

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGING CONFLICT IN MEETINGS¹

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Abstract

There is extensive literature describing the characteristics of a good leader in the area of organisational communication and business management. However, the research tends to be based on secondary, survey or reported data, typically interviews and questionnaires. Moreover, the predominant image of a “good” leader tends to be a charismatic, inspirational, decisive, authoritative, ‘hero’. The Language in the Workplace database provides a large corpus of authentic spoken interaction which allows examination of how effective leaders behave in a wide range of face-to-face interactions at work, and identifies a diverse range of leadership styles.

The analysis reveals that effective leaders select from a range of strategies available to challenge, contest or disagree with others, paying careful attention to complex contextual factors, including the type of interaction, the kind of community of practice or workplace culture in which they are operating, and the relative seriousness of the issue involved. The analysis identifies four distinct strategies which leaders use to deal with potential conflict. These strategies lie along a continuum from least to most confrontational: Conflict avoidance; diversion; resolution through negotiation; and resolution by authority. The findings suggest that good leaders “manage” conflict: i.e. they choose strategies which address both their transactional and relational goals in order to achieve a desirable outcome.

Keywords: Disagreement, Discourse analysis, Argument, Leadership, Meetings.

1. Introduction

Leadership is a complex concept which has been studied from a myriad of perspectives across diverse disciplines. Most existing research on leadership has been undertaken in the areas of business communication and organisational science (e.g. Alvesson and Due Billing 1997; Sinclair 1998; Helgesen 1990; Parry 2001). Leadership has generally been defined in the organisational literature, as “the ability to influence others” (Dwyer 1993: 552; Hede 2001). This influence includes the achievement of “complete objectives, as well as influencing the culture of the organisation.” (Gardner and Terry 1996: 153). So these studies tend to define the notion of ‘good’ and ‘effective’ leadership performance “in terms of organisational outcomes” (Hede 2001: 7). They focus predominantly on

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behavioural strategies which qualify people as good leaders, and they tend to neglect the discursive strategies used to perform leadership.

Our definition of effective leadership takes account of a person's communication skills, as a component in achieving desired organisational outcomes. We define effective leadership for our purposes in terms of consistent communicative performance which results in acceptable outcomes for the organisation (task-oriented), and which appears to maintain harmony within the manager's team or community of practice (people-oriented). Task-oriented behaviours, such as setting goals, "focus on the task to be achieved, the problem to be solved, or the purpose of the meeting" (Dwyer 1993: 572). People-oriented or maintenance-related behaviours such as on 'creating team' (Fletcher 1999), on the other hand, concentrate on group dynamics, and involve attention to relationships. Moreover, the examples we have selected for our discussion in this paper involve people who are considered effective in their own workplace contexts.²

The definition we have developed also highlights the dynamic interactional aspects of leadership and focusses on leadership as a process or an activity (e.g., Heifertz 1998: 347), rather than just on the outcomes or achievements of leaders. In other words, we examine aspects of the processes used by leaders to "do being a leader" and we put the emphasis on the interaction processes and the communication which takes place between people rather than simply on what the manager does (c.f. Parry 2001: 2).

Our analyses also underline the conceptualisation of leadership as a joint construction, not a solo performance; people work together to construct leadership, and it is enacted through relationships. Networking, negotiation and enabling others are central elements in this process (c.f. Parry 2001: 3; Zajkowski 2001). The community of practice framework (Wenger 1998) which we have consistently adopted in our approach to the analysis of workplace interaction is thus very appropriate for examining how particular managers construct themselves as effective leaders in the workplace (Holmes and Fillary 2000; Holmes and Marra 2002a; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999; Holmes and Stubbe 2003a). An analysis of how different leaders manage conflict serves well as a specific instance of this process.

The literature on organisational communication and business management predominantly presents a picture of a charismatic, authoritarian and even autocratic style of management as characteristic of the hero managers who are typically presented as models (Proctor-Thomson and Parry 2001; Jackson and Parry 2001). As Parry (2001: 4) puts it "There is nothing passive about leadership". The reason for this image, we contend, is that much of the material written about leadership in the organisational literature tends to be based on a very narrow sample, and the methods used to research the behaviour of effective leaders tends to have been similarly narrow and restricted.

The reality is much more complex and the evidence from our LWP database certainly presents a more interesting picture. The autocratic, confrontational leadership style which makes for an exciting episode in a TV programme, or raises the temperature dramatically in a film, is exceedingly rare in the day-to-day meetings which take place in most New Zealand workplaces. We have data from over 2000 interactions in

² Rather than basing this assessment on the discourse of the leaders, their effectiveness in the role was identified by the people who count i.e. we have chosen leaders who were regarded with admiration by colleagues, and where subsequent promotions or movement to other jobs often provided further evidence of their success in the job.

professional white collar workplaces, from both the government sector and the corporate and commercial sectors, and we can reliably report that head-on conflicts are vanishingly few. The leaders who are the focus of our analysis are people who play an influential role in the organisations where they work, and especially in the communities of practice which comprise their sections, departments or teams. They provide useful insights into how leadership is done in a range of typical meeting contexts.

In this paper, then, we provide examples of how a range of leaders (who were considered by their organisations and peers to be good, effective managers) in a variety of different white-collar workplaces actually manage situations of potential conflict, demonstrating in particular (1) the range of strategies which they draw on and (2) their sensitivity to contextual factors in strategically managing conflict in formal meetings. In undertaking this analysis, we have not assumed that conflict in meetings is undesirable per se; indeed it is clear that the expression of conflicting views in meetings is often a productive way of making progress towards the organisation's objectives. Rather we focus on the way that the manager-leader's judgments about this issue are worked out in the meeting. Our analyses suggest that such judgements can frequently be interpreted as taking account both of the need to reach a desirable outcome from a task-oriented or transactional perspective, as well as the need to maintain good collegial relations, and to consider people's face needs, i.e. effective relational practice. In other words, it is the effective 'management' of conflict that is our focus.

