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*Group Processes Intergroup Relations* 2013 16: 126
DOI: 10.1177/1368430212439907

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What is This?
A meta-analytical review of the relationship between emotional intelligence and leaders’ constructive conflict management

Andrea Schlaerth,¹ Nurcan Ensari¹ and Julie Christian²

Abstract

In this paper, we report the findings of a meta-analysis investigating the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and constructive conflict management, and the moderational role of leadership position and age. A total of 20 studies yielding 280 effect sizes and involving 5,175 participants were examined. The results supported the hypothesis that EI is positively associated with constructive conflict management, and this relationship was stronger for subordinates than leaders. Contrary to our predictions, age was not a significant moderator. The limitations and implications are discussed in terms of psychometric issues, use of EI in leadership development and facilitation of problem solving, and for the further development of a constructive organizational culture.

Keywords

emotional intelligence, conflict management, constructive conflict management, leaders, meta-analysis

Paper received 08 August 2011; revised version accepted 26 January 2012.

Emotional intelligence (EI) plays a significant role in positive workplace outcomes, such as company rank and salary increases (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), job performance (Lopes, Grewal, Kadir, Gall, & Salovey, 2006), as well as managing conflict constructively (e.g., Bodtke & Jameson, 2001). EI enables leaders to regulate their emotions so as to cope effectively with stress and adjust to organizational changes (Lopes et al., 2006). While there has been considerable scientific interest in the relationship between EI, constructive conflict management and leadership, there remains a lack of consistent outcome, and clear evidence as to when these variables interact (Harms & Credé, 2010; Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Daus, 2008). That is, “Does EI predict constructive conflict management?” and if so “Is this relationship stronger for leaders

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than non-leaders?” The present meta-analysis sought to provide a systematic review of the relationship between EI and conflict management, the moderating roles of leadership position and age, in an effort to distill best practices that might apply across a wide-range of organizational settings. Although the conflict management construct includes both destructive and constructive domains (Ayoko, Callan, & Härtel, 2008), this meta-analysis focuses only on constructive conflict management, specifically what works well in organizations when managing human capital, because (a) past research emphasized the importance of the relationship between EI and collaborative conflict resolution strategies (e.g., Jordan & Troth, 2002a); (b) understanding constructive conflict management is key to leadership effectiveness because leaders are expected to encourage and reinforce constructive conflict management practices and strategies; (c) it is becoming increasingly important to shift “the predominant negative bias of traditional psychology” (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216) to the applications of positive approaches in the workplace, and to encourage leadership potential and strength in using positive approaches while resolving conflicts in organizations.

**Emotional intelligence and conflict management**

EI has been defined as the individual’s “ability to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulses and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope” (Goleman, 1995, p. 34). Its main dimensions are: (1) the ability to accurately perceive emotions, (2) use of emotions in facilitating thought, (3) understanding emotions, and (4) managing emotions for personal growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). EI creates abilities that improve work outcomes in many ways: It increases the level of awareness of leaders, enables them to identify, use, understand and manage their emotions and the emotions of others, improves leader-member relationships, and thereby increases success at work (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). EI skills contribute to leaders’ ability to manage and monitor their own emotions, to correctly gauge the emotional state of others and to influence their opinions (Goleman, 1998).

Trustworthiness is an important component of EI. Lack of EI causes leaders to lose the trust of their employees. In Goleman’s model of EI (1995), one of the dimensions of EI is self-management or self-regulation which is the ability to keep disruptive emotions and impulses while maintaining standards of honesty, integrity and trustworthiness. Leaders with strong EI convey trust within the workplace which fosters constructive attitudes within and between groups, and exude honesty and the importance of other viewpoints and opinions from their decision-making (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Furthermore, leaders with strong EI find ways to further increase team effectiveness and intellectual growth by minimizing barriers to information; they are willing to equally bear the burdens of work, and they seem to reflect on constructive discontent (Antonakis, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2009; Brown, Bryant, & Reilly, 2006; Cooper, 1997; Fambrough & Hart, 2008; Sosik & Megerian, 1999). Thus, EI enables leaders to harness emotions and manage them effectively, consequently develop effective leader-subordinate relationships (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Yammarino & Atwater, 1997).

