

How Workload Influences Conflict with Team Members: The Perspective of Conservation of Resources Theory

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Abstract: Workload overload has gradually become the norm in the workplace, and the platform transformation of organizational structure emphasizes the division of labor and cooperation but also accompanies the conflict within team members. Based on the conservation of resources theory, this paper proposes a model for how employee workload affects individual interactions with colleagues. We argue that employees' workload will increase their conflict with their team members, the two dimensions of inter-team conflict -- task conflict and relationship conflict. Furthermore, we propose that team trust will moderate these relationships. This paper broadens the research perspective focusing on the formation mechanism of conflict with team members and provides an action guide for management practice.

Keywords: Conservation of resources theory, Relationship conflict, Task conflict, Team trust, Workload.

1. Introduction

The tense situation of industry competition forces all enterprises and institutions to put the output benefit in the first place of strategic layout, and the workload has increasingly become one of the important pressure sources in the modern work scene. In recent years, the specific manifestation of workload overload is the "996" work system most prevailing in Internet enterprises (i.e., daily work time continues from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., and employees need to work six days a week)[1]. "996" is essentially a deformed overtime culture in the guise of strivers. It has been criticized by many mainstream media. In March 2021, it is emphasized that labor time should be strictly regulated[2]. In August 2021, typical illegal cases of overtime work were issued[3]. Although the "996" wave has been restrained under public outcry and supervision intervention, the phenomenon of heavy workload as an important inducement of work stress and job burnout has not changed. According to Zhaopin.com's 2021 Report on the Work Stress of China's white-collar Workers, 41 percent of white-collar workers have high work pressure, and 83 percent of them are under great pressure because of many tasks they have to deal with in the short term. Previous studies have shown that excessive work pressure will directly have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of employees, such as decreased immune function, loss of appetite[4], and emotional exhaustion[5]. According to a WHO study published in the journal *Environment International* in May 2021, more than 100,000 people die from overwork every year worldwide. Excessive work pressure will also indirectly cause adverse effects on employees' work performance, such as reduced satisfaction[6], weakened attention[7], and an increased sense of burnout[8]. Because of this, more and more organizations pay attention to pressure management and emphasize people-oriented approaches to ensure the healthy development of employees and organizations.

Currently, information technology, cloud computing, big data, and artificial intelligence drive industrial transformation into the era of Industry 4.0[9], with dynamic adjustment of organizational structure. In the traditional organizational structure, the command chain that descends from the top to

the base gradually loses efficiency, and the organization emphasizes the role of a project team or team in achieving organizational goals[10]. For example, the internal business incubation platform of Haier Group is created by the entrepreneurial team group. This business incubation platform can quickly convert the core advantages of the enterprise in supply, research, production, and sales into platform value. It helps incubate and cultivate the business, and then the business feedback mechanism is used to achieve the overall growth of performance [11]. The organizational structure of the particle, flat, and team type is flexible, efficient, and has obvious advantages. However, it especially emphasizes teamwork spirit and division of labor and cooperation. If team members disagree with each other or have tense relations, it is easy to lead to team conflict [12]. Previous studies have explored conflict at the team level, namely, team conflict. There are many types of team conflicts, and there are corresponding transformation processes and conditions between different types of team conflicts [13]. Researches argue that team conflicts matters to team performance/efficacy [14], team cohesion [15], team creativity [16], etc. Team conflicts are generated from interpersonal conflicts among team members. Hence, to identify why team conflicts appear, we should first know why an individual employee may have a conflict with his or her colleagues. Therefore, this study focuses on the conflict between one focal employee and his/her team members, rather than the conflict at the team level, namely, team conflict. However, the research on team conflict is also of importance for the logical reasoning and model-building of this study.

On one hand, the current heavy workload reality makes individuals burn out and lose resources for keeping good interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, organizations prefer to group employees into the team to achieve goals through the team setting needs employees who are sophisticated in interpersonal interactions. Taking these two aspects together, we would like to ask the following key questions: Will increased workload exacerbate conflict with team members? How to scientifically explain the impact path of one employee's workload on his/her conflict with team members? Are there any boundary conditions among these relationships? However, few studies can answer the above

questions well. Therefore, this paper attempts to propose a theoretical model that depicts how employee workload affects one's interaction with teammates, namely task conflict with teammates and relationship conflict with teammates. Based on the conservation of resource theory, we argue that a heavy workload consumes individual resources, raising more task conflict and relationship conflict with teammates. Furthermore, based on the conservation of resources theory, we propose that team trust will moderate these relationships in such a way that strong team trust can weak the positive relationship between workload and conflicts with teammates. Our model offers suggestions for managers, especially on how to manage long-term internal pressure management and conflict management.

