

ARTICLE

Exploring how Conflict Management Training Changes Workplace Conflicts: A Qualitative Case Study

Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen

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Abstract

While many organisations offer conflict management training to both staff and management, there has been little research investigating the changes resulting from such training. Using an interpretive framework of analysis, a qualitative case study was conducted to understand how 'sensemakings' about conflicts change when enacted from the perspective of staff and management in a non-profit organisation that participated in conflict management training. The case study was constructed as a longitudinal investigation with ethnographic fieldwork as the primary method of inquiry. The training worked as a catalyst for the development of new sensemakings about workplace conflicts. These included increasing acknowledgement of workplace conflicts, recognition of interdependent and context embedded relationships in interpersonal conflicts, and enactment of active resistance in a subordinated occupational group. Some conflicts did not change through training, where the perpetual structural bases of the conflicts remained intact. Insights from the study call attention to the embedding of conflict in the organisation's social fabric. As a practical implication of the study, trainers in conflict management are recommended to give more weight to the structural dimensions of conflict and organisational level conflict management when putting training programmes together.

Keywords

workplace conflict, conflict management training, sensemaking theory, change

INTRODUCTION

While many organisations offer conflict management training to both staff and management, there is little research that describes the outcomes of workplace change resulting from this training. This dearth of studies is remarkable, given that conflict research literature has, for more than four decades, posited that conflicts in organisations are inevitable processes that need management through particular forms of intervention. The literature claims that, if *managed* correctly, conflicts can bring about development, collaboration, problem solving, and organisational change (e.g. De Dreu, 1997; De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997; Jehn, 1997, 2001; Johnson, 1991; Pondy, 1967, 1969;

Rahim, 2000, 2002; Ramarajan et al., 2004; Thomas, 1992; Tjosvold, 2006, 2008; Van de Vliert, 1998, 1999).

Only a few studies have examined the effect of conflict management training in organisations: where they have done so, the focus has been on the effects on clients or the public at large, with overwhelmingly positive results. Johnson (1991) measured the effects of conflict management training on teachers, finding that the majority developed a more problem-solving way of managing conflicts. Zacker and Bard (1973) measured the effects of conflict management training on police performance, finding that officers who had taken the training as part of the police academy curriculum scored higher on performance than those who had not. Ramarajan et al. (2004) found that



UN peacekeepers on international intervention missions in complex humanitarian emergencies experienced fewer conflict situations with NGO workers after receiving training in negotiation.

The three studies in the previous paragraph focused on how training in conflict management and negotiation affects staff relationships with different external groups (pupils, citizens, NGO workers). In contrast, the following case study was undertaken to explore the change outcomes of conflict management training in the workplace itself. It does so by comparing how staff and management in the same workplace enact and describe changing meanings of conflicts in the workplace before taking part in the training and in the year after it. Research within conflict and negotiations studies conceptualises conflict and its management as interpretive processes strictly dependent on human observation and the making of meaning (Barley, 1991; Kolb, 2008; Kolb and Bartunek, 1992; Van Maanen, 1992). Several researchers have adopted a focus on the context-specific meanings of conflicts and negotiation and the processes that shape such meanings (Bartunek et al., 1992; Collier, 2009; Friedman, 1992; Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005; Gadlin, 1994; Kolb and McGinn, 2009; Morrill, 1989; Putnam, 2004).

Building on an interpretive epistemology represented by Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking (1995, 2001), the present case study follows training in conflict management longitudinally to investigate how staff and management make sense of conflicts. Focusing on the actual processes of change resulting from the training, the research question is: how does changing sensemaking enact and affect conflicts at work? I use interview and observational methods to trace the meanings and fates of workplace conflicts longitudinally. The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, I provide the theoretical background for the study, and then describe the methods of data collection and analysis. I then present four narratives of how changing sensemaking enacts and affects conflicts at work, and conclude by discussing how the study informs our understanding of how organisational conflict management can change.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001; Weick et al., 2005) contributes to understanding the meaning of conflict, including how the dynamics of conflict meanings unfold and shift in the organisational context. While much of (organisational) life is routine, comprising situations that do not demand our full attention, we engage in a process of searching for meaning whenever something that needs or demands our attention occurs – a process that Weick (1995) terms *sensemaking*. Sensemaking theory has evolved from microsociology,

particularly symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1956; Mead, 1967) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Symbolic interactionism is concerned with how “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them” and “that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). The roots of sensemaking theory, in symbolic interactionism, emphasise the dynamics of interactions between individuals and groups on the one hand and the organisational social context on the other. The lineages from Goffman and Garfinkel stress the need for careful attention to the micro-particulars of every interaction context.

