Francisco J. Medina, Miriam Benítez

Effective Behaviors to De-escalate Organizational Conflicts in the Process of Escalation

Universidad Complutense de Madrid
España

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The goal of the present study was to determine what behaviors negotiators can use to help to quell an escalating conflict. In doing so, we formed a sample of professionals who took on the role of negotiator when we provoked an organizational conflict between a superior and subordinate that escalates due to the intervention of research confederates. Trained judges analyzed the negotiators’ behaviors that most effectively mitigated the intensity of the conflict in which they were involved. The results demonstrate that the behaviors most effective at de-escalating an escalating conflict are problem-solving and accommodation, especially when said conflict has escalated considerably. Similarly, jointly employing problem-solving and direct fighting behaviors also seems to help de-escalate conflict. The results do not, however, consistently support using a forceful behavioral strategy to de-escalate a conflict in the early stages of escalation.

Keywords: conflict escalation, problem-solving, accommodation, conflict effectiveness.

La finalidad de este trabajo fue estudiar qué comportamientos permiten la reducción del conflicto cuando los negociadores se enfrentan a un proceso de conflicto que crece en intensidad. Para ello, y mediante una muestra de negociadores profesionales, se ha provocado un conflicto organizacional entre un superior y un subordinado, que crece en intensidad mediante las intervenciones de cómplices de los investigadores. Jueces entrenados han analizado los comportamientos más efectivos de los negociadores para mitigar la intensidad del conflicto al que se vean sometidos. Los resultados muestran que para reducir un conflicto escalado los comportamientos más efectivos son la solución de problemas y la acomodación, sobre todo cuando el conflicto es muy elevado. Del mismo modo, el uso conjunto de las conductas de solución de problemas y lucha directa también permite reducir la intensidad de los conflictos. Por el contrario, los resultados no apoyan una estrategia consistente en utilizar conductas de dominación durante las primeras etapas del escalamiento del conflicto para reducir la intensidad de los conflictos.

Palabras clave: escalamiento del conflicto, solución de problemas, acomodación, efectividad del conflicto.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Francisco J. Medina, Departamento de Psicología Social, Universidad de Sevilla. Calle Camilo José Cela s/n, 41018-Sevilla (Spain). E-mail: fjmedina@us.es
It is normal for an organization to have some conflicts, whether collective or a dispute between employees. Conflict is understood as the process that occurs when a person or group perceives differences or opposition between itself and another person or group, due to interests, resources, beliefs, or values that matter to them (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). There is evidence to suggest that conflict can be productive for organizations by stimulating change, producing higher-quality decisions and decreasing groupthink (Turner & Pratkanis, 1997). This occurs when conflict is task-oriented, takes place in positive, interdisciplinary contexts, and when there is a high level of trust between parties (Tjosvold, 2000).

Many times, however, conflict generates a very negative organizational dynamic. It is the basis of psychological harassment (Arenas, Medina, & Munduate, 2010) and predicts a high percentage of employee turnover and absenteeism (De Dreu, 2010). Once a conflict begins, it may grow in intensity, become unmanageable, produce aggressive behavior between the parties in conflict, and trigger a spiral of unpredictable consequences (Mikolic, Parker, & Pruitt, 1997). This phenomenon is known as conflict escalation, which refers to a rise in the conflict's intensity and the severity of the tactics used throughout it. When a conflict escalates in this way, it can lead to rupturing the relationship between parties, tremendous hostility, and may impede creativity (De Dreu, 2010; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994).

The body of literature points to certain psychological and social changes that occur during the process of escalation to explain why it occurs and why it is maintained (see Pruitt, 2008 or Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2007). Nonetheless, we have very little understanding of what behaviors trigger this downward spiral to occur, and conversely, which can be used to mitigate it. Along those lines, it seems that unilateral cessation approaches such as GRIT “Graduated Reciprocation Incentives for Tension-reduction,” described by Osgood (1962), may be effective in some cases, but diametrically opposed styles such as forceful and authoritative behavior may also be effective at times.

The present study aims to determine specifically what behaviors enable conflict de-escalation when negotiators are faced with an intensifying conflict. To do so, using a sample of professionals as negotiators, we will simulate an escalating conflict situation, and then examine it in depth. Next, by employing trained judges, we will determine what behaviors were most effective at mitigating the conflict’s intensity according to the model of conflict negotiation developed by van de Vliert and Euwema (1994).