Past studies showed that leaders with higher levels of EI were more likely, or more able, to engage in functional confrontation with employees and groups, which is called constructive conflict management (Jordan & Troth, 2002a, 2002b). There are mainly six dimensions of constructive conflict management: (1) **Collaborative/Integrating dimension** refers to retaining high concern for self and others, strong cooperation and assertiveness, and involves openness, exchange of information, and examination of differences associated with problem solving and creative solutions; (2) **Confronting dimension** refers to having an open and direct communication towards creative problem solving; (3) **Problem Solving dimension** refers to expressing concerns for own and others’ problems, exchanging information about
priorities and preferences, insights and trade-offs between important and unimportant issues; (4) **Compromising dimension** refers to giving concessions, exhibiting cooperation and assertiveness, and giving up something to make a mutually acceptable decision; (5) **Accommodating/Obliging/Yielding/Smoothing dimension** refers to showing low concern for self and high concern for others, being cooperative and unassertive, attempting to play down the differences, and emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party; and finally (6) **Productive Reaction to Conflict dimension** refers to a positive and functional solution-oriented approach, and learning from disagreements and settling disagreements (Amason, 1996; Ayoko et al., 2008; Jordan & Troth, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Rahim, 1983, 2011; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Rahim, Psenicka, Polychroniou, Zhao, & Chan, 2002; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990). Overall, constructive conflict management strategies may benefit the organization by enhancing interpersonal communication, leader-member relationship and performance (Jordan & Troth, 2002a).

Effective and appropriate conflict management relies strongly on an individual’s skills in self-management, and the ability to find constructive solutions (Jordan & Troth, 2002a). EI plays an important role in conflict management because constructive solutions may require compromise which requires an ability to recognize and regulate emotions. Furthermore, higher levels of EI may facilitate collaborative and problem-solving behavior, in which emotions are both controlled and generated to develop new solutions that satisfy both parties’ needs. On the other hand, individuals with lower levels of EI are more likely to engage in greater use of forcefulness and avoidance, which may signal destructive management (Goleman, 1995). Accordingly, we predicted a positive relationship between EI and constructive conflict management. More specifically, considering that EI is an ability to manage own and others’ emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), we hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between “ability to manage own emotions” and constructive conflict management (Hypothesis 1a), and “ability to manage others’ emotions” and constructive conflict management (Hypothesis 1b).

**Potential moderators of the relationship between EI and conflict management**

We explored two potential moderators of the EI-constructive conflict management relationship: leadership position and age.

**Leadership position** Although conflict is a main function of work culture and a necessary component of a successful business (Caudron, 2000), it leads to desirable outcomes only if resolved constructively and managed effectively. The responsibility of resolving and mitigating conflicts in organizations is typically given to leaders because (a) leaders are assumed to have a significant role to play in reframing an organization’s positive value orientation (Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995); (b) by the nature of their roles and responsibilities, leaders have more opportunities to get training on how to tackle sensitive issues, about conflict management, group dynamics, or problem-solving skills; (c) conflict management skills of leaders improve as they get more experience in dealing with conflicts.

While leaders are willing and mostly obligated to embrace conflict management responsibilities, non-leaders in the organization are usually not prepared and not expected to deal with conflicts directly. It is not always feasible to provide equal opportunities for personal and career development (such as conflict management training) for all employees because training programs require vast financial and organizational resources. Consequently, non-leaders’ personal attributes and skills (such as their EI levels) play a major role in dealing with conflict. Employees with high EI, despite their lack of training, will better deal with conflicting situations than those with lower EI. Thus, when a conflicting situation arises, EI skills become more critical for non-leaders than for leaders who may use other resources and opportunities provided to them by their organizations. Accordingly, we hypothesized that the relationship between EI and
conflict management is stronger for non-leaders than leaders (Hypothesis 2).