2. Theoretical Basis and Research Hypothesis

2.1. Conservation of Resources Theory

The core content of the conservation of resources theory is that most individuals tend to protect, maintain or create beneficial resources, and any potential or existing resource depletion will pose a threat to them and transfer pressure[17]. Among them, the basic definition of "resource" is the materials, characteristics, conditions, and energy that an individual considers valuable for its utilization, and the ways and methods to obtain the above materials, characteristics, conditions, and energy[17]. Overall, the definition of "resource" can be things perceived by individuals in the process of achieving goals[18].

According to the conservation of resources theory, individual stress may be caused by the loss of resources at the perceptual level and the objective level. It can also be caused when there is no net increase in resources (effort without reward)[17,18]. The theory further points out that individuals will have the motivation to minimize the net loss of resources after the emergence of stressful situations and strengthen the preservation or protection of existing resources[19]. After years of testing, enrichment, and development, the conservation of resources theory has become increasingly mature and has been widely used in psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, and other fields. For example, the perspective of conservation of resources theory is used to explain how psychological capital negatively influences employee turnover intention[18], why the superior-subordinate relationship is related to employee voice behavior[19], and how workplace satisfaction boosts employee organizational citizenship behavior[20]. This study essentially explores the individual reaction to potential or actual workplace stress, and the conservation of resources theory reveals the reason for the creation of the pressure situation and individual reactions to the pressure situation. Therefore, the conservation of resources theory is an important cornerstone that explains the relationship between workload and conflict with team members.

2.2. The Impact of Workload on Conflict with Team Members

Workload refers to the work intensity endured by individuals in a specific period[21]. Workload has been recognized by many scholars as an important indicator of employee emotional exhaustion and job burnout[8]. There is still no conclusion on the correlation between workload and job performance. It is generally believed that when employees

are in a state of low workload or overload, their work performance is at a low level, and only when the workload is controlled within a reasonable threshold range, their work performance is at a high level. That is, there is an inverted U-shaped curve relationship between the two. However, other scholars believe that workload and job performance are negatively correlated, positively correlated, or even irrelevant. According to Zhao Xiuqing[22], the differences in the type and connotation of resources of the working pressure measurement scale and the standards of a sample, as well as the neglect of the internal structure of working pressure, are the important reasons for the above differences. In addition, studies on teachers, civil servants, medical staff, and other professions have found that workload has a positive effect on emotional exhaustion, job burnout, and turnover intention, and a negative effect on job satisfaction[23]. Self-efficacy, perceived organizational support, and other boundary factors play a moderating effect[24].

Conflicts are manifested as differences of opinion, opposites of views, tension in relations, and other processes, which generally cover the three levels of individuals, groups, and organizations. The conflicts among team members are the embodiment of conflicts at the individual level, resulting from the differences in goals, interests, approaches, and other aspects perceived by team members[12]. The research on team conflict focuses on two aspects: dimension division and internal transformation of team conflict. Guetzkow and Gry[25] divided team conflict into task conflict and relationship conflict. The former is caused by team members' task-related differences in work content and results, while the latter is caused by team members' task-irrelevant differences in personal interests and personality. Through empirical tests, Jehn[26] et al. further pointed out the existence of process conflict, which focuses on personnel selection, responsibility implementation, resource allocation and other issues related to task realization approaches. Passos[27] et al. believe that process conflict is a branch of task conflict, and the boundary between them is fuzzy, so it is unnecessary to discuss it separately. In order to facilitate the follow-up research, this paper divided the conflicts among team members into two dimensions according to the views of Passos et al. As for the internal transformation of team conflict, Pelled[28] found that task conflict and relationship conflict can be transformed into each other. There are two possible ways underlying the transformation between task conflict and relationship conflict. First, when the rational opinions on the tasks do not get agreement, it is inevitable that interpersonal conflicts will take place, and vice versa. Second, team members may perceive the task conflict as a personal attack, and vice versa. Team reflexivity[29], team heterogeneity[30], team cohesion[31], and other factors play a moderating role in the internal transformation process of team conflict. A large number of studies have explored the impact of team conflict. Numerous studies show that team conflict can influence team performance/efficacy, team creativity, and other outcomes. There are still different opinions on the impact of team conflict on team performance/effectiveness. Since task conflict has a significant problem-oriented feature, the thought collision of "contention of a hundred schools of thought" among team members is conducive to the proposal of constructive ideas and the promotion of substantive tasks. Thus, task conflict should improve team performance and enhance team effectiveness. This conclusion has also been confirmed by several studies. For example, Hao Jinlei and Yin

