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**An Institutional Work Approach to Conflict Management**

A Case Study of a Swedish Vehicle Manufacturer

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A Case Study of a Swedish Vehicle Manufacturer

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we investigate workplace conflicts at a Swedish vehicle manufacturer. The aim of the study is therefore to provide a deeper understanding for conflict management in the workplace. The data was collected through internal documents and by conducting 16 interviews with employees, managers and HR-representatives from the organisation, resulting in forty-eight unique conflict situations. The data collected laid the foundations for an analysis driven by the lens of new institutionalism and institutional work, supplementing existing conflict management literature. This paper shows that in the organisation studied, there is a general approach towards managing conflict situations, regardless of the conflict type that exists, in this paper referred to as the conflict management escalation process. The origins, motives, and processes of this well-established conflict management procedure are in this paper explored and discussed in depth, contributing to previous literature in the domain of organisational conflict research.

**Keywords:** *Conflict management, conflict type, new institutionalism, institutional work*

## **Introduction**

Conflicts are a naturally occurring phenomenon in organisations (Jehn et al., 2012). For example, Mintzberg (1973) estimated that around 30% of managerial responsibilities revolve around conflict management, thus standing as a both time- and effort-consuming activity for managers and teams. For its importance and effect on team functioning, conflict management therefore constitutes a timeless area of research that has consistently been subject to management studies in history (Carton & Tewfik, 2016). However, in order to further understand why conflicts are an important area of studies today, we must first look into one of

the cornerstones of the organisation, the teams. Working in teams is today still the norm in most organisations around the world (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn et al., 2012; Lang, 2009; Zander et al., 2015). Therefore, one may postulate that an organisation's *raison d'être* depends to a large extent on its teams to function adequately and to be effective in order to conduct business (Flanagan & Runde, 2009). A team is typically described as an entity consisting of three or more members striving towards achieving one or more measurable goals. Teams are often tasked with solving a problem, coming up with new ideas to overcome competition, creating more effective ways of working or new ways of improving the organisation (Hackman, 1987). As a consequence of this way of working, challenges adhere that are of noteworthy importance in order to keep the team effective and in line with the organisational goal(s). A result of some of these challenges that derive from working in teams are the conflicts or the 'incompatible differences' that arise, (Carton & Tewfik p.1127, 2016) between two or more members of the team. Because team members' work is of an interdependent nature, working within social systems and sometimes with incompatible goals or differences, various types of conflicts may occur. Moreover, increased diversity in teams typically entails increased opposing perspectives, which can be both a strength and a challenge for the team performance (Flanagan & Runde, 2009). Thus, conflicts can also be seen as a necessity in teams, in order to create debate, increase critical thinking and facilitate the creative process (ibid.). The concept of conflict is therefore of imperative essence to understand, both for managers and researchers, in order to adequately manage conflicts as to extract the positive aspect of conflicts that derive from the differences, while reducing the negative impact and harm on the team (Carton & Tewfik, 2016; Flanagan & Runde, 2009; Jehn et al., 2012).

While many scholars have focused on how conflicts within a team affect team performance or how conflicts are best managed, the relationship between the type(s) of conflict that exists and its management has been studied to less extent. Only recently did Carton and Tewfik (2016) conclude in their article that individual conflict management strategies can have an influence not only on single conflict types, but also on multiple types. The article constitutes a potential basis on which to conduct research given its comprehensiveness over previous theories and given its recent publication. The authors developed a framework based on a literature review of various conflict management strategies, in order to show how these strategies affected multiple conflicts. Thus, Carton and Tewfik (2016) contributes to the conflict literature by depicting a more nuanced view on how various strategies may have positive, neutral or negative impact, depending on what type of conflict exists. However, as the authors studied existing strategies to conflict management and compared how these strategies relate to existing types of conflicts from previous studies by using a literature review, there arises a need to study the manifestation of conflicts and its management in relation to the type of conflict and its context in practice. This is one of the gaps and inconsistencies in contemporary literature that this paper aims to help understand.

This paper uses a theoretical framework to analyse the findings stemming from new institutionalism and institutional work. Thus, from an institutional perspective on conflicts and conflict management, the concepts can be understood to incorporate norms and pressures

towards how companies and managers should work with conflicts. These norms and pressures may derive from a strive of being similar to other organisations, to gain legitimacy from their shareholders or, bluntly put, to survive (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The institutional perspective may also help in analysing the differences between what the organisations claim to do and what they actually do in terms of conflict management (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Institutional work, a concept within institutional theory, is used in this paper as a theoretical tool of analysis in addition to the conflict management literature, in order to explain the actions that affect the day-to-day routines and changes that create, maintain and disrupt institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009). Thus, using institutional work as a theoretical framework allows the authors to explore the stability in institutions, in addition to the actions that affect them (Suddaby, 2010). This will be thoroughly explained in the theoretical framework.

The aim of this paper is to study and understand the practice of conflict management within a particular context, namely a Swedish vehicle manufacturer. Therefore, the paper aims to answer the following research questions: (1) *How do conflicts and conflict management practices unfold in an organisation?* and (2) *How can conflict management practices be explained by the theoretical concept of institutional work?*

This paper is structured as follows: we start by presenting an introduction to conflicts and conflict management, followed by an overview of the theoretical framework of institutional work; secondly, the study method is presented, describing the setting and how data was collected and analysed; thirdly, in the findings section, a selection of conflict situations and the studied organisation's conflict management escalation procedure is presented; the subsequent section critically analyses and discusses the findings, providing insights into the practice of conflict management within the specific context. The section further presents the study's potential limitations to the findings and suggestions for future research within the area. Finally, the main findings and theoretical as well as practical contributions of this paper are summarised in a conclusion.

## **Earlier Studies and Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction to Conflicts**

Previous studies and literature on conflict and conflict management is extensive and discursive to some extent. Countless aspects, areas and views on the concepts of conflict and conflict management have over the years been studied by scholars, including the definition of conflict (Putnam & Poole, 1986; Carton & Tewfik, 2016), the various types of conflicts (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Wall & Callister, 1995; Fowler, 2013; De Wit et al., 2012; Rahim, 2002; Jehn et al., 2012) and conflicts' effect on team performance, *inter alia* (DeWitt et al., 2012; (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Carton & Tewfik, 2016; Rahim, 2002). Moreover, scholars have in recent years started to explore the nuances of conflicts, e.g. discussing the co-occurrence of conflict types in single conflict situations (De Wit et al., 2012; Murnighan & Conlin, 1991; Fowler, 2013; Carton & Tewfik, 2016), conflict asymmetry and how disputants can view the same conflict differently (Jehn et al. 2012; Jehn

et al. 2010), and the ever-lasting debate on whether conflicts should be terminated as they arise or managed to an optimal level (Pondy, 1967; March & Simon, 1958; Carton & Tewfik, 2016; Jehn et al., 2012; Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

In this report we have chosen to apply a definition of conflicts stemming from recently published literature by Carton and Tewfik (2016), who studied ten of the most influential conceptualizations of conflicts in the contemporary discourse, and searched for keywords that appear in each of the studies, boiling down the essence of conflicts into two simple words: *incompatible differences* (p. 1127). This is the definition of a conflict that will be used throughout the paper. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are several definitions of conflicts used in literature, and several types of conflicts that read into the definitions. In contemporary literature, clear distinctions have been made between conflicts on different levels, depending on if they appear on personal/interpersonal, intragroup/intergroup organisational/interorganisational level, etcetera. To be more specific, the distinctions revolve around who is involved in the conflict, the implications of the conflict and whom it may affect or concern (Wall & Callister, 1995). Naturally, the reason to determine which type of conflict exists is because it helps to determine the appropriate technique to managing the conflict (Fowler, 2013).