Behaviors’ Effectiveness at Negotiating Escalating Conflicts

Analyzing the effectiveness of conflict negotiation has followed two lines of investigation: one is oriented toward predispositions, behavioral strategies and conflict negotiation styles (Rahim, Antonioni, & Psenicka, 2001), and the second is geared toward observable behaviors (Olekalns, Putnam, Weingart, & Metcalf, 2008). Conflict negotiation style is a predisposition, the strategy the negotiator is most likely to follow when confronted with a dispute. Various models have described these styles in terms of two dimensions: the extent to which the negotiator attempts to satisfy his or her own interests, and the extent to which the negotiator takes the other party’s interests into consideration (e.g., Rahim & Magner, 1995). Those underlying dimensions give way to four pure categories: problem-solving (high self-interest and high interest in the other party); forcing (high self-interest and low interest in the other); accommodation (low self-interest and high interest in the other); and avoidance (low self-interest and low interest in the other), as well as a mixed category, compromise, which entails a moderate level of satisfaction of self-interests and the other’s interests. Furthermore, some recent models distinguish between two different components of forcing: direct fighting, conceptualized as seeking to fulfill one’s own interests using results-oriented or issue-oriented mechanisms such as threats, physical violence or verbal abuse; and indirect fighting, which is understood as seeking to achieve one’s self-interests by means of indirect mechanisms, controlling the process, or resisting the issues raised by the adversary (van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994).

Systematically studying the use of these styles has revealed that some conflict negotiation styles are more effective than others. Specifically, problem-solving is the most constructive conflict-negotiation strategy because it enables both parties in the dispute to bring their ideas and interests together and reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. Effectively, the most constructive results are produced when people adopt a collaborative (or problem-solving) orientation, use a greater number of positions and counter-positions, and make a greater effort to cover all the underlying needs (Putnam & Wilson, 1989). Conversely, the most prejudicial, destructive results occur when the subject adopts a more competitive orientation, which manifests itself in the use of influence tactics, an increased number of threats, launching personal attacks, and making large demands, but no concessions (e.g., van de Vliert, Euwema, & Huismans, 1995).

Hypothesis 1. Problem-solving behaviors will effectively de-escalate a conflict in the process of escalation.

When a conflict intensifies, certain styles may help de-escalate it, leading to more constructive results for both parties (Janssen & van de Vliert, 1996). In the literature on a related subject, influence tactics, there is evidence to suggest certain behaviors similar to accommodation can be very productive. Similarly, accommodation shares certain characteristics with ‘trying to ingratiate oneself,’ an influence tactic identified by Yukl and Tracey (1992). This tactic entails that one try to convince his or her opponent that their thoughts about the other person are very positive, which
CONFLICT DE-ESCALATION

may facilitate their relations or increase trust between them (Wayne, Liden, Graf, & Ferris, 1997). Another tactic related to accommodation is GRIT (Osgood, 1962), proposed by Osgood to de-escalate conflict. This is based on making public concessions to the adversary, obligating them to make concessions, too, reciprocally.

Nevertheless, these studies’ conclusions have been based on analyses of overarching behaviors, not on the systematic analysis of interactions (Olekalns & Smith, 2003). In that vein, negotiators’ behaviors do not occur in isolation; they combine, they occur predominantly in some phases and not in others, and they are used to respond to specific actions on the part of the adversary (e.g. Munduate, Ganaza, Peiró, & Euwema, 1999; Olekalns, Brett, & Weingart, 2003; van de Vliert, Nauta, Giebels, & Janssen, 1999). It is for this reason that the evidence attesting to accommodation’s ability to de-escalate conflict remains incomplete.

Hypothesis 2. Accommodation behaviors will effectively de-escalate conflicts in the process of escalation.

To analyze the combination of several behaviors has greater explanatory power than analyzing behaviors independently of one another. Certain combinations and style patterns have been demonstrably ineffective, for example, patterns based on force, or soft styles like avoidance and servility (Munduate et al., 1999). By utilizing other methodologies, however, such as cluster analysis and profile analysis, it has been demonstrated that combining hard styles, take forcing for example, and soft ones, such as problem-solving, is more effective at distributive (Munduate et al., 1999) or conflict negotiation than using these styles in isolation (van de Vliert et al., 1999). The underlying logic to this result is that combining two opposing strategies may effectively minimize the negative impact of each, in other words, reduce problem-solving’s tendency toward stagnancy and force’s tendency toward escalation (van de Vliert, Nauta, Euwema, & Janssen, 1997). Based on these arguments, we predict that:

Hypothesis 3. Combining problem-solving and forcing behaviors will effectively de-escalate conflict.