**Age** As people get older, they have higher emotional-social intelligence, improved emotional functioning, higher degrees of differentiated emotional experiences, and better regulation of their emotional states (Bar-On, 2006; Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000). Improvements in emotional functioning have been linked to increases in self-awareness and interpersonal skills dimensions, as well as to “develop in concert with cognitive and social skills” (Chapman & Hayslip, 2006, p. 411). As age increases, life experience increases, thereby equipping older individuals with better tools and more constructive approaches to use in a given conflict situation (Luong, Charles & Fingerman, 2011). Individuals who are 40 years and older are better able to regulate and monitor their emotions and to understand the emotions of others (Carstensen, 1992, 1995; Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, DeVoe & Schoeberlein, 1989). Past research considered 40 years of age to be an acceptable cutoff to distinguish between young and old workers because “it represents the start of career maintenance stage” (Ng & Feldman, 2008, p. 393; Thornton & Dumke, 2005). Accordingly, the level of EI plays a more critical role for younger employees who are not as experienced and equipped to deal with conflicts as the older employees. Consistently, we hypothesized that the relationship between EI and constructive conflict management is stronger for younger than older employees (Hypothesis 3).

**Method**

**Literature search**

A quantitative review of the existing literature studying the relationship between EI and constructive conflict management, and the key study variables was performed. Studies were then grouped based on leader versus non-leader position, and the age of the participants. An extensive systematic review of the literature was conducted from September 2009 through February 2010. This review accessed full-text studies published world-wide from 1990–2010, using electronic platforms which included the Sage Online Journal, Google Scholar search engine, and EBCOhost, PsychInfo, ProQuest Dissertation & Abstracts, Academic Search Premier, and the Business Source Complete databases. The key search terms used to locate published and unpublished reports of the existing studies were: “emotional intelligence”, “leadership”, “conflict management”, and “constructive conflict”. A search of the reference section of each relevant article provided additional studies for this research. Also, a manual search of key journals on conflict was also complied and used, for example the *International Journal of Conflict Management*.

**Selection criteria**

The meta-analysis included only correlational studies that studied the relationships between EI and constructive conflict management. The necessary correlation r-statistics had to be reported in these studies. For studies in which correlation amongst these variables were reported, effect sizes were calculated by transforming each reported correlation coefficient to an effect size score by using the Comprehensive Meta Analysis (CMA) (Version 2.0) statistical software program (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009).

**Coding procedure**

Based on Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) model, EI is defined as the ability of an individual to monitor and regulate one’s own and understand other’s emotions, to discriminate among the positive and negative effects of emotion, and to use emotional information to appropriately guide one’s thinking and action. The two main dimensions of EI that the current meta-analysis coded were “Ability to Deal with Own Emotions” and “Ability to Deal with Others’ Emotions” (Jordan & Troth, 2002a). The main dependent variable coded in this meta-analysis was constructive conflict management which was operationalized as the extent to which...

The first step in coding was to organize and catalogue the research data systematically. A master candidate list of articles was compiled. The classification was done using a priori classification of overall EI and the two main dimensions of EI, as well as constructive conflict management. Leadership position (leader vs. non-leader) was coded based on the category and demographics of the samples reported, including the participants’ position or organizational role, job function, and level of education. Leader was operationalized as the employee who is in the position to lead a group or an organization; whereas non-leader was operationalized as the employee who does not act in a leading position in the organization. Age of the participants, as the predicted moderator, was coded based on the information provided in the “participant sections” of the studies. If a range was given, an average score was calculated and implemented.

Additional measures in the categorization of data components included sample size, unit of analysis (individual or team), type of conflict (task, relationship, or process), and type of instrument used to measure EI. Four instruments used to assess EI in the studies collected for this meta-analysis were: (1) Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQi) (Bar-On, 1995) assesses an individual’s potential to succeed in life, and measures interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, adaptability, stress management, and general mood; (2) Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI) (Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000) measures four competency areas, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills; (3) Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) Version 2.0 (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003) measures the ability to accurately perceive emotions, use of emotions in facilitating thought, understand and manage emotions; (4) Workgroup Emotional Intelligence Profile—Version 6 (WEIP6) (Jordan & Troth, 2002a) assesses one’s ability to deal with, control, discuss, and recognize own and others’ emotions.