There is, of course, a corresponding body of literature on conflict. In business and communication studies, Rahim and Bonama's (1979) analysis of conflict management styles is widely cited: i.e. *collaborating*, *accommodating*, *compromise*, *avoidance* and *competing* (cf. Brewer, Mitchell and Weber 2002; Gross and Guerrero 2000; Morris, Williams; Leung and Larrick 1998). Most obviously relevant, however, are the pragmatically oriented papers in Yaeger-Dror (2002), a special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* which focuses explicitly on disagreement and negotiation. In the introduction, Yaeger-Dror (2002) emphasizes the importance of context in the investigation of disagreements; it is argued that differences in setting (e.g. Jacobs 2002; Clayman 2002; Heritage 2002) and culture (e.g. Kangasharju 2002; Kaufmann 2002; Kakavá 2002) have an impact on the enactment of disagreement. In this paper we investigate the New Zealand workplace as a specific interactional setting, where power asymmetries between leaders and their subordinates are especially relevant.

Effective managers clearly adopt a range of different strategies in different contexts. In what follows, we identify and illustrate four such strategies along a continuum from least to most confrontational.

1. Conflict avoidance - asserting the "agenda"
2. Conflict diversion - moving conflict out
3. Conflict resolution using negotiation - working through conflict
4. Conflict resolution using authority - imposing a decision

2. How do effective leaders manage conflict?

Strategic conflict management

The effective management of conflict to ensure that it contributes constructively to the discussion typically begins well before the point at which the conflicting claims or views

of two or more participants are overtly voiced. Indeed, our analyses suggest that a good leader ensures that, as far as possible, any explicitly confrontational and aggressive verbalisation of contradictory positions in meetings is minimised. Overtly expressed disagreement is thus relatively infrequent in the meeting database as a whole. In a very detailed examination of ten different meetings, for example, involving over 12 hours of talking time, we identified only 15 instances of overtly articulated disagreement, and less than a handful of those instances could be characterised as serious disagreements expressed in an overtly confrontational way. So the first strategy we consider is the use of avoidance tactics.

2.1. Conflict avoidance - asserting the “agenda”

Conflict can arise in meetings when there are differences in participants’ understandings of what they are supposed to be discussing or deciding, or when participants have different views of what has been agreed. Constructive steps such as setting a clear agenda, summarising progress, keeping the discussion on track, and explicitly verbalising and ratifying implicit decisions, are therefore important strategic moves which contribute to maintaining order and avoiding conflict. One of the most common strategies for meeting management is simply to stick to the agenda. And when a digression promises to introduce contentious but irrelevant material, this can be a useful conflict avoidance tactic. Phrases such as *to get back to the agenda* and *just moving on* regularly occur in meetings as explicit discourse markers of this tactic. And, interestingly, when the meeting Chair was someone other than the team manager, it was noticeable that the manager would on occasion “move the meeting along” by overtly indicating that it was time to move to the next agenda item. In this situation, one manager simply said *next*, while another regularly used the phrase *moving right along*. These short intrusions on the rights of the meeting chair were always strategic moves to get the meeting back on track, but on occasion they also served to divert discussion from contentious areas which the leader judged irrelevant to the primary objectives of the meeting.

Example 1 illustrates a very effective leader managing the opening of a meeting which includes a covert challenge to her authority.

(1)³

Context: Meeting in a large commercial organisation chaired by section manager, Clara, since the usual chairperson is absent. Seth has gone to collect the minutes from the previous meeting which he didn't realise he was supposed to circulate.

1. Cla: okay well we might just start without Seth
2. he can come in and can review the minutes from last week
3. Ren: are you taking the minutes this week
4. Cla: no I'm just trying to chair the meeting
5. who would like to take minutes this week
6. Ren: who hasn't taken the minutes yet
7. Ben: I haven't yet I will

³ This example is analysed from a different perspective in Marra (2003). In this example and in all subsequent examples all names are pseudonyms. See appendix for transcription conventions.

8. Cla: thank you /Benny\
9. Ren: /oh Benny\ takes beautiful minutes too
10. Ben: don't tell them they'll want me doing it every week
11. [general laughter]
12. Cla: it's a bit of a secret
13. okay shall we kick off and just go round the room um doing an update
14. and then when Seth comes in with the the minutes
15. we need to check on any action items from our planning
16. over to you Marlene

We have used this example in our book *Power and Politeness in the Workplace* to concisely illustrate the discursive complexities of the ways in which an effective leader strategically “does power” in the course of everyday workplace interaction. As we say in the book, there is no doubt who is in charge here:

Clara declares the meeting open, *we might just start* (line 1), even though one of the members is not present. She deftly ducks Renee’s attempt to get her to take minutes by asserting her role as Chair (lines 2-3), and then asks for a volunteer for this task (line 5). She approves Benny as minute taker, *thank you Benny* (line 8), and sets the agenda for the meeting (lines 12-14). Finally, she allocates the first turn, *over to you Marlene* (line 15). (Holmes and Stubbe 2003b)

This excerpt also nicely illustrates Clara’s skill in managing potential conflict. Renee behaves as a bit of a stirrer in this interchange. Her enquiry (line 3) about whether Clara is taking the minutes is not guileless. While minute-taking is shared among team members, it is apparent from a range of non-verbal signals that Clara intends to chair this meeting. Renee is thus covertly challenging Clara’s role here. Moreover, she then takes over from Clara the responsibility for allocating the role of minute-taker by asking for someone who has not already undertaken this duty (line 6), and finally approves Benny as a suitable volunteer (line 9). Clara, however, manages Renee’s contestive behaviour good-humouredly but firmly. She re-asserts her role at line 8 by ratifying Benny as minute-taker, and then after a brief acknowledgement of the humorous exchange between Renee and Benny, she very firmly announces the agenda *okay shall we kick off and just go round the room um doing an update* (line 13).

This is a brief example, then, of one of the more subtle ways in which effective leaders manage potential conflict: i.e. they use their meeting management skills to defuse and divert it. Clara here constructs herself as an effective manager, a professional with good management skills; but her behaviour does not at all conform to the stereotype of the “hero manager” outlined in the business management literature.

Example 2 provides another example of a team Manager from a different organization controlling the discussion in order to more effectively manage a potential area of conflict and disagreement.

(2)

Context: Meeting participants are evaluating a number of proposals.

