Chapter 9

Conflict Management in Bicultural Teams: Cultural Dimensions and Synergistic Problem Solving

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Managing conflict is difficult in any work relationship but it is particularly difficult when two cultures are involved. For example, international negotiations are often hindered by discordant assumptions about the nature and value of social relationships and the individual, appropriate communication, and hierarchy and power (Cohen, 1991; Griffin & Daggatt, 1990). In this paper we describe the impact of culture on conflict management behavior in work organizations and how differences influence conflict management behavior in bicultural teams. We propose that fundamental dimensions of cultural variability influence conflict management behavior so that the difficulty of managing conflict in a bicultural team increases as cultural differences increase (Drake, 1995; Natlandsmyr & Rognes, 1995). However, we suggest that certain factors can mitigate this effect by increasing the likelihood that participants transcend their cultural orientations and develop new ways to manage conflict (i.e., engage in synergistic problem solving; Adler, 1986; Moran & Harris, 1982). It is important to note that although cultural differences in conflict management
orientations themselves might create conflict, the model we present is not designed to identify causes of conflict in intercultural work relations. Instead, we focus on how cultural differences influence the ability to manage conflict that does occur. The model presented addresses two issues: (1) the impact of cultural differences on conflict management behavior in bicultural teams and (2) conditions that influence the likelihood that participants engage in synergistic problem solving to overcome these differences.

In the next section we describe five dimensions of cultural variability and their effects on conflict management behavior. This model draws on previous discussions of cross-cultural differences in conflict management behavior (e.g., Graham, 1984; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Weldon, 1995) and discussion of inter-cultural negotiation, but is different from those discussions in several important ways. We: (1) consider more dimensions of cultural variability and (2) use dimensions of conflict management better suited to understanding differences occurring in bicultural teams.

**Dimensions of Cultural Variability**

Social scientists have identified fundamental cultural differences by naming and describing the ways that shared patterns of thinking, acting and feeling differ across groups of people. In this discussion, we focus on five dimensions of cultural variability believed to influence conflict management behavior (Table 1): individualism/collectivism, facework, masculinity/femininity, power distance, and communication style. These dimensions are believed to covary (Drake, 1995; Franke, Hofstede & Bond, 1991; Kim, 1994; Kirkbride, Tang, & Westwood, 1991; Nicholson, Stepna, & Voich, 1994; Rogovsky, 1996), producing a coherent cultural profile which has strong implications for conflict management behavior (Lee & Rogan, 1991; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey, Gao, Trubisky, Yang, Kim, Lin, & Nishida, 1991; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991; Weldon, 1995).