Two main conflict categories have hitherto been prevalent in research, above all else. These have over the years been given numerous labels, such as work and people conflicts, or task and emotional conflicts (Rahim, 2002). However, the implications of the categories have remained more or less the same. Most commonly, the two types are referred to as *task conflicts* and *relationship conflicts* (Rahim, 2002; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1997; Jehn et al., 2012). Task conflicts typically concern areas of work such as the content and outcomes of the task being performed (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), whereas relationship conflicts regard for example disputes in personal taste, politics, ideology, values and interpersonal style etc. (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995). This dichotomy has always been a convenient, simple duality in research, hence its widespread use and popular recognition: for example, it allows for task conflicts to be oftentimes categorized as inherently cognitive, while relationship conflicts as affective (Behfar et al., 2011). However, as we move forward into more recent conflict literature, we see that two additional categories have been added to the previous two, in parallel with a growing awareness that the previous dichotomy was oversimplified and did not fully describe the complex reality of workplace conflicts in a complete way (Behfar et al., 2011). These are namely *status conflicts* and *process conflicts*. The first category is defined by Bendersky and Hays (2012) as disputes over individuals' relative positions in the hierarchy of the group in which they belong. These specific conflicts can then produce actions of undermining nature, in particular towards the hierarchical position of other group members, as well as actions aimed at creating gaps in that same very hierarchy (Carton & Tewfik, 2016). Process conflicts arise instead in situations of disagreements concerning the coordination of people and actions in the pursuit of a task (Behfar et al., 2011), or, in other words, they call for divergences in the assignment of roles and responsibilities (Carton & Tewfik, 2016). In practice, process conflicts can entail differences with regard to,

for example, the desired or preferred task strategy, assignment and division of work, scheduling, and/or work flow.

### **Co-occurrence in Conflicts**

Although there are nowadays four different categories of conflicts used in contemporary literature to describe what type of conflict exists in a situation, it is of essence to note that different types of conflicts are not mutually exclusive in a given situation. On the contrary, according to a recent study by de Wit et al. (2012), one is more likely to witness multiple conflicts of different typologies unfold at the same time, rather than to see a single conflict type in isolation. An example of this was observed by Murnighan and Conlon (1991) about a string quartet who were tasked with playing a musical piece. When first observed, the members of the quartet appeared to be in dissidence about how to play the piece at hand (task conflict), however, after more rigorous analysis, the authors saw that the issues at hand were also deeply rooted in certain personal issues between the quartet members (relationship conflict), which affected the task. The gist, accordingly, is that conflict situations, although they appear to consist of only one issue or type of conflict, may contain or induce additional elements of other, or similar, conflict types. This area is one that has not been studied to the same extent as conflict types and strategies have in their isolation. Therefore, it is of importance to acknowledge the multifaceted nature and context of conflicts when approaching both the study of various conflict situations and the practice of conflict management. Consequently, another cornerstone in this paper is that conflicts are dependent on their contexts (De Wit et al., 2012). In addition, and on a similar note, not only can multiple conflicts exist at the same time, but conflicts may also change over time as they escalate (Fowler, 2013). In short, different conflict types can co-occur within the same conflict situation and the conflict type(s) may change over time.

Contemporary scholars have also identified a number of conflicts on conflicts, so called meta-conflicts, which further nuances to the conflict management debate. Jehn et al. (2012) recently provided a wider perspective to the conflict debate by discussing conflicts on conflicts, so called meta-conflicts. A meta-conflict is how conflicts are perceived differently in a group; an aspect which Jehn et al. (2012) claim to have been generally overlooked in past research. By studying meta-conflicts, the authors claim that one may discover negative aspects in addition to the detriment of the conflict in its isolation, such as how conflicts are being constructed and perceived in their particular contexts rather than studying the outcome of conflicts from a more objective view. The authors thus assert the notion that perceiving conflicts differently can be either constructive or detrimental due to members' different perceptions of the conflict, depending on if the members feel challenged or threatened by the conflicts. Furthermore, De Wit et al., (2012) argue that conflicts situations can manifest themselves differently within different parts of the organisation. For example, conflicts in service teams at a branch may differ in their dynamics in comparison to conflicts that arise in a board of executives at the head office. According to the authors, the explanation to this is that teams and team members may vary in their conflict management skills, where executive teams may be more politically oriented and suited for handling complex situations between members (ibid.). Thus, by recognizing that conflicts are not only different in their types, but may also differ in their

impact and dynamics depending on the context in which they arise, scholars can gain a more complete understanding of the dynamics of intragroup conflicts. However, and most importantly, according to a previous study by Jehn et al. (2010), conflict asymmetry is in fact in itself detrimental, as groups tend to be more effective when they agree on meta-conflicts such as the understandings of interactional practices. In short, this means that if the parties involved in the conflict are not in agreement in what the conflict is about, that is in itself a conflict which may be harmful to the team.

### **Conflict Management**

Theorists within the area of conflicts generally make a division between conflict management and conflict resolution, in which the latter signifies the extreme of completely terminating a conflict, whereas conflict management implies the minimization or reduction of negative aspects and increasing of positive aspects of conflicts (Rahim, 2002). According to the author, the aim of conflict management is therefore to enhance learning, effectiveness and performance in organisations. Consequently, conflict management does not necessarily need to involve conflict resolution, however, it involves creating and setting up strategies to handle conflicts efficiently. Strategies to handle conflicts can be defined as “specific interventions that teams use to manage conflict” (Carton & Tewfik, 2016, p.1135) and have the general objective goal to optimize the conflict level to in order to achieve group effectiveness (ibid.). Hignite et al. (2002) claim that as conflicts are nowadays more or less known and familiar consequences of organisational processes - sometimes even desired consequences - firms have in recent times to some extent adapted their conflict management processes to this notion, by focusing on the management of conflicts as opposed to the elimination of conflicts.