1. Bel: that's the way they came out
2. Aid: yep
3. Len: yeah yeah okay
4. Cli: one that I am surprised at is [institution] engineering

5. Len: hang on can we can we stay in the do this block first
6. Cli: oh okay you want to /do service first\
7. Len: /all right\
8. Len: do service first otherwise we'll
9. Cli: okay
10. Len: we'll we'll dart a bit
11. I just want to try and [clears throat] deal with the a
12. do the scores make sense with people's perceptions
13. or if there's a difference big difference in the scores
14. that we've got some comment that covers that big difference
15. so um + we've done that one

Len here skilfully directs the attention of the group to a general issue which he wants to obtain agreement about before they embark on the discussion of specific cases. By first dealing with cases where there is a *big difference in the scores*, he avoids the recurrence of the same basic issue (namely a difference in the way different teams are assigning evaluations) as a potential source of friction throughout the meeting.

In example 3, Dudley, the overall project leader (but not the meeting chair) re-directs his team back to the central criteria which should be guiding their decisions about training at a point where they are digressing to consider what he perceives as peripheral issues which have the potential for generating conflicting (and, in his judgement, irrelevant) views.

(3)

1. Eric: yeah no no I meant that as soon as people
2. like we're getting questions now people know that mobile's coming up
3. so what does this mean oh I'd like to know the profile of people
4. who carry these things
5. Dud: (oh you'd like to)
6. Eric: as you get those questions that's what drives the
7. Bar: mm
8. Dud: you you need to drive the training from a from your objectives
9. of what are you going to use the the the mobile data for
10. Bar: yep
11. Dud: and and what are your objectives that you want to achieve with that
12. Bar: mm
13. Dud: and base your training around those objectives
14. because I think isn't the reality is at the moment
15. yes we've got this thing called mobile data in the marketing database
16. do we really know how we're going to use it yet
17. we don't really do we because y- you know yes we've matched it
18. and we know how we think we're going to form it
19. to get get the output that we need
20. Bar: mm
21. Dud: but we haven't really tested that
22. we don't know if it's going to work as you wish it to work
23. Bar: mm
24. Dud: and really it's a bit of sort of touchy feely stuff at the moment

Dudley here intervenes in a discussion between three project team members who are beginning to express disparate views about what they should be doing next, and especially about whose views they should be seeking. He reminds the team of the relevant criteria for their specific project from the organisation's perspective: *You need to drive the training from a from your objectives of what are you going to use the the the mobile data for.* The discussion in the meetings we recorded between these IT experts was repeatedly prone to digress in a number of directions: e.g. into discussion of the technical advantages of different approaches or, as here, into a consideration of the unresearched (and thus speculative) needs of external clients. The group is made up of rather competitive experts from different areas of IT who are more than ready to argue with each other, albeit in a predominantly good-humoured way, given an opportunity (Holmes and Marra 2002a). Dudley's strategy of drawing attention to the high-level organisational objectives here very effectively pulls the plug on a potentially unproductive argument about what he judges to be irrelevant detail (such as what people use their mobile phones for).

In both examples 2 and 3, then, the hands-on strategy adopted by the leader for re-directing the discussion is clearly motivated by a wish to avoid unnecessary and unproductive contentious discussion. Len is chairing a long meeting of a group of eight people and it is crucial to establish at an early stage that he intends to manage the discussion so that they follow the agenda closely. Dudley's intervention is also crucially strategic – he is finally responsible for the delivery of the team's outputs, and they must therefore meet the objectives to which he draws explicit attention. Asserting this point before the team members get embroiled in an irrelevant argument is an effective means of preventing pointless conflict and frustration. Preventative action is thus clearly one important strategy for managing (potential) conflict in meetings.

2.2. Conflict diversion - moving conflict out

A second very effective strategy for managing conflict or potential conflict is to simply divert it to a different context. This tactic was used in our data predominantly in relation to two related kinds of situations (i) where it became clear that a particular issue needed further exploration or preparatory work before it was sensible for the meeting participants to discuss it (ii) when a disagreement arose between two experts or perhaps a sub-group about an (often technical) issue which was not strictly part of the business of the meeting as a whole.

In such cases, effective leaders typically identified the issue and then diverted it to another venue for discussion.

(4)

1. Bar: mobile's different /though isn't it\
2. Eric: /[drawls]: er:\ I don't know /we're still working on\ that um
3. Bar: /are we (still doing) history\
4. Eric the original said no there was to be there wasn't any history
5. which I said didn't make sense 'cause it was all available
6. /so\ I should check [coughs]

7. Bar: /mm\
 8. Mar: but it /(seems) like\ um the questions and=
 9. Eric: /(well)\
 10. Mar: =answers from the [name] feed when there wasn't any data there either
 11. um (there's) just no data + so
 12. Cal: that one that one certainly was a known Marco
 13. Mar: yeah [laughs] so yeah
 14. Eric: yeah
 15. Mar: that was known
 16. Cal: yes
 17. Mar: okay well
 18. Cal: yep
 19. Mar: (might)
 20. Bar: okay well you guys need to talk about it to/morrow\ not /not\ now
 21. Mar: /we'll talk\ /yep\
 22. Mar: yep

This example is typical. The problematic area gradually emerges from the discussion and it becomes apparent that the area of contention is something that needs to be resolved by the experts, and that there is no useful point in pursuing the discussion at a meeting which involves others who have nothing to contribute to the resolution of the issue. Another similar example involves the chair saying *you guys have got to sort that out*, and in a third example the chair says *shall we deal with that out-outside of this outside of this morning*. In each case the contentious or potentially contentious issue is diverted outside the context of the current meeting, and thus overt disagreement in the formal context of a large group meeting is avoided.

A closely related instance is an example where the leader listens to an extended complaint from a participant that she has had insufficient time to consider the documents before the meeting because she has been away.

