Managing through the Kaleidoscope: Diverse Perspectives on Conflict and Decision Making in Organizations

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The articles in this special issue speak to the notion that managers and decision-makers face a multitude of complex organizational and managerial challenges. If we look at this special issue as a contribution to the dialogue on conflict and decision-making in groups as if gazing through a kaleidoscope, we discover that we confront different images of diversity. These images come most prominently into focus in a conflict and decision-making frame. As the articles suggest, when diversity increases in organizations, managing conflict and improving decision-making become both more important and more difficult. Each of the articles in this special issue describes various levels of diversity, or difference: individual differences in teams, ethnic/gender differences, and cultural/national differences. As a result, these articles look at difference as a source for conflict and decision-making and the means for adjusting it. Together, the studies provide tools for managers and practitioners and frameworks for scholars for managing conflict more productively, and improving decision-making in a modern organization. As you read each article, I invite you to reflect on the specific essay, and on the issue as a whole, with kaleidoscope eyes. Diversity is key to managing the contemporary workplace, but it can also be quite problematic depending on the perspective.

As we take our first look through our management kaleidoscope, we feature decision-making and conflict from a broad vantage of diversity and organizational behavior context. Clark, Amundson, and Cardy (2002) aim to provide a clear understanding of the team decision processes that facilitates knowledge creation and learning by examining cross-functional team decision-making. Their field study may lead to applications that will foster improvement and organizational performance. In addition, their study further delineates the notion that functional diversity on team performance within groups requires members with highly developed group processing skills, like engaging in functional, task-related conflict. Their contribution generates greater insight into the organizational learning process by focusing on specific outcomes produced through cross-functional teams such as improved organizational knowledge structures, new knowledge creation, routines and individual learning.

From functional diversity in teams and organizations, our management kaleidoscope turns to our second article, which addresses cultural diversity and conflict in decision-making groups. Broom, DeTurk, Kristjansdottir, Kanata, and Ganesan (2002) present a process aimed at increasing the chances that cultural diversity will result in more creative decision-making rather than in more intense conflict by giving voice to the wide variety of perspectives that exist in a culturally diverse organization. Their process, Interactive Management, is a problem solving and design process developed to assist groups in dealing with complex issues. In this case study, the authors argue that Interactive Management addresses the complexity of

work environments which usually involve multiple areas of expertise and significant differences in viewpoints and which often arrive with challenges to the basic assumptions underlying a given context. Their contribution promotes the development of a relational empathy and what they call a third-culture perspective. This perspective integrates conflicting viewpoints and provides a shared set of norms for operating successfully in workgroups within organizations. They argue that in order for management and organizations to benefit from diversity, workgroups must find effective means to integrate multiple perspectives, embrace disagreements, and utilize the productive management of complex tasks.

Another turn of our kaleidoscope delineates our focus on diversity from function and culture to visible diversity. Richard, Kochan, and McMillan-Capehart (2002) aim to increase our understanding of how visible diversity affects organizational effectiveness and provides a framework for organizing our comprehension with an emphasis on a group level of analysis. In their essay, the authors argue that conflict is a mediator of the relationship between visible diversity, decision-making, and firm performance. Their contribution lies in the use of procedural justice as a moderating effect, the contingency propositions they offer, and the curvilinear effects they examine. The theoretical framework answers troubling questions about the outcomes of diversity in organizations and the managerial justifications for including diversity as an organizational objective.

As we complete a final turn of our kaleidoscope, our focus of diversity moves to cultural/ national levels of difference. Whiteman and Mamen (2002) examine the deeply-rooted complexity of environmental conflict between indigenous peoples and mining companies and their linkages to community perceptions of injustice. In their case study, the authors introduce an indigenous cultural framework for justice and conflict management focused on the decision-making events at a copper mine in western Panama. They argue that entrenched social and environmental conflict stems from an incongruence of worldviews, and ongoing differences regarding a strong ecological, spiritual, and societal ethic. Their greatest contribution to our understanding of conflict consists of their cultural-justice examination of the process of decision-making and conflict in minerals development or natural resource perspective. While the study goes beyond the confines of organizational behavior, it develops important insights into the nature of corporate responsibility and social perceptions of ethical conduct.

Underlying the notion of conflict, decision-making, and diversity in these articles is the challenge of managing information complexity, structuring team dynamics and effective interaction among organizational members, and the notion of giving voice to diverse perspectives. These articles aim to move from the underconceptualization of complex problem-situations to identifying the relevant dimensions of problem situations and solutions. Thus, these articles take an explicit and inherent approach to learning that aims to create understanding among those who study work organizations by examining biases, long-held assumptions, and one-sided views. It is here that our special issue makes its most meaningful impact to organizational studies because the articles aim to address some of the most obvious barriers to managing in the 21st century.

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