Health Education in Practice: Employee Conflict Resolution Knowledge and Conflict Handling Strategies

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to determine if a brief workplace conflict resolution workshop improved employee conflict resolution knowledge and to examine which conflict handling strategies (Yielding, Compromising, Forcing, Problem-Solving, Avoiding) were most used by employees when dealing with workplace conflict. A pre-test/post-test control group design was used. The brief educational workshop yielded higher post-test knowledge scores among participants as compared to control group (p<.05), and most employees in the sample used Problem-Solving followed by Compromise as strategies to handle workplace conflicts. Conflict disrupts the workplace, but many employers have limited time and staff to address it. Implementing an effective, pro-active prevention strategy such as this workshop takes little time and staffing. A brief educational workshop can have a positive effect on conflict resolution knowledge, and employer awareness of how employees prefer to deal with those conflicts may help resolve conflicts before they escalate.

Introduction

Although some workplace conflict or disagreements, if handled positively, can bring about new ideas or changes (Riaz & Junaid, 2013), unresolved conflict can negatively impact employee health (Romer, Rispens, Giebels, & Euwema, 2012) and organizational performance and success (Patterson, 2010). Conflict can range from a simple argument among co-workers to a confrontation with a boss. If unresolved, disagreements can lead to conflict, conflict can escalate, and the situation can become more serious (Schnurman, 2011).

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How conflicts at the workplace are managed and resolved affects workplace climate. Both employees and managers usually deal with conflicts using their preferred conflict management style such as: competing to win the argument, avoiding or delaying conflict, finding middle ground, satisfying both parties, or yielding to the other party (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d.). Generally, conflict management styles are situation-dependent. Competing, avoiding or yielding, and accommodating styles, though, do not lead to long-lasting dispute resolution (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d.; The Marcom Group, Ltd., 2007). Dominating styles, forcing or competing, and avoiding conflict increases uncivil workplace behaviors and workplace stress (Trudel & Reio, 2011; Romer, Rispens, Giebels, & Euwema, 2012).

On the other hand, problem-solving styles serve as protective factors in the conflict-stress association (Romer, Rispens, Giebels, & Euwema, 2012). Compromising and collaboration are the preferred styles of conflict resolution. However, compromise can leave individuals feeling unsatisfied, whereas collaboration can solve a conflict and result in all individuals having their needs or goals reached (The Marcom Group, Ltd., 2007). Because of the undesirable personal and organizational consequences of unresolved conflict, employees need to understand how to deal with workplace conflict, and mangers, especially, need to implement effective resolution strategies that can lead to improved workplace climate, communication, and productivity (Patterson, 2010).

Much of a manager's time can be spent dealing with various forms of workplace disagreements and arguments, and conflict resolution can be a daunting, time-consuming task for management (Becze, 2009). Managers who implement and use conflict resolution training interventions at their workplaces, though, may help prevent conflict before it arises. Training employees and managers in conflict resolution can impact employee well-being, improve employee retention, and help to develop managerial skills (Patterson, 2010).

Because conflict can be a large part of employees and manager's jobs, research focusing on effective ways to improve employee knowledge regarding conflict is needed. Although there are different approaches to increase knowledge of conflict resolution among employees, one avenue is through brief workshops. The Marcom Group provides curriculum and resources in order to implement informative workshops to workplaces (The Marcom Group, Ltd., 2007). In order to determine if brief workshops are an effective method to improve employee knowledge, further research needs to be explored. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to determine if a brief workplace conflict resolution workshop improved employee conflict resolution knowledge and to examine which conflict handling strategies (Yielding, Compromising, Forcing, Problem-Solving, Avoiding) were most used by employees when dealing with workplace conflict.

Methods

Sample

Managers from a variety of workplaces in Northern Missouri were asked by the researchers if they would allow their employees to attend an hour-long conflict resolution educational workshop during work hours. With management approval, an experimental group was obtained using a convenience sample of 41 adult employees, all White, aged 22-65 from a variety of workplace settings in Northern Missouri. The participants were asked by the researchers to participate in an hour-long conflict resolution educational workshop that included pre-post assessments. Managers reported that they had never conducted any workplace conflict resolution trainings with their employees. The sample reflected the demographics of adults in this region of the state. All volunteered and freely agreed to participate in the study. Concerning the control group, a convenience sample of 34 adult employees, from a variety of workplace settings in Northern Missouri were also asked by the researchers to participate in the pre-post assessments only.