According to Wall and Callister (1995), there are two general sources of conflict management; either the managing of the conflict stems from the disputants involved in the conflict themselves, or the managing of the conflict may come from a third party involvement. There are several reasons to include a third agent in the managing of the conflict. For example, a third party may have a particular interest in intervening in the conflict as the managing or resolution of the conflict may be beneficial to the team or the organisation as a whole, the third party may be expected to intervene, or may simply be called upon to assist in the conflict. Regardless of the reason for the third party to be involved, he/she may generally be called upon only when disputants cannot or do not want to handle the situation (ibid.). However, it is also relevant to note that there may also be negative aspects of an outside intervention. Rubin (1994) claims that a third party involvement may e.g. disrupt a conflict managing process that is progressing on its own, the third party may be biased *vis-à-vis* particular interests or the third party may use inadequate precautions or methods to manage/resolve the conflict. Thus, it is important that both sides involved in the conflict are unanimous on who should be drawn in as a third party. Moreover, not only is it important to manage conflicts as they arise, but also to prevent conflicts from occurring in the first place (Raines, 2013). Thus, according to the author, the first step of conflict management is to create policies, structures and procedures that facilitate collaboration and constructive behaviour from all employees in the organisation (ibid.). It is important that team members are able to discuss problems and issues with each other, therefore it is also crucial that the

organisational climate allows for discussion, openness and collaboration, using constructive communication (Flanagan & Runde, 2009). Good communication is also seen as a key instrument in managing conflict while bad communication can instead have effects on creating conflicts (Fowler, 2013). To summarize this overview of conflicts and conflict management, scholarly studies on conflicts have over the years progressed from a narrow view stating that there are two types of conflicts that are detrimental to teams and organisations and should therefore be terminated as soon as they arise, to nowadays incorporate a more nuanced view, claiming that there are various types of conflicts and that there are subsequently various strategies to managing conflicts in order to reduce, rather than terminating conflicts as they appear. In addition, strategies to managing certain types of conflicts are nowadays seen as to induce additional impact also on other types of conflicts.

### **New Institutional Theory**

At the centre of institutional approaches in the field of organisational studies stands the idea of the institution; 'cultural-cognitive', normative and regulative elements that act by providing stability as well as meaning to social life, according to Scott (2001). There are multiple bearers of institution such as relational and symbolic systems, artefacts and routines. Different perspectives within institutional theory focus on different aspects of the institution. New institutionalism - the foundations of which were laid by Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) - for example, focuses on cognition as a central part of the institution (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997), and to some extent shifts the focus onto the effect that agency has on the life cycles of institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2011). If on one side new institutionalism emphasises the role that structures play in defining individuals' behaviours, agency is now intended not as restricted to economic-rational, profit-maximising sort, but instead as more complex, embedded social actions (Lounsbury, 2008).

Failure to consider agency had been one of the main critiques directed at institutional theories, in addition to claiming that institutions are seen as already in place (Zald & Lounsbury, 2010). DiMaggio (1988) introduces on that note the concept of institutional entrepreneurship, stressing the active part that actors play in shaping their institutional contexts. Institutional isomorphism is also amongst the new concepts, and identifies in a set of external pressures the reason why organisations tend to grow increasingly similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This process results in a sort of general conformity with which organisations have to comply, in order to gain or maintain a level of legitimacy, necessary not only for success but even for survival. Moreover, a central aspect in institutional theory is the discrepancy between what organisations claim to do and what organisations actually do (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This phenomenon can be referred to as the decoupling of behaviour and formal structure, e.g. a company claiming on their website to apply a flat organisation structure, while in practice there are rigid hierarchical roles in place. The purposefulness and deliberateness in the actions that give existence to and alter institutions has gained importance with new institutionalism, in that it has grown increasingly accepted as an attainable explanation of the life of institutions. In other words, more recognition is given to the fact that organisational structures are not only subject to the effect of social norms, but also to that of individuals (Elsbach &



Sutton, 1992). This makes the concept of agency central: with their actions, individuals can have effects on institutions.

### **Institutional Work**

Institutional work is a concept which extends institutional theory and institutional entrepreneurship to incorporate the notion that the actions carried out by individuals, groups or organisations can be understood to affect institutions on a day-to-day basis (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), and is nowadays a central topic in organisational studies (Lawrence, Leca & Zilbert, 2013). Lawrence et al. (2009) explain that institutional work denotes the activities that contribute to the creating, maintaining and disrupting of institutions, rather than the accomplishments. Thus, the focus of institutional work lays on the process rather than the achievement of a state particular state (Lawrence et al., 2011) and therefore constitutes an adequate framework for studying people, practices, changes, and work within organisations. This was an important aspect for this paper to consider when choosing among theories. According to Lawrence & Suddaby (2006), the category of creating institutions relates to the actions that establish new norms and rules and sanctions that support them, the maintaining category includes the work that ensures that the existing institution is relevant and effective and finally the disruption of institutions incorporate the work that undermines norms, beliefs and assumptions in a current institution.

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006; 2011) also stress the importance of intentionality and effort in institutional work, two aspects that the authors claim are necessary to its very definition. Consequently, institutional work incorporates “all human action that has institutional effects” (Lawrence et al., 2009, p.13). This definition seeks therefore to include the effects of the deliberate actions of individuals or groups that are connected to the creation, maintenance and disruption of institutions, but also the more mundane day-to-day actions of reproducing, as well as challenging/disrupting roles, rites and rituals (Lawrence et al., 2011), as opposed to institutional entrepreneurship, which only emphasises the highly visible and dramatic actions to change institutions. The intention of actions has therefore been a central aspect within the field of institutional work studies. However, in recent years, scholars within the field have begun to explore the nuances in this perspective, considering various interests and intentions that actors may have in an institutional context (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). This extension aims therefore to include also the notion that institutional work is performed in a context where actors may or may not have a direct intention to create, maintain or disrupt institutions. Consequently, this new line of studies addresses that the actions do not necessarily need to have direct intentions of affecting institutions, incorporating the notion of negotiation, which can involve various actors and various intentions in a context (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). According to Zietsma and McKnight (2009), negotiation can be seen as a result of collaboration and competition between various actors, or, as a joint outcome. In this paper, the authors will therefore aim to consider actions of institutional work that aim to, directly or indirectly, create, maintain or reproduce institutions in conflict management.

According to Suddaby (2010), using institutional work allows for the exploration of stability in institutions, as well as the processes that maintain and reproduce institutions. An

institutional work approach allows therefore the authors to see how organisational structures and processes gain continuity and meaning for the actors within, as well as to capture both agency and structure (Zilbert, 2013). Hitherto, the concept of institutional work has to a large extent been neglected in studies of intergroup and intragroup workplace conflicts. One example is Raitio (2013), who used discursive institutionalism (DI) to analyse a conflict in a case study of land usage and forestry in Finland. The author used institutions as a tool of connecting conflict management to the importance of creating and maintaining conditions of mutual trust or mistrust. Albeit similarities exist with Raitio's (2013) article using DI, there is to date none or very little research on conflicts and conflict management using an institutional work approach. The use of new institutional theory and institutional work therefore allows for a deeper and more thorough analysis of conflict management, which helps explain why the organisation's way of working with conflicts looks the way it does, and also helps establish a contribution in relation to previous studies on conflicts and to new institutional theory.

