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Structured Conflict Approaches used in Strategic Decision Making: from Mason's Initial Study to Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Prior structured conflict research has not fully addressed the strategic decision making approaches. To address this gap, the objective of this monograph is to organize, summarize, categorize, and analyze the structured conflict decision approaches. It has been fifty years since Mason (1969) published his famous study on dialectical inquiry. Since then there have been 52 studies investigating the performance of these structured conflict decision techniques. The organizational case and field studies support the intention that dialectical inquire is effective in strategic decision making. The experimental studies favor the devil's advocacy decision aid. There are moderating effects based on the type of participation, active or passive. Technology can play a role in strategic decision making, but there have not been an adequate number of studies to make any generalizations with structured conflict. Studies with virtual teams need to be developed and explored. One factor which appears to be missing in the research literature is leadership. Management,

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leadership, is clearly involved in the case and field studies, but not in the experimental studies. This comprehensive study of structured conflict research is designed to improve the essence of strategic decision making with structured conflict decision aids.

1

Introduction

An organizational business strategy is a statement about how the business operates. It is based on assumptions, it has guidelines, constraints, and more, all leading to a purpose with goals. There are in most cases, alternatives which leads to a planning process culminating in a strategy. How does an organization develop the best strategy? According to Emshoff and Mitroff (1978) these strategies are normally developed through active participation from the organization's top-level executives. There are many approaches to this. This monograph will focus on a strategic planning processes which uses structured conflict to aid in elicitating and exposing management's underlying assumptions and how to stimulate management to adopt a broader view of the planning problem (Mason, 1969).

This research has been ongoing for 50 years mostly with strategic planning groups working in a face-to-face environment. These groups are mostly students in the experimental studies and practicing managers in the case and field studies. Increasingly, managers and professional information workers are communicating via the internet and virtual private networks, using groupware for synchronous multi-media "meetings" and virtual (text-based, recorded meetings, anytime/anywhere)

discussions and project management. These meetings are used to support distributed task forces and project teams within existing organizations, and to create temporary or permanent virtual teams to take advantage of new opportunities, for example in new product development (Schmidt *et al.*, 2001) and strategic decision making (Powell *et al.*, 2004). What kinds of structures, tools, and interaction processes work best with these new communication media? We know that the communication medium does affect process and outcomes of group interactions (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Hiltz *et al.*, 1989; Priem *et al.*, 1995; Rice and Associates, 1984). It is very likely that group processes that have proven effective in face-to-face decision-making and project meetings will not have the same impacts in computer-mediated meetings.

Previous research on face-to-face groups indicates that groups who try to reach consensus on a task-based decision without following any specific procedures often have impaired outcomes (process losses) relative to the efforts of others following specific procedures (Steiner, 1972). These include issues resulting from unequal participation, a failure to generate and explore alternative solutions before reaching a final choice, and a lack of critical examination of ideas.

Group interaction processes such as brainstorming, Nominal Group Technique, Delphi, and structured conflict procedures namely, dialectical inquiry (DI) and devil's advocacy (DA) have been shown to decrease process losses and improve the outcomes of face-to-face decision-making teams (Nunamaker *et al.*, 1991; Schweiger *et al.*, 1986, 1989). For example, Mason and Mitroff (1981), Mitroff *et al.* (1979), and Schweiger *et al.* (1986), have demonstrated that DI and DA structured conflict approaches can improve decision quality in organizations.

Unfortunately, researchers have not confidently generalized these findings from studies dealing with structured conflict in face-to-face teams to teams supported by computer-based group support systems (GSS) technology. This limitation is especially notable with respect to distributed or virtual (different time/different place) computer-mediated-communication (CMC) environments. This is important given that organizations are migrating from traditional face-to-face communication and decision making to electronically mediated interactions, such as email and groupware (Powell *et al.*, 2004). In addition, businesses

are becoming more globally oriented, have flatter hierarchies, and are utilizing more cross functional teams, all of which are placing tremendous demands on decision makers' ability to coordinate dispersed activities and improve the effectiveness of the decisions (Chidambaram and Jones, 1993). The questions for decision makers are:

1. Is dialectical inquiry (DI) more effective than devil's advocacy (DA) in strategic decision-making tasks in face-to-face teams?

2. Are conflict generating techniques (DI and DA) more effective than expert or consensus processes in face-to-face teams?

3. Is dialectical inquiry (DI) more effective than devil's advocacy (DA) in strategic decision-making tasks in virtual teams?

4. Are conflict generating techniques (DI and DA) more effective than expert or consensus processes in virtual teams?

5. Are there any factors that contribute to the differences between case and field, and the experimental studies?

6. Is there a role that management, leadership, projects in structured conflict strategic decision-making?

The objective of the review is to examine these issues of whether structured conflict procedures are superior to expert or consensus-oriented procedures in face-to-face and virtual teams working on strategic decision-making tasks. The review begins with a brief background in Section 2, then Section 3 discusses structured conflict, followed by philosophical and empirical debate in Section 4. Section 5 examines structured conflict: devil's advocacy and dialectical inquiry studies in both case and field, and experimental studies. Section 6 presents an integrative analysis of the structured conflict studies. Section 7 focuses on leadership. Section 8 addresses structured conflict and leadership in virtual teams. Section 9 is the conclusion and addresses the issues of this review and discusses potential future studies.

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