According to Weick, sensemaking is ongoing, subtle, social and easily taken for granted. It makes circumstances comprehensible both prospectively and retrospectively. Much of the time we make sense routinely, invoking rationalised accounts of actions, past, present and future. Rationalised accounts do not always hold, however, especially where jolts that disturb these accounts are experienced (Meyer, 1982). Jolts transform routines and rationalised accounts by introducing ambiguity that prompts revision of meaning. On these occasions when normalcy is disturbed, new forms of sensemaking often emerge: these occasions might include shocks, changes, or unexpected actions that may be small or massive. Conflicts epitomise challenges to the ongoing flow of inter-subjective sensemaking. Changed sensemaking happens when people make a different sense of situations in which they find themselves. While social context influences how people interpret events in many ways, people also participate in creating and maintaining their social contexts, which makes sensemaking iterative and reflexive (Weick et al., 2005). With a sensemaking perspective, the focus is on the development of meanings and how such meanings motivate engagements, actions, and practices. Weick et al. (2005) argue that the concept of sensemaking keeps action and cognition together. Central to a sensemaking perspective is how people enact the environments they interpret and constitute their identity within these enactments, shaping how they interpret events, things, phenomena. Identity and identity construction are therefore central to sensemaking.

The goal of a sensemaking perspective is to understand organisational life (Drazin et al., 1999). From this perspective on workplace conflicts, the focus is less on reducing the level of conflicts in the workplace than it is on understanding the processes through which individuals and organisations enact and make sense of them. As with other micro-sociological theories, sensemaking is concerned mostly with the actions of groups and communities (Weick et al., 2005), where it provides a useful framework for understanding how social phenomena, such as conflicts, play out in organisational cultures and group dynamics. Organisational situations dedicated to changing sensemaking are, from the point of view of research,



naturally occurring experiments (Silverman, 2007). Conflict management training, as a form of organisational intervention that aims to transform behaviours around conflicts, provides a unique, naturally occurring, experimental situation. The researched conflict management training took place in a Scandinavian non-profit development organisation, referred to as NGO Plus.

2. METHODOLOGY

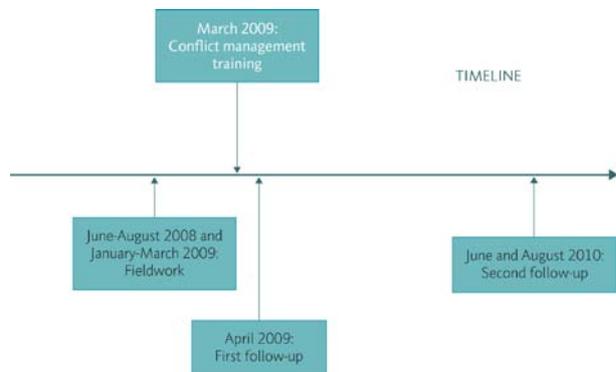
2.1. The setting

NGO Plus works to promote democracy in post-conflict developing countries. Funding comes from the state, represented by the Development Agency as well as private funding agencies. Founded in 1970, NGO Plus employs 30 full time staff members, all of who participated in the study. The average age is 46, mean tenure is eight years, and the majority are female. The organisation has a clerical unit, a fundraising department, and a programme department. The management group, consisting of the three departmental managers and the general secretary, administers NGO Plus.

2.2. Data collection

The data collection was conducted through ethnographic fieldwork (Brewer, 2004; Neyland, 2008; Van Maanen, 1988) over a two-year period (June 2008 to September 2010), including six months full-time fieldwork in NGO Plus (see fig. 1). The fieldwork included several interviews with staff and management (Kvale, 1996; Schensul, 1999; Steyart and Bouwen, 2004), collecting qualitative accounts, and training and on-site participant observation (Bernard, 1994; Waddington, 2004). Following Kolb and Putnam's (1992) view that conflict has a sensitive nature, I chose the method of ethnographic fieldwork to gain participants' trust before conducting interviews and to obtain insight into the daily life of the organisation, as a way of investigating cultural meaning systems encompassing conflicts (Dubinskas, 1992). In total, I conducted 52 individual interviews and four focus-group meetings. Individual interviews lasted from 20 to 75 minutes, and focus-group meetings from 90 to 120 minutes. Interviews addressed issues of community, collaboration, and conflict management in the department/organisation. In the pre-training interviews, participants were asked to bring up any situations that were frustrating them and that involved other staff members. They were encouraged to talk about what had happened and how they had experienced it. Post-training interviews addressed the situations that had been brought up in the pre-training interviews to detect if any changes had occurred.