Meng[32] found that task conflict is positively correlated with team performance, while relationship conflict is negatively correlated with team performance, and team communication has a complete mediating effect. However, there are still some research results contrary to it. It is believed that task conflict is not constructive to solve key problems[33]. To this, some scholars pointed out that boundary conditions should be taken into consideration so that we can better deal with the relationship between task conflict and team performance[34]. For example, Bradley[35] investigated 117 teams and proposed that when team members are extroverted or emotionally stable, task conflict is beneficial for team performance. When team members are introverted or emotionally volatile, task conflict is harmful to team performance. Hence, the differences in personality and emotional states of team members are among the boundary conditions. As for the research on the impact of team conflict on team creativity, some scholars have demonstrated that there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between task conflict and team creativity, and there is a negative linear relationship between relationship conflict and team creativity[36]. Some scholars have made explorations of the causes of team conflict. From the perspective of the internal characteristics of the team, Pelled[28] et al. pointed out that the difference or diversity of team members is the main cause of team conflict, that is, the team conflict is to a greater extent caused by the differences in gender, age, race, and educational background of the team members. This view was verified by Han[37] et al. Zhu Yue[38] et al. found that differences in team power distribution are highly correlated with team conflict, and procedural justice plays a fully mediating role in the underlying mechanism. From the perspective of the external environment of the team, the turbulence of the economic base and superstructure (such as the adjustment of economic policies, the change of social concepts, etc.) will add uncertainty and aggravate the conflict within the team. This study focuses on the conflict with team members at the individual level. Previous studies on team conflict, especially on the dependent variables before team conflict, can also give enlightenment.

Efficient promotion of team tasks results from good cooperation. When the workload increases, achieving the work target as scheduled becomes the priority for individuals in the team. Team members have to invest more knowledge, skills, time, energy, and other elements to communicate and coordinate with teammates on the specific content of the work, project solutions, personnel responsibility allocation, and other issues to reach a consensus as soon as possible. According to the loss-first principle of the conservation of resources theory, without organizational support, an individual is prone to feel threatened by the impending or ongoing loss of energy resources, which is far more rapid and lasting than the impact of resource acquisition. Hence, the workload is accompanied by stress reactions such as depression and burnout[17]. Thus, driven by resource net loss minimization motivation, individuals will take active measures to prevent the knowledge, skill, time, energy, and other energy resources potential or actual loss, the crash claptrap, unwilling to efforts such as negative "lie flat" behavior, such as sleeping during work time, fry, etc., and no mood to exchange views with the other members. This creates a favorable environment for task conflict with teammates. In addition, the energy resources of individuals are limited, when team members have to consume a lot of time, energy,

and other energy resources on work achievements without resource supplement and acquisition, they barely have time to participate in the chat, sports, and other social activities to strengthen the interpersonal ties, it provides a good opportunity for relationship conflict with teammates. Therefore, this paper puts forward the following hypotheses:

H1a: Workload positively affects task conflict with teammates;

H1b: Workload positively affects relationship conflict with teammates.