(5)

1. Hen: okay thank you Georgia + er check ins
 2. Sel: can I make a comment on it
 3. (I've) much less I've only been away for ten days +
 4. um + I didn't come back till last night
 5. I didn't come in and look at the papers +
 6. I had thought through the fact that I wouldn't get any major papers
 7. unless they'd been out for consultation
 8. so there couldn't be anything I didn't expect today +
 9. I had discussed with strategic HR who undertook
 10. that the XX paper wouldn't be up until it had consulted with me
 11. and I find today an unconsulted paper on approving new capital bids +
 12. and a XX paper for decision and I have skimmed them not read them
 13. and I don't feel very + well prepared to participate
 14. particularly in the XX one where I have been very strongly involved +
 15. so I feel I don't I'm not at the stage that the papers not be handled today
 16. but I don't feel very comfortable about participating in the decision
 17. I hadn't finished reading the XX paper

18. I had commitments and catch ups this morning
 19. and I wasn't anticipating unconsulted papers
 20. Hen: yeah okay Selene what what as I understand
 21. you're registering your concern about that
 22. but not asking for us not to consider the paper is that right
 23. Sel: [drawls]: no: but I mean um ++
 24. yeah you you've summed it up correctly that I'm uncomfortable
 25. Hen: okay + well let let's um er if during the course of that discussion
 26. you you continue to be uncomfortable let's um discuss it at the time
 27. Sel: right
 28. Hen: any other check ins

The Chair paraphrases Selene's lengthy expression of concern in a very brief summary utterance *you're registering your concern about that but not asking for us not to consider the paper*. He then seeks her explicit agreement to the accuracy of his summary *is that right?* She agrees that she is not asking for a delay in the consideration of the paper, but she manages to indicate her unhappiness by her skilful statement *you've summed it up correctly that I'm uncomfortable* (line 24) which re-states the Chair's summary clause *you're registering your concern* with a much more expressive and forceful signal of her disagreement with the proposed process. The Chair acknowledges this, with the concession that she may raise her concerns in the course of the discussion (lines 25-26) and then proceeds with the discussion of the agenda item. This could be regarded as a neat conflation of the tactics of avoidance and diversion. The Chair skilfully avoids confronting the issue Selene is raising – namely the acceptability of discussing a matter in which she has been *strongly involved* when she is inadequately prepared, by a paraphrase which alters its pragmatic force. He further pulls the rug from under her by offering her an alternative means of addressing her concerns – though one she clearly considers less than satisfactory. This is skilful leadership at least at the level of meeting management. And while Selene may feel disgruntled, she has at least had the satisfaction of being heard; her complaint has been explicitly acknowledged, and her dignity or face needs addressed through the agreement that further discussion of her concerns will be permitted.⁴

2.3. Conflict resolution using negotiation - working through conflict

A third strategy for dealing with areas of disagreement in meetings is to acknowledge them and to then “manage” them, rather than avoid or divert them. This approach generally involves negotiating consensus among participants, a skill which was not an obvious component of the repertoire of all the chairs in our data. Good chairs and effective leaders tended to adopt it particularly when the decision was a serious or important one e.g., one which set a precedent for subsequent decisions. They did not use it for trivial decisions, which were typically decided by fiat or authority (see below).

⁴ This example is analysed from a different perspective in Marra (2003). In this example and in all subsequent examples all names are pseudonyms. See appendix for transcription conventions.

We have many examples of skilful leaders first clearly identifying the area of disagreement and then negotiating the discussion through to a group consensus. We have elsewhere illustrated in more detail how exactly effective managers achieve this discursively (Holmes 2000; Holmes and Stubbe 2003b; Marra *fc*). Here we briefly identify crucial points in three examples to illustrate the process. .

One very clear, extended example of a skillfully negotiated consensus involved a forty-minute discussion at a regular team meeting. The team was discussing the allocation of responsibilities in relation to a range of tasks which intersected with complicated staffing problems. The need to catch up with the filing had become a particular problem and a number of possible solutions were discussed, some involving complicated re-assignment of duties. One possible solution, first proposed at a relatively early point in the meeting was to bring in external people to do the filing, "the flying filing squad". A relatively senior team members, Zoe, whose area of responsibility involved document management, was clearly not happy with this suggestion, and throughout the discussion she raised a variety of objections to it whenever it re-emerged, as it regularly did.

The manager, Leila, handled the contentious issue by encouraging extensive and explicit discussion. Finally she checked that all were happy with the proposed solution. Example 6 provides some instances of how Leila explicitly sought consensus.

(6)

Context: Meeting of 6 participants to sort out systems problems.

1. Lei: I mean we may not be able to find a solution but that
2. I mean you're the people who are in the best situation for knowing that
3. what's your feeling?
.....
4. Lei: I want people to be honest about whether they
5. if they don't you know even if things come up again
6. now if you don't feel comfortable say so
.....
7. Lei: you need to work that through
.....
8. Lei: does this feel okay
9. I mean I don't want anyone to feel that (6)

Leila's strategies of requesting people to make explicit their reservations (lines 4, 6, 9) and overtly seeking agreement before proceeding (lines 3,8) finally resulted in a satisfactory conclusion. It was apparent from the discussion that the resolution of the staffing issues left the team feeling very positive, as indicated especially by a good deal of collaborative and mutually supportive humour at the end of the meeting (Holmes 2000)

Leila is an effective leader. Her skill in obtaining explicit consensus, ensuring that participants agreed with the decisions made, not only at the point they were first reached, but also at relevant points throughout where they interacted with other decisions, was clearly one important factor which contributed to her effectiveness.

Our second example of negotiating a pathway through conflict is taken from another organisation where there is a strong consensus culture. In this example the manager skilfully leads the discussion from a position where different participants are

clearly at odds with one another to a consensus conclusion that is consistent with the organisation's transactional objectives.

The group is discussing the wide range of evaluations assigned by different evaluators to the various programmes for which the department is responsible.

At the start of this section of the discussion, one participant, Bet, identifies an evaluation which she considers surprising, and then goes on to signal that she disagrees with the "A" rating assigned to the designated programme. In the extensive discussion which follows, the manager, Len, leads the group through to a conclusion which ratifies the "A" rating on grounds of student performance, while noting that there are questions to be answered concerning the management of the programme. He achieves this by directing the team's attention to the central criterion which he considers relevant, namely the success level of the course's students in subsequent tertiary education programmes. The discussion extends over several minutes - just the key stages relevant to the issues addressed in this paper are provided below.

