

Creative Friction in Contemporary Organizations: A Curvilinear Moderated Mediation Model of Task Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Workplace conflict remains one of the most debated predictors of employee creativity, with prior research offering inconsistent conclusions regarding whether task conflict enhances or undermines innovative performance. Drawing on an integrated framework grounded in Information Processing Theory and Conservation of Resources theory, this study proposes that the relationship between task conflict and employee creativity is nonlinear and context dependent. Specifically, we argue that moderate levels of task conflict stimulate creative process engagement through cognitive elaboration, whereas excessive conflict depletes psychological resources and diminishes engagement. Furthermore, psychological safety is proposed as a boundary condition shaping the functional value of task conflict. Data were collected using a time-lagged, multi-source design from 290 employees nested within 40 supervisors in a hospitality and travel organization. Hierarchical regression analyses with cluster-robust standard errors and bootstrapped conditional indirect effects were employed to test the hypotheses. Results reveal an inverted U-shaped relationship between task conflict and creative process engagement. Creative process engagement, in turn, positively predicts supervisor-rated creativity. Moreover, psychological safety strengthens the positive segment and attenuates the negative segment of the curvilinear relationship. Conditional indirect effects indicate that the mediating role of creative process engagement is more pronounced under high psychological safety. By integrating nonlinear modeling with moderated mediation, this study reconciles prior conflicting findings and advances a contingency-based understanding of productive friction in contemporary organizations. The findings suggest that task conflict can function as a cognitive catalyst for creativity when maintained within an optimal range and embedded in psychologically safe environments.

JEL Codes:

Keywords: *Task conflict; Employee creativity; Creative process engagement; Psychological safety; Curvilinear effects; Moderated mediation; Organizational behavior.*