## **Methodology**

### **Design of the Study**

As the purpose of this paper is to study a specific phenomenon or practice, that of conflicts and conflict management in workgroups, a case study method that is qualitative-oriented was used as methodology (Czarniawska, 2014; Yin, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Consequently, the aim of this study is to provide a deeper understanding for conflicts in the workplace or, more specifically, how conflicts and conflict management practices unfold in practice and how the practices can be explained through institutional work. Using a case study, it is possible to study how people interact with each other in different situations, as well as to gain a more detailed view of the situations (Flyvberg, 2006). According to Yin (2009) there are however a number of concerns related to using a case study method. These concerns include the lack of rigour, the limited base for scientific generalisation and the extensive time consumption of conducting the study. In response to the first two concerns, Yin (2009) claims that case studies can be generalizable to theoretical propositions, however, not to complete populations. As this paper aims not to build new theoretical conceptualisations of highly generalizable character, but rather to adapt an existing theoretical framework to study a phenomenon in practice, the method can be justified. In response to the time concern, this paper was limited to the length of the master degree project.

Yin (2009) confirms that case studies can include so-called 'multiple case studies', case studies that base their theory on a number of cases analysed (p. 19). This is the approach that was adopted in the present work, resulting in a total of 48 cases or situations of conflict deriving from 16 interviews with employees within the same organisation. This will be further explained in the following sections. Moreover, by investigating a practice inside its specific context, a greater comprehension for the characterisation can be accomplished (Martin and Turner, 1986; Silverman, 2006). While it was, for natural reasons, not possible to make observations of conflicts in the workplace as they appeared, this method allowed for a detailed view of the conflict situations, as told by the interviewees. Furthermore, the method allowed

the authors to study the practice of conflict management in a particular setting, thus contributing in depicting a broader view and understanding of the practice in conflict management studies as various contexts and settings are studied.

## **Setting**

Our research focuses on conflicts that arise in work groups and project groups at a Swedish vehicle manufacturer. Project teams at the chosen organisation are motivated by the achievement of a specific goal, and typically last around one or two years. Work groups, on the other hand, are more fixed structures for the operations of the company. Different divisions within the organisation were studied, namely R&D, aftermarket, human resources (HR) and assembling. The choice of organisation was motivated by the size of the organisation and the consequent wide degree of respondent variety, the inclusion of both project groups and teams in the organisation, and access reasons. As the company consists of several different divisions and departments such as manufacturing, R&D, assembling, sales, aftermarket, etcetera it consequently provided a basis for a variety of conflicts to appear within the organisation. For that reason, due to the working processes of the organisation, such as various departments and employees interacting with each other on a regular basis, preconditions required for conflicts to exist were fulfilled within the organisation. Although respondents came from various parts of the organisation, all 16 respondents had in common that their line of work included some degree of managerial responsibilities, ranging from a project manager responsible of a few team members to executives in charge of several hundred employees in the organisation. This became evident in the data as the conflict stories depicted in the interviews included situations where the respondents had been on various “sides” of the conflict, i.e. in one situation the respondent could be on involved as a disputant, and in another the respondent could be involved in the conflict from a managerial or HR-position. Thus, in the data collected we have stories as told from all perspectives; disputant, manager to the disputants, manager’s manager and HR-representative, which resulted in more nuances and a more complete view of various conflict situations.

## **Data Collection**

Considering the topic of conflicts within organisations is a particularly sensitive subject, as conflict situations may contain delicate information that the organisation or employees may be concerned with sharing, some organisations or employees may have been discouraged from participating in the case study, or alternatively, respondents may be less loquacious in an interview situation. The first phase of data collection in this case study was therefore to ensure contact and access to the organisation studied, identifying an adequate contact person who could provide a brief overview of relevant conflict processes and guide the authors forward by providing details to additional contacts within the organisation, credential contacts who would be willing to participate in the study. The method that provided the best fit was consequently a ‘chain-referral’ or snowballing method, as elaborated by Kvale and Brinkmann (2008). With this type of method, the initial contact may refer additional potential contacts, who in their turn may suggest additional contacts, continuing the “snowballing”. The interviewees were referred to the authors by the contact person, or by previously interviewed employees who in

their turn recommended colleagues who were available to answer questions about conflicts and conflict management. This was one of the advantages of the snowballing method as identified by the authors, considering that the contact person and/or previously interviewed employees were able to refer us to persons who, according to their own opinion, could have experienced conflicts situations in the organisation. Consequently, the snowballing method helped ensure that the interviewees had relevant and adequate experiences to participate in our study, in addition to being open to sharing their experiences. Moreover, it was necessary to interview different types of employees in order to fully understand the phenomenon and practice of conflicts and the potential implications and consequences of conflict management. A more extensive set of roles and professions therefore allowed for a more complete analysis and understanding of the various interpretations of the phenomenon (Silverman, 2004).

The second phase of data collection concerned the primary data, i.e. performing semi-structured interviews with the respondents. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions (Silverman, 2011), with an open mind and with respect (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008) in order to allow the interviewees enough room to elaborate and talk freely, considering conflicts as a sensitive subject, and in order for the study to be ethical and impartial. As earlier explained, the authors acknowledge that the issue of conflicts is not a topic to tread lightly on, but rather a delicate issue that the authors need to use some care around, when conducting the interviews. During the course of the present work, research was conducted by the authors following widely accepted ethical norms, so as to not violate the rights, the privacy, the intimacy or general well-being of the interviewees. The ethical principles/issues as per Bryman (2012) of anonymity, confidentiality and disclosure were held for everyone involved in the project. Similarly, the data presented reflects the collection carried out on the field in a complete and truthful manner.

In total, 16 interviews were conducted with employees in the organisation, resulting in forty eight conflict situations, which were subsequently studied. As earlier mentioned, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, interviews were performed face-to-face in order to earn the interviewee's trust and to avoid various forms of power asymmetry (Czarniawska, 2014). Interviews lasted between 50-80 minutes and were conducted using a similar structure throughout the process. Interviewees were asked to freely select and explain in detail a few conflict situations that they had experienced. In average, each respondent depicted three conflict situations, allowing for depth, detail and variety in the stories. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, conflicts are unique in their nature, people experience conflicts differently and there are several definitions to what constitutes a conflict. Therefore, in order to allow a coherent structure, the interviewees were allowed to elaborate on their own view of what constitutes a conflict. Focus was thereafter put on ensuring that each conflict situation contained an adequate amount of information, by asking follow-up questions to the respondents, according to the predetermined categories: (1) interviewee's definition of a conflict (2), type of conflict, (3) description of conflict situation/context, (4) parties involved, including managers and HR/union, (5) cause of conflict, (6) management/solution to the conflict, (7) how conflicts are generally managed in the organisation. Moreover, interviews were recorded and subsequently wholly transcribed (Martin & Turner, 1986) as inspired by