The coding was completed by two coders to ensure reliability and accuracy of data entered. The coders were graduate students with postgraduate qualifications (Master’s or Doctoral degree), and they also had statistical analysis experience. The inter-rater agreement between the two coders was 98%.

Results
The outcome of the literature search revealed 29 studies, including a total of 20 studies yielding 280 effect sizes and involving 5,175 participants. Of the participants, 57% of the participants were men, and 41% held a leadership position. The age range was 17–75 years. Also, more than half of the sample was drawn from organizational settings (56%); 35% of these were sampled from business settings with the majority of the remaining employees coming from the public sector (18%). International research data were used in this meta-analysis involving participants from 15 countries. All of these studies were published in English, with the exception of two that were translated from Turkish to English by a native speaking professional. We have decided to include these two articles published in Turkish because reliance only on English language publications may pose potential bias in meta-analyses (Petitti, 2000).

Within the 20 studies selected form the meta-analysis, a separate effect size was calculated for each correlation. As suggested by Rosenthal (1991), each correlation coefficient $r$, or meta-analysis estimate index as reported by each study, was transformed to a Fisher’s $z$-score. To assure accuracy, and to provide an additional record of the raw data, we compiled the correlation coefficients from the primary studies. This data was then input into the Comprehensive Meta-Analysis
(CMA) (Version 2.0) statistical software program to perform descriptive analyses and determine the overall strength and consistency of the effect. The random-effects model was selected for this meta-analysis because this model provides a more balanced weight to large and small studies in the same statistical analysis. A separate meta-analysis was performed for each hypothesis using the transformed Fisher’s $z$-values, which also allowed for correction of bias (Borenstein et al., 2009). The CMA statistical analysis calculated the values for the number of effect sizes ($K$), mean weighted effect sizes (Fisher’s $z$), standard error, and homogeneity among these effect sizes ($Q$) for each hypothesis separately.

The mean Fisher’s $z$ ranged from .13 to .29 across 20 studies, yielding 280 effect sizes in total (See Table 1). When examining overall EI, higher level of EI was associated with stronger constructive conflict management (Fisher’s $z = .29$, $p < .01$). When “Ability to Deal with Own Emotions” dimension of EI was examined, it was associated with stronger constructive conflict management, supporting Hypothesis 1a (Fisher’s $z = .13$, $p < .01$). Similarly, the individual’s “Ability to Deal with Others’ Emotions” was associated with stronger constructive conflict management (Fisher’s $z = .15$, $p < .01$). Thus, Hypothesis 1b was also supported.

Tests of homogeneity among these effect sizes ($Q$) were calculated to analyse the variability among the obtained effect sizes. The results revealed significant heterogeneity among the effect sizes of Overall EI ($Q = 20.97, p = .00$), and “Ability to Deal with Own Emotions” ($Q = 164.48, p = .00$). The results showed no significant heterogeneity among the effect sizes of “Ability to Deal with Others’ Emotions” ($Q = 83.60, p = .72$). Since the homogeneity index is a possible indicator of moderating effects present in the relationship, the impact of putative moderators on the effect size should be further assessed (Borenstein et al., 2009).