Instruments

Pre-Post Conflict Resolution at the Office Knowledge Quiz – Accompanying the "Resolving Conflicts in the Office" conflict resolution educational workshop curriculum, the Quiz included seven knowledge items based on content contained in the curriculum. Two questions were true-false style, and the other 5 questions were multiple choice questions that asked about productive ways of resolving conflict, approaches to solving conflict, and potential results of conflict. The Quiz was published by Marcom, a company that produces safety training products that are used by organizations such as Wendy's, AT&T, the United States Army, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (The Marcom Group, Ltd., 2007). The Quiz was administered in its entirety.

The Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH) Expanded Version/Paper and pencil version has been demonstrated to be a flexible, valid, reliable instrument to measure preferences for conflict management strategies at the workplace. Specific details of assessment of the instrument are noted by De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, and Nauta (2001). The instrument was used as a self-assessment of preferred conflict handling styles. Conflict handling styles included yielding, compromising, forcing, problem solving, and avoiding (De Dreu et al., 2001). A description of the five conflict resolution strategies is offered below:

Yielding: giving in completely to the other side's wishes, or at least cooperating with little or no attention to your own interests. This style involves making unilateral concessions, unconditional promises, and offering help with no expectation of reciprocal help (McShane, 2006, para. 2).

Compromising: looking for a position in which your losses are offset by equally valued gains. It involves matching the other party's concessions, making conditional promises or threats, and actively searching for a middle ground between the interests of the two parties (McShane, 2006, para. 3).

Forcing: tries to win the conflict at the other's expense. It includes "hard" influence tactics, particularly assertiveness, to get one's own way (McShane, 2006, para. 4).

Problem Solving: tries to find a mutually beneficial solution for both parties. Information sharing is an important feature of this style because both parties need to identify common ground and potential solutions that satisfy both (or all) of them (McShane, 2006, para. 5).

Avoiding: tries to smooth over or avoid conflict situations altogether. It represents a low concern for both self and the other party. In other words, avoiders try to suppress thinking about the conflict (McShane, 2006, para. 6).

The instrument contained 4 questions about each of the five conflict resolution strategies, resulting in 20 questions in total. All of the questions were on a 5-point scale ranging from not at all to very much. An example of a question pertaining to the yielding strategy is "I give in to the wishes of the other party" (De Dreu et al., 2001).

Procedure

During spring 2013 and after IRB approval and participant consent, the experimental participants were given the anonymous, Pre-Conflict Resolution at the Office Knowledge Quiz and the DUTCH to complete. Completed instruments were placed in a clasp envelope, sealed, and returned to the researchers. The experimental group participants were administered the pre-quiz, attended an hour-long conflict resolution educational training "Resolving Conflicts in the Office" following The Marcom Group's standardized curriculum, and then completed the post-quiz. (The Marcom Group, Ltd., 2007).

The educational training session was taught during work hours by undergraduate health education students from the local university who were previously trained by a university health and safety instructor in the curriculum to assure fidelity. The session covered training topics such as, sources and types of workplace conflict, defusing a confrontation and consequences of unresolved conflict. Also, the main strategies to resolve conflict were covered, which include yielding, competing, compromising, avoiding and collaboration. These five strategies were defined as well as positive and negative outcomes of each strategy were discussed. To conclude the session, instructors covered the most productive conflict resolution approach, collaboration. Instructors then provided examples of how to apply collaboration as an effective conflict resolution strategy.

Instructors followed the curriculum using lecture and visual aids. The visual aids were 16-page booklets produced by The Marcom Group, which outlined the main information provided in the session. The participants were able to take home the booklets with them after the session to provide a way to reinforce the information taught. The sessions also included active-learning techniques of role-plays, demonstrations, and scenario-based learning. The instructors asked each workplace for common conflicts that arise within their workplace and based on the answers, the instructors developed role-playing

scenarios that applied the five strategies (yielding, competing, compromising, avoiding and collaboration) of handling conflict.

Immediately following the educational training sessions, the experimental group participants completed the anonymous, Post-Conflict Resolution at the Office Knowledge Quiz. In preparation for the training sessions, the Pre and Post Quizzes were paired by numbering the top of each survey and distributing the same pre and post quiz numbered survey to a given participant.

For the control group, the participants were distributed the Pre- Conflict Resolution at the Office Knowledge Quiz and the DUTCH to complete. After one hour, with no educational session provided, the control group participants completed the anonymous, Post Quiz. The procedure design for the control group was identical to the experimental group, except that the control group went about their daily work or meetings for an hour and received no education training before taking the Post-Conflict Resolution at the Office Knowledge Quiz. The completed instruments were placed in a clasp envelope, sealed, and returned to the researchers.