2.3. The Moderating Effect of Team Trust

Trust refers to the psychological bond gradually formed based on the principle of mutual nonaggression between the trusting party and the trusted party. In this study, we focus on trust among teammates, namely team trust. Because of the existence of team trust, there is no need for coercive means such as command, supervision, and control to intervene[39]. According to the results of the meta-analysis, De Dreu[40] et al. pointed out that team trust reduces the correlation between task conflict and relationship conflict to a certain extent and inhibits the mutual transformation between them. Simons and Peterson[41] found that in "stranger teams" (i.e., low-trust teams at the beginning of the establishment), when members disagree and argue about work content or methods, self-interested attribution bias tend to process objective information into aggressive language, thus accelerating the transition from task conflict to relationship conflict. However, this phenomenon is rarely seen in "acquaintance teams" (i.e., high-trust teams in the middle and late stages of creation). Studies also find that team trust works as a boundary condition for the relationship between state empathy and employee helping behavior[42], between time pressure and employee innovation behavior[43], and between authorization from superior and employee silence behavior[44], etc. According to the theory of resource preservation, task conflict and relationship conflict are largely caused by cognitive or objective resource loss. In other words, reducing or avoiding resource depletion will help limit the impact of workload on conflict with team members. Studies have shown that highly trusted team members tend to help each other, and a solid psychological connection is conducive to promoting resource sharing among members[39]. Specifically, in a full trust team, when a member's working load increases, other members who have fewer tasks or have completed tasks will consciously share key resources such as knowledge and skills with him/her, and even take the initiative to share the workload with him/her. This circumstance helps the focal team member reduce or avoid resource depletion, and thus weaken or eliminate the negative effect of workload. Team members not only have sufficient energy resources for communication and coordination in the workplace but also can manage their resources for social activities outside the workplace, which means, team members can invest more time and energy in the improvement of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the probability of task conflict and relationship conflict can be reduced under the buffer of team trust. Therefore, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H2a: Team Trust negatively moderates the correlation between workload and task conflict with team members in such a way that the relationship is stronger when team trust is low and weaker when team trust is high;

H2b: Team Trust negatively moderates the correlation

between workload and relationship conflict with team members in such a way that the relationship is stronger when team trust is low and weaker when team trust is high.

Based on the above assumptions, the theoretical model is constructed as shown in Figure 1.

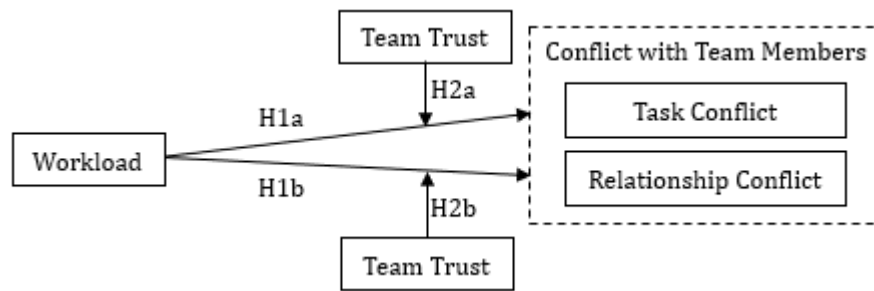


Figure 1. Theoretical model

3. Conclusion

The main conclusions of this study are as follows. The compression of time and energy of employees by excessive workload is essentially the loss of energy resources of employees at subjective and objective levels. The motivation of minimizing net loss of resources will drive employees to defend themselves so that it negatively deals with interpersonal interactions, and positively stimulates task and relationship conflicts among team members. Team trust is conducive to promoting resource sharing among team members, it can inhibit resource loss and the negative effects of workload.

The theoretical contributions of this study are as follows. First, it draws on the research framework of team conflict to expand the scientific understanding of the antecedent variables of conflict with team members at the individual level. Existing studies focus on the outcome variables of team conflict, while the antecedent variables of inter-team conflict are less explored. Limited by the main factors such as heterogeneity and identity of team members, they fail to give a comprehensive answer to the questions including "What causes inter-team conflict?", "How do factors other than 'people' influence the conflict with team members?". This study identifies workload as the antecedent variable of conflict with teammates. It broadens the research perspective focusing on the formation mechanism of inter-team conflict. Second, it extends the literature on the outcome results of workload. Existing studies focus on exploring the impact of workload on employees' own health status and performance. This study argues that workload can lead to conflict with team members, not only task perspective but also interpersonal perspective.

This study also provides some management implications. For example, managers can promote job redesign to balance organizational performance with employee relations through the appropriate workload. Moreover, organizations should provide more support for their employees and weaken the negative impact of perceived resource depletion on employees' stress and conflict. Managers can also strengthen emotional connections among team members to enhance team trust perceptions.

This study contains limitations that can be solved in future research. First, our proposal remains in the stage of theoretical model building. Future studies can empirically test our model. Second, we leverage the team conflict framework to propose our individual-level model. Are there other forms of conflict between an individual and his/her teammate? Future studies can also benefit from discussing more details in interpersonal

conflicts. Third, future studies can also benefit from exploring other boundary conditions such as leadership style, member characteristics, and organizational environment.

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