Several authors have attested to the fact that there are many different phases and steps in the process of conflict negotiation (e.g., Douglas, 1962) and have found that the quality of the negotiation process depends not only on the frequency with which a given strategy is employed, but also on how it is distributed throughout the interaction. For example, a tactic known as ‘differentiate vs. integrate’ consists of being firm and resilient in the early phases of the interaction, and flexible and creative in the latter stages. From this point of view, the most constructive results occur when the subject is very flexible and creative toward the end of the negotiation, and the least effective results occur when the subject is inflexible late in the negotiation (Medina, Dorado, Arévalo, Cisneros, & Munduate, 2003). Given that creativity and flexibility are manifested through problem-solving and accommodation behaviors, respectively, we predict that:

Hypotheses 4 and 5: Employing problem-solving and accommodation behaviors will effectively negotiate the most intense phase of the conflict’s escalation.

Method

Participants

The participants of the present study were 36 professionals (72% female) from postgraduate programs in Spanish universities. Practically all participants (98%) performed management tasks in their usual profession (13.9% worked for organizations that produce goods and 86.1% for service organizations). Subjects ranged in age from 22 to 48 years-old (M = 26.94, SD = 5.97). They were unaware of the research objectives; the study was presented to them as a practical exercise about conflict negotiation.

Procedure

Participants were received by the researchers in a classroom and were placed in front of a computer with a pencil and piece of paper to design a course of action. On the computer screen, subjects were given instructions about their part in the negotiation role-play. There was a fictitious opponent whose responses were standardized and previously designed by the experimenters to escalate the conflict. In the interest of increasing the realism of the situation, researchers incorporated errors into each sentence. The task lasted approximately an hour and a half. The negotiators knew the task was over when a message appeared on the screen with the following statement: the negotiation is over; then they continued on to the next stage of the exercise.

The experimental subjects always took on the role of the superior. The conflict occurred with a subordinate, who had experienced a serious problem with the organization’s most important client. The subordinate’s responses were standardized and previously designed by the experimenters to escalate the conflict on three levels. In the first, trivialization, the incident was relativized by statements such as: ‘nothing really happened; Mr. Sage and I know each other and this is no more than the result of trust.’ In the second, attack the company’s rules, the company’s commercial politics were called into question with statements such as: ‘I understand your concern about what happened with Mr. Sage, but it would be more useful to focus on the heart of the problem, which is company politics.’ In the third, personal attack, the opponent’s behavior and intentions were questioned in statements like: ‘on the street, reality is very different from what you see from your office.’ Responses were standardized in order to ensure that all subjects would follow the same procedure in stimulating
Conflict. Each stage of escalation consisted of five statements. For the exercise to be considered valid, each subject had to complete thirteen sentences. Once those were complete, the research confederate ended the task.

After the experimental task was over, subjects were thoroughly debriefed about its aims and were asked open-ended questions about whether or not they would behave similarly in a real-life situation, and whether they had at any point detected that the opponent’s responses were artificial. They were asked if they had perceived increasingly aggressive behavior on the part of the opponent, and how angry the escalation in the experimental task made them. None of the subjects in the sample detected any falsehood in the interventions their adversary used to escalate the conflict. Furthermore, they reported they would behave similarly in a real-life situation, and they considered the conflict to have escalated. For these reasons, there was no need to eliminate any experimental subjects.

