Competing	1	0.05	6.914	0.009	1.139	0.156
Constant			0.513	13.325	0	0.154	
Yrs. Admin.	Compromise	2	0.047	4.585	0.032	0.905	0.097
Constant			0.45	4.954	0.026	2.725	
Yrs. Admin.	Avoiding	3	0.039	0.681	0.409	.968	0.013
Constant			0.402	0.026	0.873	1.066	
Gender	Accommodating	4	0.476	1.138	0.286	0.602	0.02
Constant			0.295	1.035	0.309	1.35	
Gender	Collaborating	5	0.476	0.449	0.503	0.727	0.008
Constant			0.297	1.702	0.1921	.474	

a=p<.05

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this sample of small school principals point to leadership experience being a fairly strong predictor of particular conflict-management preferences. All the while, the findings seem to confirm gender as an evolving leadership dimension in the workplace (Berry, 1994; Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, & Chin, 2005; Corral-Carlson, 2008; Dillard, 2005; Schaubhut, 2007; Shockley-Zabalak, 1981). The results of this analysis cast a new light on the traditional presumption that males tend to exhibit preferences toward competitive behaviors while females opt for compromise (Eagly, Karau, & Johnson, 1992; Holt & DeVore, 2005; Ilmer, 1980; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Shockley-Zabalak, 1984; Thomas, Thomas, & Schaubhut, 2007). Female leaders were no more likely than male leaders to demonstrate a preference for any of the preferred conflict-management behaviors. This is a finding consistent with prior studies that have examined, for instance, collaborating (Berry, 1994; Chismur & Mills, 1989; Duane, 1989; Schaubhut, 2007; Shockley-Zabalak, 1981; Shockley-Zabalak & Morley, 1984; Sorenson, Hawkins, & Sorenson, 1995; Thomas, Thomas, & Schaubhut, 2007;) and compromising behaviors (Berry, 1994; Brahnam et al.,2005; Duane, 1989; Schaubhut, 2007; Shockley Zalabak, 1981; Thomas, Thomas & Schaubhut, 2007). Findings from this sample of small school principals seem to confirm the ever growing complexity in the gender and leadership link.

As for experience, two findings are noteworthy. First, the principals in this study exhibited a preference for more competing behavior as administrative experience increased. This finding is not consistent with previous research that found no significant differences in groups of male and female principals (Berry, 1994; Indelicato, 2005). However, no other satisfactory research could be found that strictly examined administrative experience and competing behaviors.

Yet, a significant negative relationship was found between administrative experience and compromising behaviors. As administrative experience increased, compromising behaviors decreased. This finding lends support to the first finding – the idea that more administrative experience results in increased assertive behavior. A reduced tendency to compromise could also indicate more assertiveness and less accommodating behaviors.

Implications for Leaders

Practice

Some situations may require leaders to exercise varying forms of conflict resolution. In other words, a particular mode might be more effective in light of special circumstances. As such, a more experienced small-school principal may need to re-examine his or her competitive conflict-management behavioral tendencies and determine if these behaviors are beneficial to the school. Conversely, the inexperienced principal may need to demonstrate competitiveness when appropriate. Thomas (2007) has noted managers who exhibit more compromise may often lose sight of larger issues, which may weaken the organization's core beliefs. Too much compromise may also foster a climate of gamesmanship where bargaining and trade-offs de-emphasize trust and direct attention toward meaningless and/or time-consuming issues. Reluctance on the part of the leader to exert influence or show hesitancy in taking action when needed may also undermine confidence from followers. Leaders who over accommodate the personal interests of employees at the expense of the students' academic interests may also threaten group stability. Followers can become frustrated or resentful when a leader does not lead decisively or in a timely manner (Thomas, 2007).

One obvious advantage eluding inexperienced administrators is experience itself, which offers a measure of insight for what might be an appropriate course of action. However, veteran administrators are prone at times to be inflexible and form habits that impair judgement. As such, too little compromise diminishes the potential influence of a principal. Employees dependent on a single decision-maker may exhibit low morale, tend to underachieve, or be less willing to take initiative to address issues. Under overly competitive leaders, employees may be afraid to express themselves or take risks. Failing to value the contributions and feedback from employees in addressing problems diminishes feelings of unity and shared purpose, which may ultimately impact student success.

The findings of this analysis stress at the very least the need for principals at all levels of experience to be more reflective of their conflict resolution practices. Experienced principals may need to give pause to the advantages compromise brings and explore the approach as a valid technique to managing interpersonal conflict. Conversely, inexperienced principals may need to acknowledge that compromising behaviors may not always be best for all situations. The results of this study point to the need for principals to tap into particular conflict-management behaviors when appropriate, regardless of experience and gender. Some have noted the advantages to the androgynous school administrator as he or she can react to situations free from cultural stereotypes or expectations (Berry, 1994; Erickson, 1984).

Leadership Preparation

CPP Human Global Capital Report (2008) noted conflict-management training is critical for managers but still lacking in most preparation programs worldwide. Many managers who participated in the report indicated no conflict-management training. Ninety-five percent of those who did receive training reported that it helped them navigate the workplace. An increased focus on managing conflict may be needed in order to teach potential principals about situational leadership. Inexperienced principals are perhaps more influenced by the more recent college preparatory experience that encourages compromise and collaboration, whereas the principal with increasing experience may not have the benefit of continuing training and may have a lesser view of the importance of collaborative approaches and compromise in interpersonal relationships.