Fig. 1. Research process timeline



2.3. The conflict management training

The purpose of the 35-hour programme of conflict management was to promote knowledge about conflict resolution and provide training to deal more constructively with conflicts. The training programme was normative: it was considered that providing participants with methods and tools for understanding and working with conflicts would enable a more productive resolution of conflicts. The training programme was presented to 18 of 30 staff members in NGO Plus. All four managers at NGO Plus participated in the training. All staff members who wished to participate in the training were given a place on the course, resulting in participation from all areas of the organisation.

An experienced external trainer, from a local agency, conducted the conflict management training, which included knowledge and skills development in the following areas: defining what conflict is; working with escalation and de-escalation of conflicts; distinguishing between destructive and constructive negotiation styles; reframing the issues in conflict; differentiating between underlying needs versus positions; working with dialogue and active listening; working with phases in mediation and win-win solutions, and negotiating values for the organisation. The training methods alternated between presentation of theory and models as a large group, and exercises in pairs or small groups.

2.4. Data analysis

Using qualitative methodology congruent with phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Van Maanen, 1979) I was able to learn how participants viewed the world by attending to how they talked about it. I acknowledge that my interpretations are not the only possible ones. The analytical strategy focused attention on the empirical materials in terms of changed meanings and enactments of conflicts. After the fieldwork, I thoroughly analysed the interviews, line-by-line, and the field data to uncover as many as possible potentially relevant narratives about conflicts in the empirical



material. I used a narrative approach (Czarniawska, 1998) for analysis to make sense of events and bring them into a meaningful whole. Chronology is used to give logical coherence to events and actions over a time period for the data collection process, thereby giving a temporal scope to a particular narrative, while contextualisation links the narrative to actions and events beyond its immediate scope (across space), thereby embedding the narrative in organisational social dynamics and structure. The narrative approach allows the pursuit of storylines in empirical material. I distinguish between narratives *from* the field, produced by analysing the data and narratives of the field, that are my collection of stories from the organisation members (Czarniawska, 1998).

3. FINDINGS

3.1. From denial to increasing acknowledgement

Generally, conflicts were not talked about in NGO Plus. For staff and management the notion of conflict was heavily associated with violence and war. Conflicts were something that the organisation tried to resolve through its human rights and development work overseas, they were not something that happened in its own backyard. Whenever I tried to get people to talk about conflicts, they would praise the sense of community within the organisation and emphasise colleagues' mutual support. Staff members talked about collaboration in their departments as being more or less conflict-free. Additionally, both staff and management frequently used unifying metaphors of the organisation that conceived it as a family and co-workers as friends, and emphasised narratives of NGO Plus as a horizontally structured organisation with strong values of egalitarianism. The metaphors and the narratives were like a cultural lens (Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005) that served to confirm the organisation's self-image as functioning well without dysfunctional elements such as conflicts. It was not that conflicts were avoided, I was told – conflict just did not happen in this organisation. The denial of conflicts also emphasised that there was no outspoken need in the organisation for training in conflict management. Staff and management, however, were generally interested in participating in the training and explained their interest as wanting to learn more about the nature of conflict due to the kind of work in which the organisation was engaged abroad.

Everyone in NGO Plus knew about my role as a researcher and that the organisation would participate in conflict-management training; nevertheless I was assured, more than once, that I had chosen the wrong organisation as my research site if conflicts were my object of study.