grounded theory (Allan, 2003). During the interviews, notes were taken in order to remember and document ideas or concepts that needed to be further discussed or studied (Czarniawska, 2014), however, the focus was on listening and trying to understand and allow the interviewee to elaborate on the conflict situations (Martin & Turner, 1986). Data was therefore continuously collected as long as the authors could see relevant, new information for the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Allowing interviewees to freely select conflict situations that they have been involved in or witnessed first-hand permitted the interviewees to choose situations they remember well and felt comfortable with sharing, therefore allowing the authors more room to ask follow-up questions and ask for clarification and elaboration. However, an apparent drawback was that the conflict stories were, for the most part, unverifiable, as other parties involved in the situation were not interviewed and consequently unable to share their “side of the story”, which can be seen as a limitation to the method. Although the interviewees had little or no reason to depict faulty or erroneous stories to the interviewers, as they volunteered to participate in the interviews, stories may or may not have been influenced towards favouring one party in the situation, for example by accentuating the actions of some individuals and understating those of others. From an optimal point of view, the best solution would be to interview all parties involved in the conflict situation in order to allow for a nuanced and holistic view of each conflict situation. However, for practical reasons this was not possible at the time and other parties of the situation may have been unwilling to participate in the study, or may since the situation took place have been relocated or left the organisation. Nevertheless, in three out of 48 examples of conflict situations the interviewees depicted very similar stories of the same situation, which may or may not have been a consequence of using the snowballing effect, i.e., the probability of employees being familiar or even involved in the same conflict situations can be seen as higher when interviewees have been referred to by another. On one hand, having the same situation told by more than one employee limited the raw amount of examples collected, however, on the other hand, depicting different versions of the same situation could also be seen as to improve the grade of validation by minimizing subjective influence.

In addition to the primary data, secondary data was collected in the form of internal documents mainly directed to managers and employees in the organisation. The data included certain directives about work environment, preconditions for cooperation within the organisation, views on conflicts, conflict types and prerequisites for effective conflict management, including third-party mediation. The internal documents served as supplementary information about conflict management in the organisation, in addition to the processes as told by the interviewees. However, from what appeared in the interviews, not all employees were aware of these documents, while others were on the contrary very well acquainted with them. Consequently, this type of information supplements the interviews by providing a more complete view on the phenomenon, and allowing the authors to understand what document was referred to by the interviewees.

Furthermore, the material was complemented by an interview with an HR-manager. Unlike the other interviews conducted, the interview with human resources was not conducted with the intention of collecting stories of conflicts, rather the HR-manager was allowed more room to elaborate on the corporate stance on conflict management, the process, internal training and documents. The HR-manager could e.g. provide insights into which types of situations required HR-involvement and why, thus helping to provide a broader picture of how conflicts are managed in the organisation. Given the HR-manager's insight and experience with conflicts, the authors of the present paper saw a chance to grasp potential procedures, rules and practices as seen in the company. Consequently, information about the organisation's conflict management processes were gathered from a wide spectrum of sources, namely employees, internal documents and the interview with the HR-department. This allowed for a more thorough understanding of conflict situations in the organisation, and contrasting sources of information with each other in order to confirm evidence and enhance validity by adopting a triangulation technique (Seale, 1999).

### **Data Analysis**

For this paper, the authors use an approach inspired by grounded theory (Martin & Turner, 1986), as the data collection process was conducted in different phases, with different methods of both semi-structured interviews and collecting internal documents. This process was performed continuously over time until an adequate amount of information was gathered. As conflict situations are unique and perpetually occurring, new data presents itself continuously, thus, the data analysis was also considered a continuous process conducted in different phases in order to ensure that sufficient data had been collected for the analysis. The process was terminated once the gathered material provided more than solid grounds for the data analysis. The stories presented in the findings section are representative of the total pool of conflict situations studied in this paper, in the sense that they present similarities among the characteristics and a descriptive picture of the complete data. Furthermore, the stories were selected in accordance to complexity, content, richness and the opportunities of analysis that they offered.

As data was collected, analysed and re-viewed, it was grouped into codes, which in turn were grouped into concepts and subsequently into categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Allan, 2003). Using this method could, according to Martin and Turner (1986), initially result in too many codes and concepts. As the initial coding process did in fact result in a large amount of data codes, it was important for the authors to categorize this data by identifying and constructing different themes found in the interview transcriptions, notes taken during the data collection process and the internal documents. Previous literature in the field of conflict management (as presented above) worked as a platform for the categorization process that followed data collection. The categories chosen are explained in detail, and coincide with, among others, the four established types of conflicts, constituting a system that will be used also in the analysis, in which institutional work will serve as a framework for interpreting the categories. As earlier mentioned, these categories were chosen in order to ensure that sufficient and adequate details were read into each conflict situation, in order to depict a more complete picture of the conflict. The categories were as follows: (1) interviewee's definition of a conflict, (2) type(s)

of conflict, (3) description of conflict situation/context, (4) parties involved, including managers and HR/union, (5) cause of conflict, (6) management/solution to the conflict, (7) how conflicts are generally managed in the organisation. These sort of categorisations of codes were thereafter combined, compared and contrasted into a wider range of data groups, in order to identify similarities, differences and patterns amid the groups and to gain insights into the conflict management process (Czarniawska, 2014; Martin and Turner, 1986). The categories were subsequently sorted in accordance to the proximity to conflict type(s). However, as stated in the earlier studies and theoretical framework section, conflicts seldom consist of a sole issue, rather, one is more likely to see elements of several types of conflict in the same situation, such as in the example of the string quartet (Murnighan & Conlon, 1991). Moreover, categories were subsequently compared within the same source of information, e.g. comparing the same category between interviews, but also between sources of information, adopting the triangulation technique as explained by Seale (1999).

The framework of new institutionalism, and in particular the concept of institutional work (as per Suddaby et al., 2006, 2011), served as the basis to the written analysis of the data collected and categorized. The choice was motivated by the suitability of institutionalism to our case study, given the mutual focus on practices, processes, on their effects, and on the motives behind them. The actions, practices and processes around conflict management that the respondents have told about will be interpreted in light of existing institutions and in light of their role in creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions at the company. Using institutional work in examining conflict types and conflict management helped the authors understand how new institutional actors and practices were established, as well as to expose previous practices and motives to critical reflection. Thus, the concept of institutional work was used as an analytical framework in order to examine this paper's aim of how conflicts and conflict management unfolds in practice, in the routine, day-to-day practices, behaviours and experiences of actors (Zilber, 2013). Moreover, given this paper's concern with the practices of conflict management and resolution - their *raison d'être* and their evolution - institutional theory offered a stable basis in which to root a sound discussion. An institutional work viewpoint allowed us to focus thoroughly on process and practice (the 'how' and 'why', as per Lawrence & Suddaby, 2011). Furthermore, new institutional theory and the concept of institutional work helped us make sense of organisational routines and customs (or institutions) and understand how and why organisations behave the way they do. Institutional work consequently worked as an analytical framework, supplementing the conflict management literature in order to understand the data at hand, stories of conflict situations and the managing of such situations, and to interpret and critically analyse the similar or dissimilar elements that they presented.