Preparatory programs need to move to discussions stressing conflict-management as context-based and adaptive. The five conflict resolution behaviors are complimentary approaches that carry advantages and disadvantages and each can be overused or underused.

Without question, increased attention is needed in training programs to enable leaders to better adapt and respond to changing social conditions (Lang, 2009). As forms of diversity increase (Gebert et al., 2014; Lipsky et al., 2016; Prause & Mujtaba, 2015) so do the obligations of the leader in responding to a multiplicity of needs. To address these conditions, school leadership programs must focus more intently on developing skills that more effectively manage differences in attitudes and values across birth cohort generations (Hillman, 2014; Messarra et al, 2016), encourage more sensitivity to the role of emotions in workplace conflicts (Hopkins & Yonker, 2015; Oore et al., 2015), and promote a more thoughtful reflection of workplace interactions and what it means for perspectives of fairness across different groups (Erdogan & Bauer 2010; Scandura, 1999;). Further, an increased focus on the complicated interpersonal conflicts that are characteristic in small environments could be an important skill set for small-school principals. Cook and Johnston (2008) have recently emphasized the need for school superintendents with the skills to manage conflicts. Since the 1980s, the educational system in the United States has been under attack by many different parties. Cook and Johnston (2008) refer to previous research that brings to light the many types of conflicts superintendents face due in large part to society's growing criticism of the public school system. The research suggests that conflict-management skills are a necessity for school leaders. With regard to the political environment of small campuses, flexibility in the sense that the five behaviors are to be viewed as a means to an end may need to be emphasized. For example, administrators should continue to be trained that they are to be leaders of the larger group and decisions should be made for the benefit of all on the campus.

Policy

CPP's Global Human Capital Report notes the costs of ineffective conflict-management in the workplace worldwide as indicated by lost production, personal attacks, sickness, excessive absences, and project failures. Legislation that addresses the problem of conflict in the workplace could focus on this need to use human resources more efficiently by encouraging preventative measures in the workplace (CPP, 2008).

Lawmakers may need to consider the implications of any possible legislation because of the effects that it can have on the behaviors of those at the campus level. For example, it has

been argued that No Child Left Behind (2001) created pressures and unintended outcomes that took the form of academic dishonesty (Bruhn, Zajac, Al-Kazemi, & Prescott, 2002; Cummings Maddu, Harlow, & Dyas, 2002; Evetts, 2006; Kidd, 2010; Storm & Storm, 2007). Direct approaches by school leaders are fostered when school districts are held to specific goals such as increased test scores with the impending threat of sanctions. NCLB, to some degree, could explain the more competitive and less compromising experienced administrator in this study.

Research

While scholarship in the area of conflict-management has advanced greatly since the early part of the 20th century, more work is needed in exploring leadership behavior as a tactical exercise that relies on the integration of varying skills and personal dispositions to improve the school. Research surrounding the effects of experience on conflict modes is sparse. More studies are needed that explore the nuances of experience in situations where it is leveraged for maximizing students' best interests and when it does nothing more than perpetuate the status quo. Administrators generally learn in training programs that collaborative methods are preferred in most circumstances; however, an increased emphasis on the effects of alternative modes of conflict management could serve to benefit researchers and practitioners alike. Research on small schools and conflict-management is sparse. This study focused solely on the small-school atmosphere and stopped short of making comparisons to larger campuses. Perhaps important insight could be gained through researching the differences between school settings of various sizes and geographical settings. Research on the topic of interpersonal conflict-management from a principal's perspective could be enriched through qualitative studies. Interpersonal relationships are hallmarks in schools, and effective leaders know how to cultivate them and how to interact with teachers and students in ways that further the goals of the school while preserving the dignity of individuals. This line of inquiry would surely be enhanced by a more qualitative turn in exploring how, why, and in what conditions/contexts certain behavioral modes manifest.

Conclusion

The study of interpersonal conflict-management behavior is complex when considering that the campus leader must often assume the shifting role of boss, friend, advisor, and confidant, while also addressing the pressing needs of the school. Leadership calls for judgment and discretion. Overt conflict between principal and teacher is rare and often can be readily resolved. Yet, the subtle interpersonal conflicts can be the more difficult tests for school leaders. Although no gender link was found, it has proven to be a valuable lens to enriching the discussion of preferred conflict-management techniques. It should continue to evolve in the larger discussion of effective campus leader behaviors. The findings of this study do, however, point to experience as impacting conflict-management behaviors, particularly compromise. Campus principals should be more aware of their views and behaviors and how these may adapt over time and across contexts. Encouraging self-awareness can also promote more effective management. Understanding tendencies of self, or at least acknowledging their existence, may go a long way to forming more positive perspectives. Principals should recognize that personal feelings can often cloud decisions.

From this study, campus principals, policy-makers, and researchers should take note the need for enhanced managerial knowledge and practice in the leadership domain of conflict-management. School principals are closest to the interpersonal happenings on school campuses and they are also responsible for seeing the big picture. Principals must remain focused on system goals all the while accepting interpersonal conflict as a reality in schools. Policy-makers should also realize the effects that conflicts can have on the workplace and policies should reflect that fact. Researchers must continue to address the void in the knowledge-base in the broader quest to better prepare leaders for the highly uncertain aspects surrounding conflict-management in schools. Amid these efforts to enhance organizational performance, the primary focus of this work should always be directed toward students' best interests.

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