However, I gradually realised that whenever staff and management *did* talk about the subject of conflicts happening in their organisation, they would use particular cultural codes such as *frictions* to describe tensions and clashes between people. In contrast with the negative connotations they attached to conflicts, frictions were more tractable and much more harmless. Due to the preponderance of the family metaphor and the organisational values of egalitarianism, they were an accepted way of making sense of the tensions and clashes that occurred between people: staff and management interpreted these as something they could work around in daily working life. While *frictions* was a euphemism for conflicts in NGO Plus, this dynamic also emphasises how sensemaking of conflict is shaped by the social structures and cultures where it occurs. Although the euphemism created access to studying conflicts in NGO Plus, staff and management primarily conceptualised these frictions as certain individuals' personal problems.

A year after the conflict management training, staff and management had changed their way of making sense of conflicts. The change showed incremental acknowledgement of conflicts as something that *does* occur in NGO Plus: "One probably sees it more as conflicts than one would have done before" a staff member said in a focus-group interview. With the changing belief that conflict is not always synonymous with violence and war, staff and management at NGO Plus had begun to develop a broader idea of what the term conflict comprises. "Viewing conflicts, not only negatively, but rather viewing conflicts as being resolvable", another staff member said in the focus-group interview, as a summary of the changes that had occurred. Moreover, a manager said that it was when she worked with a particular training exercise that she realised a certain level of conflict always exists in organisations:

"Well, I remember in the last part of the training where we worked through an exercise about the latent level of conflict, which exists in all organisations. I suppose in a way this is healthy as long as it remains deep down. For me this has been a tool to say to myself 'ooh, don't be so afraid of conflicts'. It's okay that conflicts occur when we meet each other and see things differently".

The manager talks about how she tries to deal with her fear of conflict by acknowledging "the latent level of conflict" present in all organisations. For her, the latent level of conflict assumes that different people inevitably have disagreements and conflicts. She accepts that conflicts exist in NGO Plus, as long they remain deep down, underneath the organisational surface, which emphasises her sustained fear of conflict. This fear stems from uncertainties about how to deal with conflicts: "But we must also face the fact that, although many of us participated in the training we simply don't know how to resolve conflicts", a staff member



said in another focus-group interview. While broadening their understanding of conflicts, staff and management increasingly acknowledged conflicts as being inevitable when people work together, gradually toning down their concept of frictions as being attributable to certain individuals' personal problems. Interestingly, over the course of the study, those individuals significantly changed their behaviour in conflicts.

3.2. From personality deficiency to interdependent and embedded relationships

Frictions in NGO Plus were mainly conceptualised as being about personal differences and incompatibilities between staff members and termed as, "bad chemistry between individuals". In this way of making sense of frictions, staff and management pointed to the odd personalities ascribed to certain staff members as the problem. Because these individuals could not get along with everyone else, they were regarded as the black sheep in the organisation. Frictions between the black sheep and others were cyclical and repetitive in nature and would go on for years. Given that management essentially regarded such frictions as personality problems, frictions were considered both unavoidable and very difficult to resolve. "These sorts of frictions will always be here, it's a matter of working around them", one manager said. Management's approach to dealing with these frictions was typically through one-to-one talks with the problematic personality involved, trying to help this individual be less problematic. More often than not, however, the parties involved were left to deal with the problems themselves.

One example is the frictions between a clerk and a fundraiser. Every time they had to communicate about tasks to be processed between them it ended in friction. The fundraiser saw the clerk as a support person, who was there to help her process administrative tasks. In contrast, the clerk felt that the fundraiser's way of communicating signalled non-appreciation of her work effort. Moreover, the fundraiser always turned up in the clerk's office expecting administrative assistance to be performed right away, which the clerk felt showed the fundraiser's lack of respect for her work. The clerk, sensitive to being taken for granted, often refused to help the fundraiser and claimed that she was busy with other work. "You are not first in line here and if you so urgently need me to help you today, you should have asked me yesterday", the clerk would say without hiding her resentment. Such remarks made the fundraiser angry and would only make her stand even more rigorously on her right to administrative assistance. Usually these episodes ended with the clerk verbally dismissing the fundraiser from her office.

A year after the training in conflict management, both the clerk and the fundraiser independently noted that their relationship had changed, mainly, they claimed, because

the training had made them aware of their ways of communicating. Gradually, both realised that they had a mutual responsibility for having kept the conflict going by not having communicated respectfully with each other. For example, in stressful situations likely to turn into conflicts because the clerk was busy when the fundraiser asked her to do something, the clerk now tried to tell the fundraiser, gently, that she did not have time to help her now. "I think twice before saying anything to her now, and I really don't want our communication to end up in the wrong" the clerk said, "I want us to have a collaborative relationship". As an alternative, the clerk would suggest that she could help the fundraiser the next day, as a way of maintaining a positive relationship. As far as the fundraiser and her peers had been concerned, problems with the clerk were entirely within her personality. But now the fundraiser saw their relationship differently.

