

Effects of Conflict Styles and Conflict Severity on Quality of Life of Men and Women in Family Businesses

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259

ABSTRACT: Studies show that family businesses need to manage conflict, but there has been little research on different conflict manifestations and their impact on families involved in businesses together. This study investigates the impact of six conflict styles on severity of conflict and quality of life for husbands and wives in 206 farm family businesses. Data analysis was done using structural equation modeling, with independent models for each gender. For men, the assertion style negatively impacted, and aggression positively impacted the severity of conflict; for women, aggression and withdrawal styles positively impacted, and denial negatively impacted severity of conflict. There was a strong negative relationship between severity of conflict and quality of life for both men and women in family businesses.

KEY WORDS: conflict; conflict style; family business; quality of life.

Introduction

Conflict management within family businesses is critical in the short run for maintaining or increasing productivity and in the long run for maintaining the viability of these businesses (Kaye, 1991, 1997; Sadler, 1990; Stafford, Duncan, Danes, & Winter, 1999). However, little is known about the different ways in which conflict manifests itself in family businesses or its impact on the quality of life of couples who live and work together within those businesses.

Conflict refers to a "situation in which seemingly incompatible elements exert force in opposing or divergent directions" (Heitter, 1990). There are several aspects of conflict that can affect the quality of life of couples who operate family businesses. The quality of life experienced by couples in family businesses is impacted by both the environment in which the conflict takes place and the shared symbolic world (i.e., financial, work, and family ties) that reflects the relationship between the conflict partners (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995).

Conflict has three fundamental elements: the *content* of the conflict, the *nature* of the conflict goals, and the *interactional* process (Metz, Rossen, & Strapko, 1994; Snyder, 1979). The literature on conflict in family businesses primarily has emphasized conflict content; literature discussing the nature of conflict goals and the interactional process has been based primarily upon case studies or a descriptive narrative from a therapist's experience. To attempt to address the empirical gap in the literature, this study sought to examine the interactional component of conflict in family businesses. It investigates the impact of conflict styles on severity of conflict and on quality of life within these businesses, using a multi-concept, multi-measure analysis on a random sample of husbands and wives in farm family businesses.