### Measures

Conflict negotiation behaviors were operationalized by means of observational analysis of the interactions that took place, and in accordance with the behavior typology described by van de Vliert and Euwema (1994). The following behaviors were studied: problem-solving, compromise, accommodation, avoidance, direct fighting and indirect fighting (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Trivializing or trying to put off the problem before reflecting on it.</td>
<td>‘Why don’t we wait to deal with this problem until we have spoken with the client?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Accepting the opponent’s suggestions or acquiescing to his or her wishes</td>
<td>‘I think you are right and it would be pertinent to do what you say.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>Proposing solutions that satisfy both parties, or ceding on certain points in exchange for others.</td>
<td>‘If you apologize to the client, I will talk to the directors about your ideas.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>Analyzing the situation together with the client, integrating one’s own ideas and the opponent’s to reach a joint decision</td>
<td>‘What do you think about me talking to the client to try and fix this problem?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Fighting</td>
<td>Openly discussing the issues in conflict and the attitudes adopted during said conflict</td>
<td>‘I am confused and outraged by your attitude.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Fighting</td>
<td>To deliberately place obstacles, challenge the issue in conflict, or obsess over procedural matters.</td>
<td>‘We should be discussing the rules, the procedure of assigning clients, not issues like the ones you brought up.’</td>
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</table>

An assessment scale was employed to analyze the effectiveness of conflict negotiation. In creating the scale, we applied the indications and construct proposed by van de Vliert and his collaborators (e.g., van de Vliert et al., 1995), who drew the distinction between substantive and relational effectiveness. The following eight indicators were used, each had five response alternatives. The scales evaluating substantive effectiveness were: (a) importance of the issue that sparked the conflict; (b) proximity of the solution; (c) quality of a possible solution that both parties could agree upon; and (d) the possibility of a new conflict arising between the parties. The scales used to evaluate relational effectiveness were: (a) trust between the parties, (b) mutual understanding, (c) the climate surrounding the parties involved, and (d) personal relationships (Medina & Dorado, 2006). Four judges, upperclassmen psychology students, were selected to be trained in the negotiation effectiveness assessment scale, following the procedure described above. The correlations between these judges’ assessments were quite high, a mean of .79, a minimum of .66, and a maximum of .88. Three measures of effectiveness were taken: substantive effectiveness, relational effectiveness and total effectiveness, which was an average of the first two.
First, we analyzed whether or not the experimental manipulation had had any effect. To do so, the negotiators were asked whether their opponent had utilized increasingly aggressive behaviors as the interaction progressed (1, no, 2, yes). Next, they were asked to indicate their level of anger at the beginning and end of the negotiation on a 5-point scale. Every single subject responded affirmatively to the first question. As for their level of anger, subjects reported feeling angrier at the end of the negotiation ($M = 2.52$) than at the beginning ($M = 1.77$), $F(1, 35) = 4.83$, $p < .05$. These two measures allowed us to confirm that the manipulation had taken effect; in other words, the negotiators perceived that they were confronted with an escalating conflict. Subsequently, we established that gender had no influence over the variables addressed in the present study, so this variable was omitted from future analyses $F(1, 35) = 1.21$, $ns$, with effectiveness; $F(1, 35) = 2.12$, $ns$, with problem-solving, $F(1, 35) = 1.91$, $ns$, with servility.

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics corresponding to the study’s variables. Apparently, there is a positive correlation between accommodation ($r = .36; p < .05$) and problem-solving behaviors ($r = .62; p < .01$), and effectiveness. Meanwhile, a negative correlation was observed between direct fighting behavior and effectiveness ($r = -.62; p < .01$). Negative correlations also occurred between direct fighting and problem-solving behaviors ($r = -.82; p < .01$), and between accommodation and direct fighting behaviors ($r = -.36; p < .05$).

To contrast the hypotheses described above, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed in accordance with the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991). Therefore,
conflict negotiation behaviors were input first, and the interactive effect between problem-solving and direct fighting, yielded by multiplying the two variables, was input second. Table 3 conveys that problem-solving behavior was found to be positively correlated with total effectiveness (β = .63; p < .01), substantive effectiveness (β = .38; p < .01), and relational effectiveness (β = .65; p < .01), in support of Hypothesis 1. As for accommodation, a marginal relationship was observed between accommodation behavior and total effectiveness.

On another note, the interaction between problem-solving and direct fighting behaviors had a significant effect on total, substantive and relational effectiveness. In order to analyze the interaction between problem-solving and direct fighting behaviors, two steps were followed. First, we calculated and analyzed regression lines, then performed a post-hoc test of those lines’ significance using the Aiken and West (1991) procedure. There was an Increase in R2 of .16 in total effectiveness, .11 for substantive effectiveness, and .17 for relational effectiveness, in all cases significant (p < .05). The regression lines appear in Figures 1a, 1b and 1c.