Bet notes that she is surprised at the high rating of the programme under consideration, and when asked for her comment she notes that the programme has "occupancy" problems: i.e., it does not have enough students to justify the amount of space being used or the level of allocation of resources.

(7a)

Context: Meeting of Manager with eight skills advisors to discuss evaluations of courses.

1. Bel: having heaps of problems with occupancy and stuff
2. Len: is that a a rating that says for those who actually do the course
3. do quite well in it
4. Bel: I don't /know [name] did the performance rating\
5. Sio: /[drawls]: oh: yeah yeah\ probably
6. Len: would that be a way of describing it
7. Sio: yep
8. Iri: I think that's being generous
9. [laughter]

In response to Belinda's comment, Len asks a question which directs attention to the students' performance as a basis for the evaluation (line 2). Note that he here phrases his point as a query rather than a challenge, although its illocutionary force is to present an alternative interpretation of the data. He takes the same approach in line 6, again asking if this is a possible interpretation, rather than by asserting this view as the correct interpretation.

(7b)

10. Sio: what all the all the /present () go through the course\
11. go on to further training I mean
12. Bel: /don't know what ()\
13. Sio: and they get really good high outcomes
14. but you're obviously your occupancy's low
15. and the percentage for the last few weeks has been sixty eight percent
16. Cli: yeah I think that was probably based on

17. it's on the processes

In response to Len's query Sioban acknowledges that all those who complete the course *go on to further training* (line 11) and *they get really good high outcomes* (line 13), but then the discussion moves back to a focus on processes with a number of participants joining in to provide information about the ways in which the evaluation process was unsatisfactory. There is then some further discussion about the unsatisfactory nature of processes in which the evaluation is undertaken by those involved in teaching the course, but in the course of this Val acknowledges that those who take the course are happy with it (lines 20-23 below). Len's contribution during this discussion is simply *mm*.

(7c)

18. Bel: what did X say to you when he talked about it?
 19. Val: um that just a little bit about the () processes at that
 20. and what they're where they get to
 21. the um the trainees who finish the course
 22. or the trainees who who actually go through it
 23. are full of praise for it and that kind of thing
 24. Len: mm
 25. Val: um /but\
 26. Iri: /which\ is isn't surprising given that I mean you know
 27. it's the [name] leader's ... wife who runs it
 28. and you know I mean a whole lot of /things\ like that
 29. /[[laughter]\
 30. Cli: yes it's not the sort of course you make complaints about yeah

At this point Len raises his point about the programme's outcomes once again, and this time it is phrased not as a question but as an assertion followed by a tag question, inviting confirmation.

(7d)

31. Len: /but but um\
 32. Val: /()\ yeah
 33. Len: but the trainees do get quite high high outcomes don't they
 34. Sio: off?
 35. Len: off that course
 36. Sio: yeah they all go on to further /training\
 37. Val: /mm\
 38. Len: onto /training college\
 39. Sio: /being full time\ yeah /() full time\
 40. Len: /() yeah\
 41. Bel: yeah
 42. Sio: one year certificate course
 43. Iri: mm what happens after that one
 44. Sio: well then they shoot off to uni um teacher's /college
 45. finish that and come out\ with their=
 46. Len: /teacher's college and come out with a diploma\

47. Sio: =come out with their diploma and shoot off to all the ()
 48. Cli: so it's really an occupancy thing
 49. Sio: yeah
 50. Iri: oh no
 51. Len: the () it's more a whole course management
 52. /thing I think /it is\
 53. Bel: /yeah\ I was just going to /say that it's\
 54. shall I /make a note\
 55. Cli: /oh okay\
 56. Len: occupancy is an indication

The discussion continues to address other issues relating to this programme, but Len has achieved his main objective by this point, he has obtained explicit agreement that the course is achieving desirable outcomes. The remainder of the discussion ratifies the decision to focus on the course management issue. Len makes relatively few interventions in this discussion, but they are all strategic and effective in facilitating agreement on an issue that promised initially to be a contentious and very problematic one.

Our third example is a very complex one which is discussed in more detail in Marra (fc). The contentious issue entails extensive discussion across more than one meeting between members of a project team from a large commercial organisation. Here we focus on just a few snippets to illustrate how Sandy, the team leader manages the issue. The source of the conflict is the resistance of two team members, Daisy and Seth, to Sandy's proposal that they should take primary responsibility for what the team refer to as *communications*, namely disseminating decisions about their part of the project to consumers. Daisy and Seth have identified another team member, Marlene, who is generally responsible for communications, as a more appropriate person for this task. It is clear that Marlene will be involved but the nub of the issue is where the demarcation lines will be drawn. Example 8 indicates the way in which this contentious issue is batted back and forth between the participants.

(8a)

1. Dai: Marlene was gonna have the budget for /the trav-\
 2. San: /she has got\ budget yeah
 3. Dai: yeah I think we did talk about /that\
 4. San: /yep\
 5. Dai: and thought that we wouldn't be DOing it
 6. MARlene would actually be /+ we\ would be telling Marlene
 7. San: /I would like\ I would like you to be doing it th-
 8. I would like you to do the communication yourselves
 9. I would like you to work through Marlene to make sure
 10. that the communication's consistent across + the whole of this project
 11. Dai: mm
 12. San: but I think that your team will be the people who have the knowledge
 13. Dai: mm
 14. San: [drawls]: um: you've definitely got the um background knowledge
 15. and the credibility of the people out there

16. so um I I think you'll your your people are i-
 17. the people in your team are ideal to do this communication and /um\
 18. Dai: /maybe\ we do need some money then Seth
 19. Seth: um we we will definitely need some

Daisy and Sandy agree that the team has already discussed the allocation of a travel budget to Marlene for the communications (lines 1-2), but it becomes clear that Daisy has interpreted this to imply that she and Seth would not be centrally involved in the communications aspects *thought that we wouldn't be DOing it* (line 5). The past tense *thought* here is usefully ambiguous – is it what Daisy thought or is what *we* i.e. the team thought? Sandy then proceeds to lay out what he wants in clear unambiguous terms *I would like you to be doing it* (lines 7-9) and then provides his reasons i.e. while they should use Marlene for consistency, they are the experts with the credibility. By shifting focus to the budget implications of Sandy's statement (lines 18-19), Daisy and Seth appear to have accepted his argument.

