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PANG, A.

Singapore Management University, augustine@smu.edu.sg

Yan JIN

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Can't we all just get along?

Looking for a conflict management strategy that works? Contingency theory could hold the key...

By Augustine Pang, Yan Jin

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The (real) story was told of a rancher who settled on the high plains of Montana. Ernie came to control swathes of land when everyone was leaving because of the harsh weather. His dream was for his family and their families to live out their days as ranchers.

The perfect life was, however, punctuated with conflicts with the authorities. When the US Forest Service wanted Ernie to fence up parcels of land owned by the federal government, Ernie was adamant. "If anyone crosses my land...I'll shoot 'em!". After his son took over, Turk was faced with a new set of problems. To demands from the Forest Service officers, Turk's approach was to work with them and accommodate to their requests, in part because he wanted to be a good corporate citizen. However, when dealing with a group of environmentalists whose aim was to rid the land of ranchers and free Montana of cattle rearing, Turk became defensive.

This story was narrated by Professor Glen T. Cameron, one of the founders of contingency theory. Ernie was Glen's uncle, and Turk his cousin. What took place in the high mountains of Montana at the turn of the century is instructive for the science of strategic conflict management today. Ernie's stance towards the federal government could be described as advocacy, arguing for one's position. Turk's stance towards the Forest Service could be described as accommodation, or giving in. These two concepts were to form the central tenets of the contingency theory, which argues that strategic conflict management could be examined through a continuum whereby organizations practice a variety of stances at a given time to a given public.

Key tenets: "It depends"

Contingency theory is encapsulated in this statement, "It depends". "It" refers to stance, which "depends" on circumstances as evidenced in the influence of contingency factors. Stance is measured through a continuum, which has, at one end of the continuum, advocacy, and at the other end, accommodation.

Advocacy

Accommodation

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Between the two ends are a wide range of operational stances and these entailed different degrees of advocacy and accommodation.

Factors affect the stance one takes. There are predisposing factors, factors that influence organization's position before communication takes place. These include the top management, organizational size and culture. Factors that influence the organization's position as communication takes place are called situational factors. These include the make-up of the external stakeholders, perceived urgency and threat. Factors that prohibit the organization from even negotiating with the opposing side are called proscriptive factors. They include factors like the moral conviction of top management and restriction by law and regulation.

Strategic management of conflict communication

So how does the contingency theory inform the practice of strategic conflict management?

1. In order to choose stances along the continuum, organizations should engage in strategic analyses before and as it embarks in communication with the opposing sides. Cognizance of the predisposing, situational and proscriptive variables would help organizations understand the complex realities they are working in.
2. Organizations should engage in a strategic assessment of the nature of the opposing sides and the multi-dimensionality of external threats. Such an evaluation is collectively influenced by the make-up of the organization, the involvement level of strategic communication function, and the recognition of the dominance of the top management.
3. Don't underestimate the character and competence of individuals in the top management in resolving conflicts. They are one of the most important determinants in the way the organization conducts itself. Leaders who are involved, open to change, proactive, altruistic, and support of strategic communication tend to be better placed to lead in conflicts.
4. Organizations should mindfully seek directions on the options open to them. In addressing fluid situations, the organization is given the flexibility of assuming different stances to different publics at a given point in time. Movement along the continuum is dynamic.

So should there always be win-win in strategic conflict management? No – because the reality is that given the increasing activism of multiple publics and the availability of channels in this marketplace of ideas, a “win-win” may not necessarily be attainable.

But, yes, a “win-win” is attainable, at least from the organization's perspective – because organizations can now have a framework to understand the factors that affect their decisions and what strategic positions they can take and to whom at a given time.

In times of conflicts, it is always good to be in the driver's seat, directing the dynamic process of dialogue and negotiation.