Although the organisation had a self-image of being horizontally structured, an invisible system (Gadlin, 1994) of hierarchy placed the fundraising group above the clerical workers: "I have to consider that, in the hierarchy, I am placed above her", the fundraiser said. Despite the narratives of being an egalitarian organisation, the fundraiser acknowledged that her relationship with the clerk was embedded within the broader processes of cultural life in NGO Plus, which in reality meant that different occupational groups had different status. In situations with the clerk, the fundraiser therefore realised that the way she asked for administrative assistance mattered greatly.

Their changed sensemaking about the conflicts meant different things for the clerk and the fundraiser. While the clerk became aware of their actions in conflict situations being interdependent, the fundraiser realised how their relationship was embedded in social structures. Although both continued to hold grievances towards each other, they had invented new meanings for past conflicts that made it difficult for each to locate faults with the other. Exemplified by the conflict between the clerk and the fundraiser, some conflicts in NGO Plus changed from being conceptualised as certain individuals' personality problems to embracing a more relational and contextual perspective on conflicts. But the changes in the conflict between the clerk and the fundraiser were also shaped by changes going on in broader conflicts between groups in the organisation, which emphasised the clerk-fundraiser conflict's entanglement with another conflict at the collective level in the organisation.

3.3. From an identity of subordination to active resistance

In NGO Plus, staff and management metaphorically saw the organisation as a family, and emphasised egalitarian organisational values. The clerical workers however, did not see themselves as an equal part of this family. They felt



that some members of staff and management acted as if the clerical workers were only there to serve them. People outside the unit would turn up in the clerical unit and expect instant administrative assistance, which made the clerical workers feel that they were not in charge of their own work. Furthermore, people outside the unit expected the clerical workers to take care of tasks such as arranging meetings and receptions, and set up courier services and transportation – tasks that, although commonly termed services, were accounted for as just the clerical workers being nice. Although the clerical workers had been steadily assigned more tasks that had nothing to do with supporting people outside the unit, they still felt a service image cast its shadow upon their contribution to the organisation.

Given that the clerical workers' performance in service tasks was neither recognised nor appreciated, they felt such tasks were invisible work that only took time away from activities that "counted". Despite communications to the rest of NGO Plus, emphasising that the clerical unit no longer had the resources to offer its range of services, some members of staff and management outside the unit still expected the clerical workers "to be at their disposal", as the clerical manager explained. This created a lot of frustration and irritation among the clerical workers because they felt that their work was not as important or equally valued as other types of work carried out in the organisation. Essentially, the clerical workers felt inferior to the other occupational groups in NGO Plus.

The clerical workers did not openly express their feelings of inferiority, but in private expressed their resentment at being taken for granted, which intimately tied their identity of being clerical workers to a collective experience of subordination in the organisational hierarchy. From the outside, tolerance and avoidance constituted the clerical workers' way of dealing with these frictions, which could explain why most staff and management from the other departments viewed their relationship to the clerical unit as positive.

A year after the training, it was evident that the clerical workers had acquired a new attitude when people outside the unit expected them to perform service tasks and expected instant administrative assistance. They had begun to respond through active resistance by explicitly refusing to comply with such requests. One clerk explained it as a process where "we are better at confining ourselves. I think that people, little by little, seem to know what they can and can't ask of us. I also think that we are no longer so irritated". In the process, the clerical workers had discovered that explicit refusals to perform service tasks and instant administrative assistance gave them more time to do the tasks that were accounted for in their job descriptions.

The clerical workers retrospectively used the training elements on conflict escalation and de-escalation as an extracted cue to help them decide on an acceptable explanation for enacting active resistance. Weick (1995) argues

that extracted cues are "simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (p. 50), and which help them decide what information is relevant. Through the theory of escalation and de-escalation of conflicts, the clerical workers realised that they themselves could prevent grievances and feelings of irritation by "nipping the matter in the bud, before conflicts about service tasks would escalate and create tensions", a clerk explained. They used the theory of conflict escalation and de-escalation to redraft a narrative of legitimacy for refusing to perform service tasks and give instant administrative assistance.