In the course of the subsequent discussions, however, it becomes clear that the matter has not been laid to rest. The issue resurfaces as a job demarcation issue. When Sandy repeats that he expects Daisy and Seth to be doing the communicating themselves (line 20), for instance, Daisy, supported by Seth (line 22) launches into a detailed description of what she thinks Marlene should be doing (lines 26-30).

(8b)

20. San: I would be planning to do that /communicat\ing yourself
 21. Dai: /mm\ we want her to start communicating 'though
 22. Seth: yeah and and /start building up it's a whole customer service centre\
 23. Dai: /just kind of just putting the seed in\ in people's minds you know
 24. San: okay
 25. Seth: [drawls]: um:
 26. Dai: this is what I was trying to get to at the last meeting last week is actually
 27. she's got to start telling the reps um a bit more information and and
 28. Seth: and yeah um /um\
 29. Dai: /and kind of\ sowing the seeds not giving lots of detail
 30. but kind of just keep sowing the seeds every time /she\
 31. Sandy: /yeah\

At this point Sandy appears to endorse Daisy's outline of what she regards as Marlene's role and responsibilities (*sowing the seed, not giving lots of detail*), but in the next meeting the issue re-surfaces.

(8c)

32. Dai: /so what what are we going to\ what are we gonna actually use Marlene for
 33. Seth: /[laughs]\

And a little later in the same meeting Seth picks up the baton, and the issue of who is responsible for which aspects of communications is up for discussion again:

(8d)

34. Seth: but is it not [drawls]: er: prudent to say that maybe the

35. policies and procedures should be starting to be communicated
 36. it's outside of our project /to\ to have some of those (that's) and that's=
 37. San: /yep\
 38. Seth: =where we where we sort of question the involvement of Marlene
 39. it's like um /we're\ taking on the responsibility of of the whole project
 40. Dai: /yeah\
 41. Seth: of communicating that or are we taking on /on /the\ service level project\
 42. Dai: /I didn't think we were\
 43. San: /well\ well we one of the things we talked we talked about that a little bit

Again we see Marlene's role is questioned, and Daisy supports Seth's query with her assertion *I didn't think we were* (line 42). Sandy then again patiently reminds them of the outcomes of the earlier discussion.

Finally, after much further discussion, Sandy's achieves his goal - Daisy and Seth take responsibility for the communications aspect of their part of the project. The measure of Sandy's success in managing this contentious discussion is reflected not only in the fact that a resolution is reached, but also by the fact that by the end of the discussion Seth and Daisy have adopted the challenge whole-heartedly and are proffering a range of ideas for ways of managing the communication of the project (see Marra *fc*). So in this final excerpt we see Daisy enthusiastically making suggestions for how to manage the process.

(8e)

44. San: but we have a we have a um a stake in this there's a real benefit to us
 45. of getting them to understand what we do /be\cause
 46. Dai: /yeah\.....
 47. San: [quietly]: it's a big job: we're starting on it and and the first s-
 48. the first /job is that the business review is to launch it\
 49. Dai: /and I I think more the more information you can give to the field
 50. the more they actually talk about it
 51. San: yep
 52. Seth: yep and they /(usually) that it's gonna be for us\ /(the)\
 53. Dai: /and that's when you start getting the\ feedback /and you\
 54. everybody will get feedback
 55. I don't like doing this you know why why are you doing this
 56. and then it it everybody has a (buy in)
 57. and I mean everybody in the customer service + group has a buy in
 58. to say it's gonna benefit you in the end
 59. San: yeah /well that's the (spin isn't) it\
 60. Dai: /you'll get the message\ (across)
 61. San: you can go from this job here to working for the
 62. prime mini/ster\ as a spin doctor
 63. Daisy: /yeah\
 64. Benny: /[laughs\
 65. Seth: /[laughs\
 66. Daisy: /yeah\

Sandy's humorous comment that after this experience they will be qualified to apply for job as spin doctors, together with the laughter which this remark elicits, mark the satisfactory conclusion of this issue. These are frequent discursive signals that a decision has been reached - especially a difficult or long-drawn out one (see Marra 2003).

In all three of these negotiations over areas of disagreement or contentious issues, the leader spells out the issue explicitly. Typically in such negotiations, the contested proposition or problematic issue is stated clearly by the leader so that it is clearly identified. There is no fudging or brushing the issue under the carpet. The advantage of this approach is that the issue is less likely to re-surface at some considerably later time or that it will continue to cause subterranean and possibly therefore even more potentially corrosive problems. Time devoted to negotiating consensus when it is apparent that meeting participants have different opinions about an important issue is clearly regarded by effective leaders as time well spent.⁵ Experienced leaders have commented that decisions which are rail-roaded through often do not stick; so a decision on a complex or contentious issue which is reached too quickly, or with inadequate time for discussion, may well unravel later. This is especially likely if those who are unhappy with the decision are influential, or if there is a large group of such people.

2.3. Conflict resolution using authority - imposing a decision

Finally, and briefly, leaders have available the tactic of direct confrontation with the overt assertion and imposition of what they want. Because of their positions of power, they can ignore, discount and over-ride the views of others, and insist that what they want goes. In fact, however, the use of this tactic is rare. Leaders who ignore the views of their team members take a risk and they need to be on very secure ground. There are very few examples of the use of this strategy in the extensive database of professional meetings that we collected, particularly when we consider conflict over relatively serious issues.

One clear example involves a leader imposing her decision on a group who do not agree with her. It is an example we have analysed elsewhere in some detail (Holmes and Marra 2002a, 2002b, ip). It is included here for completeness (from Holmes and Stubbe 2001)

(9)

Context: Regular weekly meeting of project team in large commercial organisation.

