The influence of conflict management styles on relationship quality: The moderating effect of the level of task conflict

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Abstract

Conflicts between owners and contractors in the construction industry will greatly affect their relationship quality, thereby affecting the performance of the project. This study aims to examine the relation between conflict management styles and relationship quality and the moderating effect of the level of task conflict on the relation between conflict management styles and relationship quality. Drawing on data from 165 questionnaires distributed to owners and contractors in the construction industry, multiple regressions were used to test the hypotheses. The research results show that the integrating style is positively related to relationship quality, whereas the compromising style is negatively related to relationship quality. In addition, with an increase in the level of task conflict, the positive effect of the obliging style on relationship quality will be weakened and the positive effect of the avoiding style will be strengthened.

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Keywords: Conflict; Conflict management styles; Relationship quality; Level of task conflict

1. Introduction

The stakeholders involved in construction projects include owners, contractors, designers, supervisors, and so on. People have gradually realized that stakeholders in construction projects play a vital role in project success (Meng, 2007). Managing the relationship among stakeholders is an effective way to improve the performance of construction projects (Xu and Ren, 2010). In the relationship between stakeholders, the relationship between the owner and the contractor is the most important relationship (Meng, 2012). A deterioration in the relationship between the two is likely to lead to the poor performance of the project, such as cost overruns, schedule delays, quality defects or poor satisfaction on the part of stakeholders (Meng, 2012). Resolving conflict properly is an effective way of improving the relationship quality between the owner and the contractor (Xu and Ren, 2010).

Conflict management styles are important antecedents of relationship quality between owners and contractors. Failure to manage and control conflict between the two sides will cause the deterioration of the relationship quality and lead to further escalation of the conflict. Thus, conflict and relationship quality form a vicious cycle due to mismanagement of the conflict (Jelodar et al., 2015a). Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to study the influence of different conflict management styles on relationship quality (Jelodar and Yiu, 2012a). Often, conflict between owners and contractors cannot be avoided due to the high complexity and uncertainty of construction projects (Li et al., 2015). The owner and the contractor both have their own goals and there is strong interest competition between them (Randeree and El Faramawy, 2011). According to contingency theory, conflict must be managed effectively to ensure a positive outcome (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Only in this way can a good relationship between the two sides be created, contributing to the ultimate success of the project (Sunindijo and Hadikusumo, 2014). So the first research problem of this study is: how do conflict management styles influence the relationship quality between the owner and the contractor?
relationship quality between the owner and the contractor at the inter-organization level?

Scholars have tended to focus on the choice of conflict management styles (Antonioni, 1998) or the effect of conflict management styles on project performance (Prieto-Remón et al., 2015) in research on conflict management styles. Thus, they ignore a critical factor, namely the level of conflict. Existing research shows that the effectiveness of the specific conflict management style changes with different levels of conflict (Andrews and Tjosvold, 1983; Xie et al., 1998), that is, the extent of the positive effect of the specific conflict management style on the outcome variables will vary with the level of conflict.

However the influence of conflict in organizations is complex and may be positive or negative depending on the type of conflict and conflict management styles (Liu and Liu, 2008). Conflict can be divided into two categories: task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict includes task inconsistency and may promote the completion of the goal. In contrast, relationship conflict includes emotional or personal problems, which may have a bad effect on the relationship between the two sides (Liu and Zhai, 2010). Although many studies have shown a strong correlation between task conflict and relationship conflict, their effects on relationship quality differ, so it is necessary to distinguish between the two (Chen and Zhao, 2010). This study only focuses on task conflict because relationship conflict reduces project performance and the satisfaction of stakeholders and thus should be avoided (Jung and Lee, 2015). Also, an appropriate level of task conflict and the application of appropriate management styles can be beneficial for organizational efficiency (Weider-Hatfield and Hatfield, 1995). Based on the above, the second research problem of this study is: how does the level of task conflict moderate the relation between conflict management styles and the relationship quality?

So the first objective of this study is to explore the effect of different conflict management styles on relationship quality between the owner and the contractor at the inter-organization level. The second objective of this study is to investigate the moderating effect of the level of task conflict on the influence. This study tested the relation between conflict management styles and relationship quality empirically. Based on this, this study tested the moderating effect of the level of task conflict in the relation between conflict management styles and relationship quality from a theoretical perspective. This study has the potential to help project managers on both sides (owner and contractor) manage project conflict better in practice, enabling them to develop a good relationship and thus contributing to the ultimate success of the project.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical background

The concept of relationship quality comes from customer retention in the marketing industry. It concerns the state of the relationship between channel partners based on past trading experience. It can be regarded as the overall evaluation or perception of both sides of the transaction concerning the state of the relationship between the two sides (Dong and Zhuang, 2012). In recent years, the concept of relationship quality has been introduced to the construction industry to evaluate the state of the relationship between the two sides (Jelodar et al., 2015b). This study primarily considers relationship quality between owners and contractors, which is the overall evaluation or perception of the state of the relationship between the two sides. Conflict management styles affect relationship quality between the two sides (Jelodar and Yiu, 2012b).

This study adopts the dual concern model of Rahim (2010), in accordance with care of the self and others. It includes five kinds of conflict management style: integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating and avoiding. The organizer must know the effective way of dealing with conflict in different situations. Also, different conflict management styles may be appropriate in different situations. If the style can enhance the effectiveness of individuals, groups or organizations, it can be viewed as a win-win style (Rahim, 2010). Research on interpersonal conflict in the construction industry shows that avoiding and dominating styles are negatively related to the interpersonal relationship. Obliging is sometimes positively and sometimes negatively related to the interpersonal relationship. Only integrating is consistently related positively to the interpersonal relationship. What is more, compromising has no significant effect on the interpersonal relationship (Burke, 1970). Research on inter-organization conflict in the construction industry shows that on an ascending scale of agreeableness, the order of the five kinds of conflict management style is as follows: dominating, compromising, avoiding, obliging and integrating. The more agreeable the conflict management style, the more effective it is in resolving conflicts and maximizing relationship quality (DeChurch and Marks, 2001).

Existing studies also show that the effectiveness of each conflict management style varies depending on the level of conflict (Xie et al., 1998). Research on interpersonal conflict in the education industry shows that the most effective conflict management style for the interpersonal relationship is integrating style, which is more effective particularly at a high level of conflict. The compromising and avoiding styles have a negative effect on the interpersonal relationship at a low level of conflict, but have a positive effect on the interpersonal relationship at a high level of conflict (Andrews and Tjosvold, 1983). The study of inter-organization conflict in the service industry shows that an increase in the level of conflict will increase the effectiveness of dominating on new product success, which indicates that when the conflict level is high, dominating may serve as a sub-optimal style. Research in Japan and Hong Kong shows that the effectiveness of integrating and compromising on new product success will reduce with an increase in the level of conflict. However, studies in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) have indicated that an increase in the level of conflict will increase the effectiveness of compromising on new product success, but the level of conflict will not influence the effectiveness of integrating on new product success. This study focuses predominantly on task conflict, the level of which is defined, according to Aibu et al. (2008), as the frequency and severity of differences concerning the task between the owner and the contractor, as well as the degree of
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