## **Findings**

In the following section, the collected data is presented (and categorized) in the form of extracts from the forty eight stories that the respondents have provided. A brief description of the conflict is followed by one or more quotes that justify its classification. The empirical data is organised conforming to the four categories that coincide with the four types of conflicts

identified by conflict literature, as considered in this paper: (1) task conflicts, (2) relational conflicts, (3) process conflicts and (4) status conflicts. The empirical findings section is thereafter concluded by a fifth and final section introducing the conflict management escalation procedure as depicted by the employees interviewed, the internal documents and by the interview with the HR-manager. As explained in the theoretical framework section, a conflict is rarely 'pure' in its form. Rather, conflicts are situational and complex instances where, oftentimes, more than one category (conflict type) can be identified, e.g. in the situation with the string quartet. Because of this co-occurrence of conflicts in our data, the examples below are classified following a principle of closest adjacency to the ideal characteristics of each category, although they may still be characterised as multifaceted in nature. In other words, the most dominant aspect of the conflict was the deciding factor in the categorisation process in this empirical section. Thus, most importantly, the stories presented below constitute an intrinsically representative sample of the collectively of cases that we have studied. Not only do they present characteristics that are interesting to analyse, they provide, at the same time, a descriptive picture of the complete pool of conflicts that the data incorporates. The choice of these particular multidimensional conflicts was also made in accordance with the richness of content, complexity, and opportunities of analysis they offer.

### **Task Conflicts**

Out of a total of forty eight conflict scenarios, fourteen were classifiable as (mainly) task conflicts, meaning that they typically concerned areas of work such as the content and outcomes of the task being performed. Ten further scenarios presented elements that make them at least partially task-related conflicts. The cases share the nature of the disagreement at the centre of our attention. Specifically, the fact that the conflict intrinsically relates directly to the content and results of the task they engage in.

In our first example, hereafter referred to as (*T1*), two co-workers disagreed about the way to go in resolving a conflict about the number of components to be used. One co-worker wanted to draw in a complete set of components to fix the technical problem in one of the vehicle models, but was hindered by a colleague another department, who claimed only a few parts had to be changed, as they only had a limited supply of those very components. Neither party would give in, which eventually resulted in a conflict between the two.

This person wanted me to write in my report that they were allowed to use only two of this article, and I said "it is not possible to write it in that way, we cannot write it like that". If they have to change five of the components, they need permission to change all five. It was necessary for the car to work, so to speak. But thanks to them having a limited amount of material available, they wanted me to write the report like they wanted.

The possible solution to the technical problem is at the centre of the conflict between the two co-workers. Indeed, one of the two tries to make the other write the relevant report the way he thinks is best, trying to make his perspective prevail, repeatedly. The fact that the scenario also involved a clash in the responsibilities over the decision - if it had been clear who the one



supposed to choose was then no conflict would have arisen - indicates that the disagreement has a process side to it, too. The disagreement between the two men continued for weeks, until their respective managers were called in by the disputants to resolve the matter.

I spoke to my boss. And my boss went to the other department and talked to the chief there, and after that he came back to ask for a little more detail. He said 'I understand, we must do in that way.'

After a meeting that was specifically set up to solve the situation, the employee who advocated for a more complete substitution of the components saw his suggestion adopted as the resolution to the question. We see that the decision by the managers sets an end to both sides of the conflict, the task-related one as well as the process-related one. They take in a decision (in line with one of the co-workers) that, given their higher hierarchical position, is accepted universally in both content (task) and form (process). The solution stems from a meeting, a physical gathering of the respective managers of the parts involved to speak openly about the problem and the possible measures, after having gathered information about the issue at stake, after talking separately with the co-workers. As was noticed during the study, communication that involves higher-placed managers is oftentimes considered the first step in conflict resolution at the organisation.

The second case that entails a disagreement about the content of a task (*T2*) sees a co-worker within the quality department and his counterpart within product follow-up experiencing a clash that finds its origin in very different expectations concerning what amount of information should be included in the so-called 'cases', work reports that are sent from the quality assurance side to the product follow-up unit of the company.

They had contact via email and had discussions at meetings without any solution. And then a co-worker escalated the matter through his team leader to me. He only sent an email and said he expected this and that from another co-worker, and that despite that he wasn't getting it. There were expectations in quality control that they would get readymade cases from our product followers. And the product follower said that 'I can't do more than this'. And then it's like quality think that one hasn't done his job, and a situation arises.

Friction arises between two workers in two divisions that collaborate on a daily basis. The quality leader side requests a performance that the product follow-up employee, according to what he says, simply is not able to put up with. When the other side sees their request denied, the conflict takes the form of a debate between the two parties. Since the communication at this stage fails to deliver a common strategy, the issue reaches the two direct managers of the employees, one on each side of the dispute.

...took contact with him and discussed the different perspectives. And then a meeting follows the next week where all the quality assurance people sit with the product followers and try to understand what the expectations for each other are.

Even in this case, a confrontation between peers does not produce the results hoped in terms of concurrence around the subject matter of the disagreement. It is once again necessary to escalate the errand and involve in the discussion other people, not only the chiefs but other subordinates as well. The conflict can be representative of an ineffective communication that arises between the two parties, with misunderstandings that translate into operational delays. An intervention by the respective bosses manages to settle the question, by clarifying how each side must behave in ordinary workflow situations, thus clarifying the roles of each employee. As a consequence, this conflict situation started out as a task conflict between the quality side and the product follow-up employee, however, as the conflict progressed, a number of elements of process conflicts were induced, as the managers of the respective side of the dispute had to clarify what needed to be done in each instance, to sort out the responsibilities of each role.

### **Process Conflicts**

Out of a total of forty eight conflict scenarios, ten were classifiable as (mainly) process conflicts, meaning situations that are characterised by disagreements concerning the coordination of people and actions in the pursuit of a task, or call for divergences in the assignment of roles and responsibility. Five further scenarios presented elements that made them at least partially process-related conflicts. The cases that follow present the common element of a disagreement focusing on how roles and responsibilities are assigned.

Our third example and first process-related conflict example, (*PI*), involves a young, native woman and an elderly man of foreign background. The two go repeatedly behind each other's' backs when dealing with a same external entity - a supplier to the company - each being convinced that the relationship with said supplier is his (or her) own exclusive prerogative. They refuse to give up and refuse to cooperate over and over again, to then openly confront each other in the workplace.

Yes he simply thought he had the responsibility (to speak to the supplier), and she did too...The girl said that he wasn't sane, and that he had stepped repeatedly into her own domain of work...He said exactly the opposite: "she doesn't know her job, she doesn't work properly."