1. Har: look's like there's been actually a request for screendumps
2. I know it was outside of the scope
3. but people (will be) pretty worried about it
4. Cla: no screendumps
5. Matt: we-

⁵ As a reviewer pointed out to us, it is unfortunate that we are not able to see how the conflict is finally resolved in cases of conflict avoidance and diversion. We agree that this would be a fascinating area for further research; the nature of our methodology (where participants have control over what is recorded, see Holmes and Stubbe 2003b: ch 2), means that in these instances we do not have the relevant data to follow the conflict beyond the relevant meeting.

6. Cla: no screendumps
7. Peg: [*sarcastically*] thank you clara
8. Cla: /no screendumps\
9. Matt: /we know\
10. we know you didn't want them and we um er /we've\
11. Cla: /that does not\ meet the criteria
12. [several reasons provided why screendumps should be allowed]
13. Cla: thanks for looking at that though
14. San: so that's a clear well maybe no
15. Cla: it's a no
16. San: it's a no a royal no
17. Cla: did people feel disempowered by that decision
18. Peg: [*sarcastically*] no

This project team is discussing how best to provide instructions to other members of the organisation about a specialised computer process. As Harry outlines (lines 1-3), the team has received requests to allow people to print from the computer screen (i.e. to “screendump”). Clara, the overall project leader, indicates very clearly that she opposes this proposal, with an explicit prohibition *no screendumps* (line 4). The rest of the team are unhappy with this, and they proceed to argue with her, providing reasons why screendumps should be permitted. Finally, however, Clara simply over-rides their opposition with her repeated simple statement *no screendumps*. She is not prepared to negotiate, and nor is she willing to discuss the matter further. Her decision is final. This is the most confrontational resolution of a contentious issue in our extensive data base.

A second less extreme example involved the same leader. The team were discussing what form the initial greeting on the organisation’s answerphone should take Clara’s response on this issue is again uncompromising.

(10)

Context: Regular weekly meeting of project team in large commercial organisation.

1. San: we were going to have a vote on
2. it’s welcome or is it kia ora
3. Cla: oh it’s welcome
4. San: you sure
5. Cla: yes
6. Peg: you phone up and say whatever they /want to outside business hours\
7. Vita: /laugh\
8. Peg: but in business hours it’s welcome

Clara firmly assert her decision *it’s welcome* (line 3), and the team clearly accept her decision, albeit with a wry humorous comment from Peg to soften the impact of the direct and explicit challenge to Sandy’s proposal that the issue be decided democratically by a vote (line 1).

3. Discussion

A number of interesting points emerge from this survey of the range of strategies used by effective leaders in our data. Here we focus on just two, which can be regarded as different facets of the same complex point:

- (i) the extent to which any specific instance is a unique response to the particular context in which it occurs
- (ii) the extent to which - at least in our data - there is always evidence of attention to dimensions of relational practice (see Fletcher 1999; Holmes and Marra ip), or to the face needs of other participants, as well as to the transactional objectives of the organisation.

3.1. *Context and conflict*

Our review of the range of strategies used by effective leaders in managing conflict in meetings inevitably identifies a large number of complex factors which contribute to an understanding of “why this particular utterance at this particular point?” [to paraphrase Schegloff]

Here we list just four very obvious factors which emerged in relation to the examples discussed above: The type of interaction, the kind of community of practice or workplace culture, the relative seriousness of the issue involved, and finally leadership style. We do not have space here to do more than briefly sketch their relevance.

3.1.1. *Type of interaction*

The data we have drawn on in this paper is all taken from formal meetings which involved decision-making rather than reporting, and where the decisions made were explicitly recorded, so that the leaders were accountable for them. Any consequences from wrong decisions were their responsibility. Consequently, as illustrated in examples 9 and 10, disagreement on a serious issue cannot be allowed to go unchallenged if it is likely to result in what the leader perceives as an unacceptable decision from the organisation’s perspective.

The relative formality of the meeting and related factors, such as meeting size and agreed length, are also relevant in analyzing a leader’s choice of strategy: The option of a lengthy negotiation by Leila in example 6 was not available to Henry in example 5 where time constraints, the large number of participants, and the associated formality all contributed to the adoption of a different tactic.

3.1.2. *Workplace culture/community of practice*

The extent to which the participants worked together on a regular basis, and formed a tight-knit vs. a loosely-knit community of practice (Wenger 1998; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1999; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999), also seems to be a potentially relevant factor in the choice of strategy for managing conflict. Leaders of closely-knit teams seemed more likely to adopt a strategy of negotiation and to avoid direct confrontation. People who did not work regularly together were more willing to engage in directly confrontational discourse (Holmes and Marra 2002a; Holmes and Marra ip)

However, this was also moderated by the overall organisational culture which could often be described as broadly “consensus-oriented”, democratic, and cooperative, as opposed to more “corporate”, hierarchical, or competitive (Holmes and Stubbe 2003a)

3.1.3. *Importance/seriousness of the issue*

Some contentious issues can be avoided, ignored or diverted to another context for resolution elsewhere. The examples above illustrated how experienced leaders provided explicit guidance on which issues were to be discussed at the meeting and which not; they typically kept people on track with discussion, and they clearly selected the areas of conflict which they were prepared to discuss at length, and those they were not. In general, not surprisingly issues which merited fuller discussion were ones with serious consequences for the organisation.

3.1.4. *Leadership style*

Finally, one other important factor which emerged from the analyses as potentially relevant to the way that conflict was handled was the kind of leadership style adopted by the leader in each meeting (Hede 2001). Some leaders tended to construct themselves as 'team players', while others tended to perform as 'hero leaders'. This leadership construction was apparent in such areas as the extent to which a leader drew attention to their leadership role, the insistence on steady progress through the agenda, and the importance of clear decisions as a primary responsibility associated with that role. In one organisation, for instance, the designation of a particular leader as the Queen, was a humorous but accurate signal of her leadership style, while another project leader in the same organisation was clearly perceived as one of the team. Not surprisingly, ways of managing conflict could also be related to these style differences.

