Unwanted Repetitive Patterns: Episodes of Ritualized Leader-Member Conflict

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Extended Abstract

The ability to manage conflict competently is essential for leaders. Successful conflict management is often associated with a display of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2004), and has the potential to turn otherwise dysfunctional conflicts into positive outcomes. Examples of such positive outcomes include enhanced decision making (Amason, 1996; Kuhn & Poole, 2000), creativity and innovation, team synergy, and increased performance levels (Rahim, 2011; Whetten & Cameron, 2011). Despite the plethora of skills-based guidelines on competent approaches to managing conflict, however, there remains a gap in understanding how leaders should deal with ongoing and repetitive conflicts in the organization. Accordingly, this paper is a report on current research-in-progress that explores recurrent incidents of conflict, or “unwanted repetitive patterns” (URPs), in the organizational context. Ultimately we seek to offer insight into the nature of URPs as well as possible pathways to resolving such undesirable episodes.

URPs were originally conceptualized by Cronen, Pearce, and Snively (1979) as episodes of expressed interpersonal conflict where the interlocutors recognize that their dispute is recurrent, but feel powerless to keep it from happening again and again. Subsequently, only a few studies have sought to extend understanding of such conflict rituals (e.g., Turk & Monahan, 1999; Worley & Stamp, 2016). Building on a significant body of research on conflict communication Murray (2012) has begun to extend this line of inquiry on a theoretical front, providing anecdotal evidence based on a single URP case study. Clearly this is an important topic, URPs are likely experienced widely if not universally, and there is a paucity of empirical research on this topic. The present project is intended to begin to fill that gap.

Cronen, Pearce, and Snively (1979) studied URPs without focusing on any specific context. However, context does seem to matter to the nature, pattern, and resolution of conflict (Meng, Fulk, J., & Yuan, 2015). Therefore, this study focuses on URPs that occur in the organizational context, specifically where there is a power differential between the interlocutors as in a leader-
member relationship. Ultimately, this ongoing project seeks to address the following research question:

**RQ**: What are the communication processes that construct unwanted repetitive patterns of conflict (URPs) in leader-member relationships?

**Methodology**

As a convenience sample collected through personal networks, we recruited 10 leader-member pairs who self-identified as engaging in URPs, and interviewed each participant about their URPs and surrounding contexts individually. Overall, interviews followed the data collection process articulated by Murray (2014), and asked participants to recall the conversational turns from their most recent enactment of this URP. We also interviewed participants about the socially constructed contexts that surrounded that URP, including questions regarding their identity, culture, definition of their relationship with the other participant, etc. Data were analyzed using a particular theory of human communication, the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), originally developed by Pearce (1976, 1989, 2007), Cronen (2006; Cronen, Pearce, & Snively, 1979; Cronen, Pearce, and Changsheng, 1989) and their colleagues (see Murray, 2014 for the most recent overview of CMM literature).

**Results and Discussion**

The findings of this analysis yielded results initially similar to those of Cronen, Pearce, and Snively (1979), but with more depth, considering the present study took a qualitative approach, specifically to generate a richer analysis that Cronen, Pearce, and Snively’s original quantitative, and somewhat reductionist, approach. Additional dimensions of URPs were also revealed by our analysis. Overall, URPs seem to be generated and perpetuated by at least six factors. These include: (1) a heavy use of prefigurative force – a perception on the part of each interlocutor that their actions in the URP were reacting to a previous conversational turn by the other; (2) significant pressure from contextual frameworks (time, place, relationship, self-concept, culture, etc.) in perpetuating the URP; (3) an increasingly narrow range of perceived alternatives and choices available; (4) negative episode valence, where the UPR is perceived as not being a desirable option of conversation, yet a sense of powerlessness in making anything else happen; (5) low use of practical force, meaning that the interlocutors are not forward thinking, rather they give little attention to the consequences of their actions; (6) heightened emotionalism, with affect beginning to become a dominant force for perpetuating the URP and causing each interlocutor to make less than rational conversational and relational decisions.

**Practical Implications**

Even though this research remains in progress, our work so far has clear, practical implications for organizational leaders who face repetitive conflict patterns with their subordinates, colleagues, and with other organizational members. Ultimately, URP research
results should prove essential with training and development as well as with organizational mediation applications.

References