The results suggest problem-solving behavior is very effective when combined with high levels of direct fighting behavior (β = .93; p < .01), but it did not have an impact on effectiveness when used in concert with low levels of direct fighting (β = .14; ns.).

One of this study’s aims was to analyze whether or not employing problem-solving and accommodation behaviors would be effective at negotiating the most intense stage of conflict escalation. Toward that end, a regression analysis was done, entering each of the conflict negotiation behaviors from the three stages of escalation as predictor variables, and effectiveness as the criterion variable. Table 4 displays the results.

As one can see, subjects’ responses during the escalation phase exert a significant influence over the negotiation’s effectiveness. Three behaviors were found to significantly influence effectiveness, two positively; as we predicted, they were: problem-solving and accommodation. However, we did not anticipate the negative impact of using direct fighting. Also, using problem-solving behavior in the final stages of escalation, that is, when the subject is taking personal attacks, was found to be positively correlated with total, substantive and relational effectiveness. On the other hand, utilizing accommodation behavior as the conflict begins to escalate, in other words, when the subject is receiving criticism of the company’s rules, was found to play a significant role in total effectiveness. It even turned out to yield relational effectiveness when used in the most heated moment of the escalating conflict, when the subject is taking personal attacks. These results confirm Hypotheses 4 and 5. Finally, we found that direct fighting behavior is negatively correlated with relational effectiveness when used in the early stages of interaction, that is, when the opponent is trivializing the issue in conflict.

Figures 1a, b, c: Interaction between Direct Fighting and Problem-solving Behaviors with Global, Substantive and Relational Effectiveness.
The present study analyzes the effectiveness of conflict negotiation behaviors when a negotiator is confronted with an escalating conflict. This study’s findings lead us to assert that to negotiate an escalating conflict, it is pertinent to use: (a) problem-solving and accommodation behaviors; (b) a combination of problem-solving and direct fighting behaviors; and (c) especially using problem-solving behaviors when the conflict has reached a high level of intensity. Conversely, it was not found to be pertinent to use forcing behaviors during the early stages of conflict escalation. These findings were analyzed in further detail above.

Discussion

The present study analyzes the effectiveness of conflict negotiation behaviors when a negotiator is confronted with an escalating conflict. This study’s findings lead us to assert that to negotiate an escalating conflict, it is pertinent to use: (a) problem-solving and accommodation behaviors; (b) a combination of problem-solving and direct fighting behaviors; and (c) especially using problem-solving behaviors when the conflict has reached a high level of intensity. Conversely, it was not found to be pertinent to use forcing behaviors during the early stages of conflict escalation. These findings were analyzed in further detail above.

Problem-solving behavior is effective at negotiating an escalating conflict. This result indicates that using this behavior more widely can help subjects achieve improved, more substantial results, that is to say, higher-quality, more lasting agreements where the conflict has little probability of recurring. It can also yield better relational results by helping to maintain or improve trust between the different parties, and through satisfactory personal relationships, fluid communication processes and an optimal social climate. This result is consistent with the findings of other research, conducted through a variety of methodologies (e.g., Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000; Rahim et al., 2001).

On another note, we have also confirmed the effectiveness of accommodation behavior, though only with a marginal level of significance. We observed that these behaviors not only improve existing relations between parties, or the climate resulting from their interaction, but also lead to better, higher-quality results and de-escalation of conflict. These data support what some authors have found, that accommodation has a positive, mitigating effect on conflict (Janssen & van de Vliert, 1996). The present study has established that on some occasions, unilateral cessation can be an effective behavior to mitigate the prejudicial effects of conflict escalation. Given that problem-solving and accommodation behaviors occur as a consequence of a high level of interest in the other party, we assert that a high level of interest in the other can serve to de-escalate conflict through the use of certain behaviors: problem-solving and accommodation.

With regard to direct fighting behavior, the present study demonstrates that forcing on its own is dysfunctional in conflict negotiation; nevertheless, employed jointly with problem-solving, it has been shown to be very effective. Problem-solving is most effective when combined with high levels of direct fighting behavior. Certain negotiating strategies that are known to be effective utilize these two types of behavior. Firm flexibility, for example, has proven effective in an array of experimental studies (e.g. van de Vliert et al., 1999). For that reason, this study supports what some other authors have posited, that the prejudicial effects of tough tactics have been exaggerated (Cialdini & Goldstein, 1979).