3.2. *Relational practice and organisational/ transactional imperatives*

It has been suggested that one of the defining characteristics of a 'hero leader' is their commitment to the organisational goals of the enterprise for which they work. They are often represented as highly focussed, totally committed individuals who consistently put the achievement of project objectives ahead of nurturing personal relationships in the workplace (Hede 2001; Proctor-Thomson and Parry 2001). Sinclair (1997: 52) comments on the predominant image of the heroic leader as self-reliant, emotionally tough, and decisive, for instance. (c.f., Beck 2000; Fletcher 1999)

Naturally, things are not so simple. Even the most transactionally focussed leader recognises that they must carry others along with them if they are to succeed in achieving the organisation's goals. However, it is certainly true that different managers pay different degrees of attention to aspects of relational practice.

Our analysis of the ways in which leaders manage disagreement and conflict provides a range of interesting ways in which effective leaders manage this balance between transactional and personal goals in specific situations. When a contentious issue

is not a central one or a serious one in terms of the meeting's objectives, an effective strategy for dealing with it is to avoid it or to divert it to another context. This effectively preserves interpersonal relations by avoiding the face threatening act (FTA). Leaders display their judgment and expertise by making this call when appropriate.

Serious areas of contention which need to be addressed clearly require a different set of strategies. The most frequent method of dealing with serious areas of disagreement which were central to the achievement of the transactional objectives of the organization, was to address them directly and thoroughly, and to negotiate through to a resolution of the areas of contention, as illustrated in examples 7 and 8. This strategy per se qualifies as a means of paying attention to the face needs of those involved, since their concerns are allocated attention and time, and their agreement to a resolution explicitly sought.

It is also worth noting that even the rare instances of direct confrontation or challenge are typically mitigated or attenuated in some way, often by the leaders themselves. In example 9, for instance, although the leader, Clara, rejects them, she nonetheless responds appreciatively to the reasons provided by the team members saying *thanks for looking at that though*, and this is followed by a short humorous interchange which is neatly ratified by the leader's concluding ironic query *did people feel disempowered by that decision*. And in example 5, another instance of a relatively direct dismissal of a team member's concerns, the leader attenuates the FTA by a degree of overt attention to the opponent's face needs or dignity. The leaders in our data, then, often mitigated confrontational behaviour by the use of strategies which paid attention to the face needs of participants, or which strengthened and re-affirmed the solidarity of the group after a period when it had been under stress.

4. A brief excursus into theory

These reflections on just some of the wide range of socio-cultural, situational and contextual factors which are relevant in accounting for the various ways in which leaders "manage" conflict in meetings raise the question of the extent to which current socio-pragmatic theory or discourse analysis frameworks satisfactorily account for the complex realities we find in our data.

Politeness theory has come in for extensive criticism since it was first outlined by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), but it still presents one of the most powerful starting points for the analysis of discourse involving face-threatening acts such as disagreements and challenges. Clearly our data provides extensive support for the idea that doing disagreement is a complex process which can rarely be captured in a single speech act or a single utterance. The process of expressing disagreement often involves extended negotiation over several speaker turns. Indeed, a complex contentious issue is often worked through dynamically, sometimes throughout a long meeting, and in some cases even over several meetings.

In addition to this inadequacy, however, Politeness Theory also fails to account for the relationship between the weight of the FTA as measured by PDR (Power, social Distance, Rating of imposition), and the strategies adopted for dealing with it.

To put it briefly, the greater the D (as measured by, say, size and formality of meeting, and degree of solidarity between members/ loose-knit vs. tight-knit CofP etc.), and the greater the P (i.e., the power differential between the leader and the participants), and the greater the R (i.e., the more serious the issue) then the MORE likely it seems that

an effective leader will adopt a relatively direct, explicit and non-negotiative strategy for challenging or disagreeing with others. (e.g. example 8), On the other hand, attention to the face needs of participants was most evident in contexts where D was lowest (e.g. examples 6 and 8) but where R was relatively high, i.e. the issue was one which mattered.

In addition there are further factors which are not accounted for by Politeness Theory, but which are relevant to any explanation of strategy selection: e.g., the preferred leadership style of the individual, and the organisational culture within which the interaction is taking place. At a more micro-level, it would also be possible to show how what exactly constitutes a challenge or a disagreement actually shifts throughout an interaction, and the issue of exactly whose face is being threatened at any point is a complex one.

This discussion might suggest that a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework (perhaps combined with a detailed Conversation Analysis approach to analysis) would provide a more adequate theoretical model for analyzing workplace conflict. CDA privileges power above other variables, and especially institutional power. At a relatively global level, we can say that those with the most power have the greatest freedom to make use of relatively confrontational tactics. But we have demonstrated in this paper that such an explanation can be considered unhelpfully crude. It takes no account of the skilled strategic management that effective powerful leaders demonstrate in handling a range of contentious issues in meetings. Any adequate model must be able to take account of the wide range of relevant factors which come into play as participants actively construct disagreement and work their way through conflictual situations in meetings.

5. Conclusion

Good leaders “manage” conflict: i.e. they deal with it in ways that are productive in terms of their transactional goals, while also paying attention to aspects of relational practice. The analysis has illustrated that the effective leaders identified in our dataset select from a range of strategies available to challenge, contest or disagree with others, paying careful attention to complex contextual factors, including the type of interaction, the kind of community of practice or workplace culture in which they are operating, and the relative seriousness of the issue involved. Good leadership, moreover, requires skills in relational practice - taking account of the relationships between people at work, and the face needs of others in interaction. Hence disagreement and conflict is typically “negotiated” and worked through dynamically, often over several speaker turns, but sometimes throughout a long meeting, and in some cases even over several meetings. Finally, we have outlined some of the weaknesses of current frameworks for handling the analysis of workplace conflict, and identified some of the requirements which must be met by an adequate theoretical model in this area.

Appendix Transcription conventions

YES	Capitals indicate emphatic stress
[laughs] : :	Paralinguistic features in square brackets, colons indicate start/finish
+	Pause of up to one second
(3)	Pause of specified number of seconds
... /.....\ ...	Simultaneous speech
... /.....\ ...	Simultaneous speech
(hello)	Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance
=	Speaker's turn continues
=	Speaker's turn continues
?	Rising or question intonation
-	Incomplete or cut-off utterance
... ..	Section of transcript omitted
XM/XF	Unidentified Male/Female

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