Feelings of being taken for granted constrained the identity of being clerical workers because it meant that they essentially only had value through supporting other people in the organisation. Their enactment of active resistance was about negotiating a clerical identity as more than a service provider – that is, as an occupational group in their own right. In particular, they had begun to emphasise the importance of meeting deadlines for their work. One morning when a clerk came into work, a staff member from another department was waiting for her at her desk claiming that he needed her support immediately. She said that he would have to wait until she had gone through her morning routines, which made him feel annoyed and try to persuade her to leave her routines until after she had helped him. She would not give way however, and told him that if she did not get on with her morning routines, others could not get on with their jobs. The staff member ended up leaving the office in annoyance, but the clerk felt satisfied that she had not given in to his demands, because it was important for her and for everyone in NGO Plus that she got through these routines first thing in the morning.

When the clerical workers enact active resistance they meet resistance from people outside the unit as they realise that they cannot always expect the clerical workers to give instant assistance. The clerical workers know that conflict levels may rise when they enact active resistance. But something more important is at stake here: claiming respect for the clerical work area and challenging the status quo in NGO Plus. Enacting active resistance is their collective way of dealing with grievances. "We help and support each other in saying no to carrying out tasks that we don't have time for or that we don't think are our responsibility", one clerk said. The shared focus among the clerical workers highlights how sensemaking is inherently social. The clerical workers look to each other to get advice and support, which positions them collectively as they individually negotiate in frictions with people outside the unit. They moreover feel that they act on behalf of the whole group when they enact active resistance. For the clerical workers, the conflict-management training signified a distinct shift in sensemaking of conflicts. Rather than identifying themselves with subordination in the organisational hierarchy, they now actively try to claim that their work is equal to that of other staff members.



3.4. Conflicts resolved?

Another friction, conceptualised in NGO Plus as being about personal differences between individuals, involved two collaborating fundraisers that would not acknowledge each other's way of doing the job. There was continuous friction over the power to decide right from wrong in work procedures and their exchanges frequently led to frustration. After the conflict-management training, both fundraisers noted that, through the training elements of dialogue and active listening, they had gained a shared language to use in difficult situations, and that they were better at discussing things they disagreed about without taking it personally and getting annoyed with each other. One of the fundraisers said, "Now we are better at saying 'well okay, now we have this disagreement so what do we do now?' You know, ask more questions to find out what she really thinks rather than making an early conclusion on something that we really don't know, but we think we know". Although they feel that they are now better at managing their frictions, they are still ambiguous about whether this common language of dialogue really resolves anything. The fundraisers do not experience any change in what each perceives to be the core of the friction, which is that they disagree about how the job should be done. Despite improvements in communications, friction continues to occur between the two and is still conceptualised as being about personal differences, despite the training.

To understand the lack of change in how some frictions were made sense of, we need to look at the collective level of the organisation. We find the roots of the friction in the relationship between staff and management at NGO Plus, and how that relationship is shaped by structures beyond the organisation's control sphere. Ongoing conflicts about staff general complaints with management were attributed as being due to management not being sufficiently clear about the organisation's strategy, direction or leadership. These conflicts were played out particularly in the programme and fundraising departments.

In the fundraising department, when it came to prioritising tasks and goal achievement, the staff found the manager lacking, but no one confronted her with their grievances. She, however, was aware that there was a problem but perceived it as a result of the organisation's funding system, where the entry of neo-liberal political ideals had forced non-profit organisations to fulfil certain conditions to obtain funding from the Development Agency. The manager regarded this compliance with external conditions as "a constant pressure affecting the social climate in NGO Plus, particularly the ways in which people behave towards one another". Accordingly this "pressure" was manifestly to blame for conflicts erupting between people, highlighting management's conceptualisation of conflicts as being mainly an interpersonal phenomenon.

A year after the training, the fundraising manager talked about how, in several critical situations with her staff, she has tried to apply some of the theory from the training, only to experience that the theory did not work as it was supposed to: "I make an effort to de-escalate critical situations but on many occasions people do not join me in my attempts". The quote shows sustained sensemaking of conflicts as an interpersonal phenomenon, because it is in situations between individuals that the manager has tried to apply tools for conflict de-escalation. Additionally however, the manager acknowledges that her workload is spread over too many tasks, not sufficiently prioritising tasks to do with leadership. To understand the lack of leadership in NGO Plus, we need to look at the organisation's social and structural context.