### Table 4

Effectiveness of the Timing of Conflict Negotiation Behaviors’ Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Effectiveness</th>
<th>Substantive Effectiveness</th>
<th>Relational Effectiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem solving</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.11 (.80)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.10 (.58)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>.63 (4.94)</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Fighting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.18 (-1.20)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-.11 (-.74)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-.05 (-.23)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indirect Fighting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.6 (.44)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.06 (.50)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-.03 (-.27)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accommodation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.28 (2.24)</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.20 (.64)</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compromise</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>-.06 (-.46)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.12 (.97)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoidance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.21 (1.73)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.10 (.78)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-.16 (-1.15)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Certainly, to resolve an escalating conflict, it would be appropriate for the subject to combine competitive behaviors – such as accusations about the opponent’s conduct and even threats – with collaborative proposals and an exchange of alternatives that takes into consideration the needs and desires of both parties in the conflict. Using the two behaviors in concert enables them to complement one another, reducing their risks and ineffective aspects.

In light of the above, the present research contributes new evidence to the study of conflict negotiation behaviors and their effectiveness. It is important to emphasize that often, when these behaviors are studied independently of one another, some behaviors, such as direct fighting, appear ineffective at resolving interpersonal conflicts. When the behaviors are jointly analyzed, however, their effectiveness and ineffectiveness overlap in many complementary ways, as discussed above.

This research also reinforces the notion that subjects’ use of different conflict negotiation behaviors in response to the opponent escalating the conflict has contributed to explaining their effectiveness. Utilizing problem-solving strategies when the subject is under personal attack has been shown to be quite effective. Similarly, given that a personal attack is considered direct fighting behavior, it follows that a response where the subject creatively seeks solutions while trying to understand the opponent’s points, case, motives and aspirations, would be very positive in de-escalating the conflict and improving the competitors’ interpersonal climate and relationships.

The results of this study have certainly demonstrated the effectiveness of using problem-solving behaviors when the conflict has reached a high level of escalation, that is, when the subject wages a personal attack against their adversary. Recent studies conducted through sequential analyses have yielded similar results. Thus, the most effective negotiators respond in a way that complements their opponents’ behavior (Medina et al., 2003). This implies the subject will be most productive in responding to his or her opponent’s provocations, even their personal attacks, by trying to understand their points and seek a creative solution to satisfy both sides of the argument.

Secondly, using accommodation behavior as the conflict escalates was found to be significantly related to total effectiveness. This may mean the subject cedes on issues that are not central to the underlying conflict, which may be perceived as a very positive strategy to de-escalate conflict and improve relations with the adversary.

Third, we found that using direct fighting behavior as the opponent trivializes the incident was negatively correlated with relational effectiveness. This suggests that accusing or criticizing one’s opponent – by means of direct fighting behavior – when they wish to trivialize or deny the importance of the existing conflict, may negatively affect relations and the climate between the two parties, or the mutual trust between the elements in conflict, without negatively impacting the outcome or the intensity of the underlying conflict.

The findings of the present study emphasize that the study of negotiators’ global behaviors is remarkably inept at explaining the effectiveness of conflict negotiation behaviors. They attest to the need to analyze conflict negotiation’s effectiveness in all its complexity, taking into consideration the combination of conflict negotiation behaviors as well as their use in distinct phases of the interaction.

Limitations and practical recommendations

The conflict resolution task in the present study was designed to incite low levels of tension in the initial stages of interaction, and to be task-oriented. These conditions were applied so that stimulating conflict could have positive consequences (e.g. Jehn, 1995). To achieve that low level of tension, subjects were instructed that relations with the opponent were good and that no prior conflict had occurred. Meanwhile, to trigger a task-oriented conflict, the role play instructions focused on a conflict between a business and one of its clients without mentioning any of the company’s characteristics or personal values. On the other hand, the research confederate exhibited a stable, constant series of behaviors. Therefore, our assessment of the effectiveness of conflict negotiation behaviors is limited to the type of escalation examined by the present study.

Moving on to practical recommendations, we recommend that when confronted with an escalating conflict, negotiators take the adversary’s interests into consideration and combine tough styles with softer ones, so as to be effective in a complex environment.

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