For both the experimental and control groups, survey completion took approximately 10 minutes for each set of pre and post surveys.

Analysis

Measures of central tendency and dispersion were assessed on subscales of the DUTCH for both experimental and control group participants combined. Descriptive statistics and measures of central tendency and dispersion were computed for the pre and post-test items and total scores of the Conflict Resolution at the Office Knowledge Quiz, as appropriate. Additionally, a one-way between groups analysis of covariance was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the training session in improving participants' knowledge on conflict resolution. The independent variable was the Post-Conflict Resolution at the Office Knowledge Quiz scores. Scores on the pre-test were used as a covariate in the analysis.

Results

As seen in Table 1, measures of central tendency and dispersion for subscales of the DUTCH indicated that for experimental and control group participants combined, the two highest mean scores were in the subscales of Problem Solving (M= 10.96, SD=2.68) and Compromising (M=10.30,SD=2.44) styles of dealing with workplace conflict.

Of the seven knowledge questions, the item with the greatest number of incorrect responses on the pre-test (n = 49) among experimental and control group participants was the item about potential results of an escalating conflict. Fewer incorrect responses were given for this item on the post-test among the control and experimental groups (n = 27 and 14, respectively), but most participants in the control group still answered incorrectly, whereas most participants in the experimental group did not. The item with the second highest number of incorrect responses on the pre-test among control and experimental group participants was the item about the best approach to resolving conflict (n=18 and 17, respectively). On the post-test, there were 11 incorrect responses from the experimental group and 17 incorrect responses from the control group. There was one item on which the experimental group had an increased number of incorrect responses (n = 5) on the post-test as compared to the pre-test (n = 1). This item questioned participants about the first step in resolving conflict. See Table 2.

Possible scores on the knowledge test ranged from 0-7. Among control group participants (n = 34) mean pre-test and post-test scores were M=5.12, SD = 0.98 and M=5.32, SD = 1.12, respectively. Among experimental group participants (n = 40) mean pre-test and post-test scores were M=5.58, SD = 1.13 and M=6.03, SD = .86, respectively. After adjusting for pre-test scores, results of the one-way between-groups analysis of covariance revealed a statistically significant difference between the control group and experimental group's post-test scores $F(1, 71) = 5.57$, $p = 0.02$, partial eta squared = 0.07.

Table 1.

Measures of Tendency and Dispersion for Subscales of the Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH) for Experimental and Control Groups Combined

Subscale	n	Possible Scores	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Range	Min	Max
Yielding	75	4-16	9.17	1.74	3.04	10.00	5.00	15.00
Compromising	74	4-16	10.30	2.44	5.97	12.00	4.00	16.00
Forcing	75	4-16	7.77	3.19	10.18	16.00	0.00	16.00
Problem Solving	74	4-16	10.96	2.68	7.19	14.00	2.00	16.00
Avoiding	75	4-16	9.35	2.53	6.39	11.00	3.00	14.00

Table 2.

Number of Correct and Incorrect Responses to the Pre and Post-test Knowledge Items
(n = 75)

Item	Pre- Test Frequency (n)		Post-Test Frequency (n)	
	Correct	**Incorrect**	**Correct**	**Incorrect**
True or False: Conflict can actually be a good thing. **True**				
Control Group	31	3	32	2
Experimental Group	35	5	40	0
True or False: There is almost always some way that a conflict can be resolved. **True**				
Control Group	34	0	33	1
Experimental Group	38	2	39	1
Multiple Choice: When people develop different understandings of the same situation, the first step to resolving the conflict is to establish…? **Common Ground**				
Control Group	30	4	30	4
Experimental Group	39	1	35	5
Multiple Choice: When people have mutually exclusive goals, the most productive way to resolve their conflict may be…? **Compromise**				
Control Group	29	5	30	4
Experimental Group	31	9	36	4
Multiple Choice: The best approach to resolving conflicts, which lets everyone meet their needs or their goals, is…? **Collaborating**				
Control Group	16	18	17	17
Experimental Group	23	17	29	11
Multiple Choice: If conflict grows too quickly, or becomes too intense, it can lead to…? **Confrontation**				
Control Group	31	3	32	2
Experimental Group	35	5	36	4
Multiple Choice: Which of the following are potential results of an escalating conflict? **Harassment, Threats, and Violence**				
Control Group	3	31	7	27
Experimental Group	22	18	26	14

Note: All items were multiple choice, and correct responses are noted in bold font after each item.