Over the course of three months the two alternate bitter comments, discussions and attempts at undermining each other's positions, both in relation to the supplier and to the company itself, even by talking to each other's boss and complaining about each other's behaviours and perspectives. The conflict draws extra attention from other co-workers, given the obvious differences between the two, namely: gender, age, origin, background, role and experience. In the effort to avoid direct contact with each other, and each one being certain to be right according to their respective understandings, they continuously contact the business partner from different directions, which ends up damaging the company's image. This ambiguity with respect to who holds what responsibilities and roles provides grounds for an immediate linkage to the process aspect of the conflict. The very origin of the conflict consists in a deep-

rooted disagreement regarding whose role it is to care for the relation with the supplier. As the dispute unfolds at the workplace, the scenario evolves into including a task dimension, too. In his critique to his counterpart, the man expresses allegations according to which the woman would not be able to do her own job. At a later stage of the conflict, thus, we see issues arising even from the subject matter of the task itself, sourcing operations. The woman's way of working is now under fire, and becomes an integrated aspect of the conflict itself. The mediation of the direct managers is not enough to sort out the problem, in this case. Instead, the manager's manager are also informed on the matter and asked to intervene. When even this attempt fails, the HR department is called in as a presumed remedy. This is done by both having individual conversations as well as by conducting a shared meeting with the two co-workers, the managers, and the HR professionals.

...talked to both the man and the woman, naturally with both of them. And I understood that this wasn't something easy to solve. We asked our HR department, we got to contact a really capable woman in that context, who was prepared and had experience of solving similar situations. She met the two, and then their respective bosses. All one by one. (...) And then we had a general meeting, all six of us. (...) Some weeks go by, and then it began again.

The matter is escalated by several levels, but nothing seems to help more than temporarily. Communication and hierarchy do not produce the effects the company was hoping for, and in this instance the conflict does not find a conventional solution. After some time, the woman resigns and leaves the company, while her counterpart changes position within the company. The conflict is resolved only by means of (voluntary, to some extent) physical relocation of the two parties from the workplace, which naturally represents a definitive answer to all of the aspects in the dispute.

Another process-related conflict arose at the company when a co-worker bypasses another in a deal with a supplier, henceforth referred to as (P2). The second colleague, originally responsible for such kind of procedures, feels extremely offended and to some extent even humiliated by the course of action taken by the first employee. He then proceeds to escalate the conflict by talking negatively about the colleague, guilty of having neglected him in the negotiation process, and by sending complaint emails to several top executives, claiming that the man had wrongfully intruded himself in his work area and not performed the work adequately.

He felt like he was bypassed by me. That I took up the dialog with the supplier without him knowing. I didn't invite him in the dialog, that's his world so he gets all discussions with suppliers, but sometimes you have to do it right away, without waiting for him to show up or to reach you. I think it's like this that it went.

...the consequence was that he smeared me in front of a number of managers, mine and his own, he said that I didn't do my job. And he sent his complaints even to the highest manager at the sourcing department. I had to go and face the critique,

that I supposedly hadn't done my job, whereas I only skipped him in the process  
(...) I didn't know he wanted to be involved in.

The respondent essentially substituted himself to the other employee, taking his role in dealing with a business partner. The case of 'overstepping' into someone else's work domain and doing someone else's work without them being informed or consenting to it provides support for the categorization of the conflict as a process-related disagreement. While the conflict eventually evolves and takes different turns, such as the emotional response by the 'offended' side, the triggering factor resides in the initial conscious trespassing of (more or less) clear responsibility boundaries. At the same time, the way the 'bypassed' co-worker reacts to the situation indicates that the disagreement eventually progressed into a multifaceted form, taking up a relational conflict edge, especially if we think that, because of said reaction, the conflict lasted a whole eight months. Here we can notice a fundamental discrepancy in interpersonal styles and beliefs between the two, difference observable even thanks to an early, clearly expressed will to settle the matter by the 'offender's' part. As already stated, not only the managers, but the managers' managers were included in the discussion from - roughly - the beginning of the conflict, called in by the co-worker who felt set aside. In line with the relational element of the conflict, the employee seems indeed to be after a sort of personal revenge, exaggerating the blames of his counterpart and drawing in all levels of the organisation for a matter that, according to the other side 'would have been resolved in minutes'. Other than managers and executives, and after most of the disagreement's span has unfolded, even HR specialists have conversations with the individuals involved in the dispute. The conflict is only resolved when, at that point, the two parts express a mutual will to end the hostilities.

...and then we had one from HR that was in our unit and he said they had understood the situation, and wanted us to just let it go. (...) Yes, the solution was simply "we draw a line over the episode and we don't talk about it again". For something that would have taken five minutes. It didn't feel right but I understood the advantages of just getting over it.

The solution does not stem here from a decision from above, such as in other cases, even given the nature of the conflict. Instead, it is the parties involved who choose to disrupt the antagonism. The process of conflict resolution, though, even in spite of its non-success, can be considered to start the moment the offended co-worker escalates the issue to his manager. Communication in the forms of conversations, email exchanges, meetings and procedures involved a great number of individuals within the division and lasted for months, until the parts agreed to cease the dispute, at least on an official level, putting an end to a conflict that started as a process-related one and evolved into a relational, personal issue.

### **Relation Conflicts**

Out of a total of forty eight conflict scenarios, seventeen were classifiable as (mainly) relation conflicts, i.e. conflicts regarding for example disputes in personal taste, politics, ideology, values and interpersonal style. Ten further scenarios presented elements that made them at

least partially relation-related conflicts. Of the two relational conflicts that we present in the study, the first one is the case of two women of foreign descent working at the same division of the company (*RI*). When one day one of the two greets the other in a traditional, foreign-cultural style, she is not given the same salute back. Instead, she is addressed with a normal Swedish way of greeting. This provoked a reaction that would constitute the grounds for a conflict that lasted over three weeks. In the situation, the first woman feels offended, and experiences the episode as a lack of respect from the other side. As a result, she is thereafter not willing to cooperate or interact with the other woman, which fuels the conflict onto a new level.

...greeted in a very traditional foreign style. In a very conservative way. They had been in Sweden more or less for the same period, ten years, but one of them was more open to both cultures, and refused to greet back the same way, and responded in a simple, Swedish way. That's a big no no, because then you're taking distance from the tradition. (...) They couldn't cooperate, they refused. Even if they were from the same country, they were raised in different ways. One had come here with her parents who said "now we'll take ourselves as quick as possible into the Swedish society and put away the old culture". The other family had been reluctant to do the same, they wanted to keep their roots.

One of the women, unlike her counterpart, refuses to accept a complete (or even partial) transition into the culture of the new country, and adopts an approach that conserves much of her original culture. The conflict arises from deep differences in the way the two women experience the contrast of old and new values, and how they interpret in each their own way identity and change (due to different family perspectives). For this reason, this case is categorized as relational. Since the conflict does not seem to phase down, the managers of both parties decide to step in and try to handle the conflict in order to avoid negative effects on the performance of the unit they work at.