The last decade's trend for neo-liberal political ideals in the funding system has led to commercialisation of the NGO sector, which has pushed the NGO Plus managerial practices in a new direction. Whereas the organisation used to engage itself only in activities concerning aid and development, it now also has to be engaged in marketing and branding to raise funds. In NGO Plus, this broadening of managerial practice and focus has only reinforced the staff's needs for direction and leadership. Over the course of the study, however, the staff saw no changes: management's lack of leadership and failure to meet staff needs for direction and leadership continued to form trajectories of conflicts at various levels of the organisation. Given that the training course in conflict management did not deal with how conflicts can be built into organisational structures, the ongoing conflict between staff and management in NGO Plus was not explicitly addressed either during the training or in the months that followed. For the two disputing fundraisers the lack of leadership means that it is up to them to decide the direction and strategy for their team, resulting in continuing disagreement about the right one. While this illustrates how, in some conflicts in NGO Plus, overemphasis continued to be on interpersonal conflict management, conflicts that were not appropriately placed within their particular social and structural context by staff and management only changed marginally.

CONCLUSION

The case study highlights the understudied dimension of change outcomes resulting from conflict-management training in the workplace. The conclusion from the study is twofold.

First, in conflicts where structural changes ensued from the training, the training worked as a catalyst for different sensemaking of conflicts. For example, among some staff members involved in conflicts, training changed this sensemaking from being about personality deficiency in individuals to being more about shared communication



responsibilities. Participants' changed sensemaking also saw conflicts as being embedded in intergroup hierarchies, an organisational dynamic that similarly underwent changes following the training. Changes particularly consisted of the clerical workers enacting active resistance to claim that their work was equal to that of other staff members. Conflicts that continued to be conceptualised as individual or interpersonal problems, however, only changed marginally. This was illustrated through the interpersonal conflict between two fundraisers, was deeply embedded in a structural conditioned conflict between staff and management, in which no changes were observed in the year that followed the conflict-management training.

At the organisational level, staff and management incidentally changed their sensemaking of conflicts as being associated with war and violence to acknowledging conflicts as inevitable organisational processes that can potentially be resolved. The change was illustrated by how staff and management began talking about conflicts in NGO Plus. One interpretation of this change is that conflict had become more widespread since the training. However, the ethnographic method employed in this case study shows that this change concerned new ways of framing and understanding conflicts in NGO Plus, emphasising increasing acknowledgement of conflicts rather than increasing prevalence of conflicts. Had the study only measured the level of conflict before and after the training course, the results would have shown more conflicts after the course, because they were rarely framed as such before.

Second, focusing explicitly on meanings and the processes of change resulting from conflict-management

training, this study contributes to the strand on conflicts and negotiation in organisations made using an interpretive epistemology (e.g. Bartunek et al., 1992; Collier, 2009; Friedman, 1992; Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005; Gadlin, 1994; Kolb and McGinn, 2009; Morrill, 1989; Putnam, 2004). Using insights from Weick's theory of organisational sensemaking to show how different people attach different meanings to conflict, this study offers a more holistic view of conflicts in organisations. Insights from the study call attention to how conflicts are embedded, by showing how they occur and are entangled across organisational levels and with the organisational cultural system and broader societal structures that create conditions for actions that lead to conflicts. Indeed, through its interpretive framework, the paper has shown that conflict and the meanings that staff and management attach to it is part of the social fabric in organisations, giving weight to a more complex understanding of how conflict management operates in organisations.

Practical implications of the study are that trainers in conflict management are recommended to give much more weight to the cultural and structural dimensions of conflict – how conflicts are built into organisational structures and are shaped by organisational cultures – and organisational-level conflict management, when putting training programmes together. Conflict-management training elements that deal with conflict framing, communication, and techniques for managing interpersonal relationships could be enriched with more attention on power analyses (Hansen, 2008) and organisational influences on conflict. ■

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About the author

Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen
 Enm.ioa@cbs.dk

Elisabeth Naima Mikkelsen is a PhD candidate at the Department of Organization, Copenhagen Business School and the National Research Centre for the Working Environment. Her research focuses on ethnography, conflicts management and well-being in organisations.



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