Given the heterogeneity of the effect sizes, age and leadership role were tested as potential moderators for overall EI. The results of the mixed effects regression (method of moments) computation revealed that age was not a moderator, thus Hypothesis 3 was not supported ($Q = .30$, $p = .59$). On the other hand, leadership position position was a significant moderator ($Q = 29.49$, $p = .0001$). The relationship between overall EI and constructive conflict management was stronger for non-leaders (Fisher’s $z = .43$) than for leaders (Fisher’s $z = .26$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

When additional measures were examined as potential moderators, there was no significant finding with one exception: The type of instrument used to measure EI marginally moderated the relationship between EI and constructive conflict management ($Q = 11.10, p = .05$). The effect sizes for each of the instruments were as follows: Fisher’s $z = .50$ for EIQ, Fisher’s $z = .07$ for EQ-I, Fisher’s $z = .02$ for MSCEIT, Fisher’s $z = .15$ for SUEIT, Fisher’s $z = .29$ for WEIP, and Fisher’s $z = .26$ for WLEIS. Thus, the highest effect sizes were found in studies that used EIQ, and the lowest effect sizes were found in studies that used MSCEIT.

### Discussion

Emotional competency is an essential skill in the workplace. According to Goleman (1998), those who can manage conflict effectively are “the kind
of peacemakers vital to any organization” (p. 180). It is a necessary component of a positive organizational environment (Ybarra, Rees, Kross, & Sanches-Burks, 2012, p. 201). This meta-analysis examined the relationship between EI and constructive conflict management, and the moderational role of leadership position and age on this relationship. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Jordan & Troth, 2002a) and hypotheses 1a and 1b, the results showed that employees with high levels of EI (both ability to deal with own and others’ emotions) manage conflict more constructively. The results also showed that the relationship between EI and constructive conflict management is stronger for non-leaders, supporting Hypothesis 2. We argued that EI is a more critical skill for non-leaders who might not have opportunities to develop their conflict management and resolution skills as much as those in leadership positions. Non-leaders, for example, may work within teams with strict deadline pressures. As a result, they need to understand the emotions of the team members, and to be able to use the necessary strategies to deal with conflicts within teams when necessary. For these people, EI skills are critical for the individual success, as well as for positive team outcomes.

Our findings suggest that constructive management skills are more critical for non-leaders, because it is the followers who actually implement the strategies and vision of the leader and the organization. Thus, the form and strength of the relationship among leaders and non-leaders are critical components of a successful conflict management. Therefore, future research may look at the nature of the relationships (e.g., social network, friendships at work) to better understand the role of leadership and followership on conflict management (Jordan et al., 2008).

We also found that age of individuals did not moderate the role of EI on constructive conflict management, disconfirming Hypothesis 3. It is possible that EI impacts conflict management equally for older and younger people for different reasons. Younger people need stronger EI skills to deal with conflicts, to develop new social relationships that would enable them develop their careers. Older adults, however, engage in strategies that optimize positive social experiences by avoiding conflict (Luong et al., 2011). Additionally older individuals may not be confronted with the same daily difficulties that their younger and middle-aged counterparts are because they are generally treated more positively and forgiven more easily (Luong et al., 2011). These possibilities need further research to understand conditions and situations under which EI predicts conflict management for younger or older employees.

Limitations and directions for future research

One potential limitation of this study is the low number of studies included, which may potentially limit the power and internal validity of the aggregate data (DeCoster, 2009). Although the design of this meta-analysis required that more than a single effect size per study to be included in the analysis, not all of the effect sizes are independent. The violation of this assumption (multiple effect sizes from a single study) could have potentially affected the internal validity of the analysis (DeCoster, 2009). Individual studies with a larger number of effect sizes could have more influence on the summary effect and overall outcome. Future studies may want to include jackknife estimates and a resampling procedure (Berk, 2006), to analyse the weight of each individual study included in the final analysis. Additional statistical analyses could assure that no sampling bias was introduced due to the dispersion in effect sizes (Borenstein et al., 2009).

Another potential limitation is the number of different instruments used to measure EI and conflict management. The lack of theory-based specification of EI is purported to hinder the construct validity of EI (Goldenberg, Matheson, & Mantler, 2006; Matthews, Roberts, & Zeidner, 2004; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2004). When we compared the effects sizes by the type of EI instrument, we found that the studies that used MSCEIT produced the smallest effect sizes. Indeed, some subtests comprising the MSCEIT
fail to exhibit satisfactory levels of internal consistency reliability in past studies (e.g., Matthews et al., 2004). While researchers have been making a scientific effort to create psychometrically valid measures, there is still no single one measure that is universally accepted to assess the EI construct. Specifically, the convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity of the scales has been the target of criticism. It has been questioned whether the different instruments measure the same construct at all since little convergence across the different measures were found when assessing the psychometric properties of the instruments (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Harms & Credé, 2010; Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). Thus, it is important for future research uncovering the basis for the discrepancies in the assessment of EI.