Discussion

To determine if a brief workplace conflict resolution workshop improved employee conflict resolution knowledge and to examine preferred employee workplace conflict handing styles, a convenience sample of adult employees participated in an hour-long "Resolving Conflicts in the Office" workshop during work hours. Another convenience sample of adult employees from the same area of the state participated as the control group. The experimental group participants had significantly higher conflict resolution knowledge post-test scores as compared to the control group. Both experimental and control group participants also indicated that they preferred to use problem-solving and compromising strategies to resolve workplace conflicts. It seems that even a short (hour-long) educational intervention such as a workshop can improve employee knowledge in this area, and this group of employees in the experimental and control group are using generally effective strategies to deal with conflicts in the workplace.

This study has several implications for worksite health promotion. Managers may view conflict resolution and associated trainings as overwhelming (Becze, 2009). Results of this study, however, provide some support for the efficacy of brief interventions implemented during work hours. Possibly, the standardized curriculum including active-learning activities like role-plays and scenarios allowed participants to directly apply their knowledge to current conflicts being faced in their workplaces. Conducting the workshops during work hours might have also demonstrated the managers' commitment to the importance of the topic, leading employees to take the workshops seriously. Because volunteers could easily lead this workshop by following the standardized curriculum, managers may not have to devote administrative time to instruction and facilitation.

When asked about their preferred conflict management styles, both experimental and control group participants in this study preferred to use the more effective styles of problem-solving and compromising. Finding common ground and working towards a potential solution are cooperative styles that may lead to creative ways to solve disputes as well as new ideas and positive change (The Marcom Group, Ltd., 2007; Riaz & Junaid, 2013). Participants may not have known the most effective situations in which to apply those preferences, though. Although they were using more positive styles, the most appropriate style really depends on the conflict situation (The Marcom Group, Ltd., 2007).

Post-workshop, though, experimental group participants specifically improved their knowledge of when to use the most productive styles. Hopefully, they can better apply the most productive style to the appropriate workplace conflict situation in the future. Results also indicate a lower score for the experimental group on the knowledge question regarding the first step in resolving conflict. The lower score could have been a result of confusion during training or poor wording of the question. Curricular content regarding this item should be reviewed and the particular question could be revised if necessary. Also, more time during the teaching of the workshop should be spent on the particular topic to make sure the first step in resolving a conflict is adequately covered and understood. Results from the other knowledge questions demonstrated increase in post-scores by the experimental groups and should not require revision. Overall, the experimental group showed statistically significant higher scores on the post-test when compared to the control group, indicating that a brief workshop can improve employees' knowledge on conflict resolution.

Awareness and recognition of preferred conflict resolution styles of employees by managers may allow managers to more effectively handle and resolve conflict in the workplace. Managers who can know ahead of time the conflict styles used by most employees can attempt to implement a resolution strategy tailored to those styles. For example, if a large number of employees use compromising as a primary conflict resolution strategy then managers can realize that the main advantage to this strategy is that everyone gets at least some of what they want. They can help employees weigh priorities and find common ground. From here you can negotiate and realize that the employees will need to give a little to get a little. By being conscious of the situation and acting accordingly and in a timely manner, managers can help maintain a healthy work environment, prevent the escalation of conflict, and maintain employee productivity. For managers, this pro-active approach can limit administrative time spent dealing with conflict, may require only a small amount of company time, and can help to develop their personal managerial skills (Paterson, 2010).

In order to draw broader conclusions from the study, a larger sample size would need to be obtained, as the results of this study may be difficult to generalize. Managers in this study who allowed their employees to participate may have been more pro-active in their willingness to learn about conflict resolution than those at other workplaces. Experimental group participants' attitudes towards conflict and conflict resolution may have also influenced their willingness to learn and participate in the workshops, and any previous conflict resolution training they received at other workplaces may have influenced their knowledge scores. Because of the nature of self-report data, reliability may have been compromised.

The results from the one-hour workshop suggest, though, that a short conflict resolution workshop may increase employee's knowledge of resolving conflict as well as identify their preferred resolution styles. If future studies confirm these findings, managers should consider implementing this type of conflict resolution workshop that saves administrative time while achieving positive outcomes. To determine the lasting effect of this type of conflict resolution workshop, future research should examine knowledge and behaviors of participants and non-participants in the long-term. Conflict disrupts the workplace, but many employers have limited time and staff to address it. Implementing an effective, pro-active prevention strategy such as this workshop takes little time and staffing. A brief educational workshop can have a positive effect on conflict resolution knowledge, and employer awareness of how employees prefer to deal with those conflicts may help resolve conflicts before they escalate.

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