Future research may also examine the specific sub-dimensions of different domains of EI and their relationships with conflict management. For example, how one’s level of Social Responsibility, Organizational Awareness, or Service Orientation, specific sub-dimensions of the Dealing with Others’ Emotions domain of EI, impacts interpersonal challenges and the strategies used in conflict situations in a team-setting where interdependence is high. Today’s teams involve more autonomous and self-managed teamwork, thus more research will be needed to further study the dynamics of team performances and how emotions and conflict guide team performances. Besides applying emotional intelligence and conflict into training and development venues, additional EI and conflict research could be useful for carrying out leadership and employee training. This is particularly the case in the areas of selection and staffing, when supporting effective recruiting and employee selection processes for team-based organizations. It must be noted, however, that studies conducted in selection and staffing will require valid and reliable instruments to avoid legal implications and adverse impact of such factors on training, leadership training and business costs.

Given the complexity of factors involved in the relationship between EI and conflict management, there may exist a number of other possible moderating variables such as individual’s commitment to the team or organization, external factors related to the conflict such as conflict duration or time pressure and how they influence whether a constructive conflict strategy is applied, the group norms of the team or organizational culture, cross-cultural differences, and generational differences in conflict management research. Additionally, as we mentioned above, the nature of the relationship between the leader and his/her followers, and his/her leadership style may shape the way the leader resolves conflicts. For instance, a close friendship between a leader and his/her follower may lead to a more peaceful resolution, whereas autocratic leaders may experience difficulty resolving conflicts using collaboration or integration. Charismatic leaders, on the other hand, are very problem-solving focused, adept at implementing constructive conflict strategies, and they tend to exhibit high levels of emotional intuition. Future research may also focus on the role of possible mediators of the relationship between EI and conflict resolution, such as creativity, collaborative problem-solving behavior, or approach/avoidance style.

**Conclusion**

Engaging in a conflict situation through confronting the conflict using positive, functional, and constructive approaches, can yield outcomes that can benefit both the individual and the organization as a whole. Accurately perceiving and managing our own emotions, and being capable of understanding the perspectives of others, will have a positive impact on managing conflict constructively. To some extent, this will also be buffered for non-leaders than leaders who are already trained, expected and perhaps required to use their EI skills in managing conflict constructively. Further dimensions in the psychological coupling of conflict and emotional intelligence research abound for follow-on studies to further tap human potential. It might also be useful to explore the extent to which EI training helps to aid employees as they develop within the organization, and as they cultivate experiences and learn to manage conflicts...
effectively. So, while this meta-analysis indicates that the relationship between EI and constructive conflict management is significant, further research and more empirical evidence will be needed to scientifically demonstrate the relationship and conditions that might facilitate the use of different strategies for employees at differing levels. The general take home message still seems to be, for leaders and non-leaders alike, that, by focusing on what works well in a given organizational context, all employees can build and nurture a culture that expands business capacities through strengths, trust, positive orientation, motivation, and open and effective communication.

Notes

Portions of this paper formed the basis of the first author’s pre-dissertation project. We would like to thank John Schlaerth and Lucy Alford for their assistance in preparing this manuscript.

1 Consistent with Akerjordet and Severinsson (2007), no longitudinal or experimental designs were included. In terms of exclusions, one exploratory, qualitative study using personal interviews was omitted, and four duplicate studies (i.e., duplicate study of dissertation, previously published research under a different title, and same research published in a different journal) were not included.

2 We excluded two instruments that were only used in one study for this particular analysis.

3 Studies with an asterisk were included in the meta-analysis data.

References