...so the respective bosses came in and mediated between the two and agreed that "okay we all understand each other now, it took a while" (...) we don't have that knowledge here. All managers were swedes, we didn't understand how and why the conflict arose. They spoke together, we had a common discussion, all of us, it was good. (...) It was more than one meeting. What they eventually came to was some sort of 'steady-state'. "We can cope with this", but they never became friends.

The conflict finds its solution with the mediation of the direct chiefs as well as a higher ranked manager. The decision to intervene comes from above this time, and it takes several joint meetings to even only partially solve the conflict. The two get then to openly confront their views in the presence of their respective managers. Even though the two women came to accept, or better, tolerate the differences that set them apart, they kept on rejecting each other and refused to communicate and relate to one another. In other words, the differences and the disagreements between the two remained latent.

Another disagreement that traces its roots in differences in values and interpersonal styles manifests itself when three experienced individuals show repeated despotic behaviours and almost recur to regular bullying onto younger employees in occurrence of weekly meetings held to discuss ordinary work matters, referred to as (R2). They present and impose their ideas very aggressively and without much regard to what anyone else says, even though they are de facto on the same level in the company hierarchy as all at the meeting. The decisions that are taken are always theirs - without much discussion preceding them - not because of the validity of the choices behind but because of the forceful attitude on the part of the older people. The circumstances become worse and worse, to the point where some of the younger employees suffer so much that they discontinue attendance at the routine meetings.

...and we talked about work and changes in general, and these three older individuals were very strong, and they had strong opinions such as “we’ve always done it this way and we’ll keep doing it this way”. There was like no room for those who were a little younger to come up with suggestions, they decided and that was it.

The relational aspect of the conflict is rather clear, as the dispute is set in motion by the differences in interpersonal styles, values and identity (on one side aggressive, neglecting older characters with no interest in discussion and inclusivity, on the other young, inexperienced professionals with more open, careful views). This example is though very complex, and presents other sides to it. The fact that the discussion concerned changes around processes in the work structure tells us that the conflict relates to the task, as well. While it might not be the main, most apparent and immediate element in the instance, it certainly is worthy of a mention, as it contributes to understanding the bigger picture. On a deeper level, the three more experienced employees also express an attempt in their behaviour at establishing an informal hierarchy, of which they sit on top. This makes the conflict status-related as well. They force others into accepting their word as final, and in this way try to establish themselves as having authority, establish themselves as bosses. Those who are not willing to accept the state of things are in substance compelled to leave. Three facets of conflict coexist in this specific episode, which therefore captures particularly well the situational and inherently complex nature that characterizes workplace conflicts. It takes some time before one of the other co-workers lifts the question to her manager, who does not take action to improve the situation. Nothing changes over the course of six months, and the conflict endures.

I tried to explain how I felt and said that we had been treated unfairly (...) She didn’t take it up with him because he was so dominant so she didn’t want to go into a conflict situation with him.

The longevity of the conflict stemming from the attitudes of the three older persons, combined with an incapacity on the part of the direct manager to address the issue, pressures many of

the other employees to change their position within the company, for example asking to be relocated in other units.

No it didn't get better, and I ended up changing job, we were many unsatisfied with this, I think we were like eight that changed position within a little more than a half year. For me that's a sign that the group isn't doing well.

Escalating the matter does not help in this context, and all possible communication has already been tried without success. The direct manager keeps avoiding the concern of the employees and does not involve herself in the matter.

### **Status Conflicts**

Out of a total of forty eight conflict scenarios, seven were classifiable as (mainly) status conflicts, signifying disputes over individual's relative position in the hierarchy of the group, oftentimes producing actions of undermining nature as well as actions aimed at creating gaps in the hierarchy. One further scenario, already illustrated above, presented elements that made it at least partially a status-related conflict.

The anecdote of two young professionals competing for a higher (perceived) prestige by undermining each other's position represents the first example of a status conflict (*SI*). The dispute worsens to the extent where it takes the form of shouting at each other, whether in public official meetings or in the halls.

They are two senior, experienced software developers. Neither of them has a managerial role. But they want to have informal leadership roles on the basis of their experience. The conflict is based on how they compare. "Who's the number one in these things?" Both are young, despite their seniority. They're driven by career and power.

The fight for a 'leader position', is a clear sign that the conflict is about status, even though prominence is expressed in merely informal ways. At the same time, the manager of the group of which the two individuals are parts becomes sick and leaves the team. It follows that a new manager, who is currently responsible for another team as well, is assigned as a temporary team leader. Given the high amount of work he must sustain, he is not able to address the conflictual question of the two competing professionals. His own manager, even though informed of the situation, does not contribute to solving the situation either. Failure to address the conflict causes the situation to aggravate. Eventually, it takes an HR-department involvement to settle the dispute.

So I [from the human resources department] had a meeting with the one who is chief at the unit (...) and then the group adjusts what's okay and what's not. So we went through the basics: why do you exist as a group? What are your tasks? What must you deliver? What rules do you need to have?

A meeting is held with the manager, and a separate meeting is held for the group at-large. The very foundations of the group are discussed (its purpose, its rules, its objectives...), but, as told by the HR-manager, the conflict still persists as this paper is being written. Even in this case, a series of actors that are foreign to the conflict are drawn in, in an effort (which, as it seems, is not always shared) to sedate the confrontation.

The second status-related conflict sees a high-ranked executive picking on an immediate subordinate in the context of meeting sessions at the company (S2). He makes comments directed at making him uncomfortable or at, more generally, causing him trouble. The victim of this behaviour feels abused, and a conflict arises. Given the high rank on which it unfolds, and given the causes behind the man's behaviour (he felt like he needed to assert himself in a high-pressure, extremely competitive environment), the situation evolves into a struggle for power.

...people have different goals. A chairman has another perspective and doesn't want to risk that his or her goals are modified. (...) he asked a question on my unit's strategy, I answered and he said "you have one more chance to answer right". But that was our strategy. So he says "okay" and takes a pen and starts writing on a piece of paper like this. It was just a mark, like you do with kids when they do something wrong. Of course some conflict will arise from that. (...) When one does like this, he's challenging someone and calling him to a fight. (...) it was about prestige.

The goals of two executives clash, producing a dispute that lasts over the course of weeks. The two individuals engage in some sort of competition, after one of the two fuels the conflict by challenging the other with malicious remarks and open provocations in public. This behaviour is motivated by the ultimate objective of undermining the other's hierarchical position and at the same time strengthening the current, established order. Based on the above premises, the conflict is classified as status-related. Because of the high level this case unravels on, neither of the parties relies on a higher placed manager to solve the matter - assuming in the first place that a will to solve the matter actually exists on either part, assumption that would not be completely warranted - but they keep instead the conflict going.

No it was never addressed. (...) it was just something one registers, and picks up during a conversation or in a context where one trusts the people there. (...) I know that I have to prepare myself in a wider way. Be ready for all kinds of questions, think of what he can come up with and how I can counter that already from before. It's a little like chess. Which I think is enormously time- and energy-consuming. It would have been better if we had the same objectives. I did not feel that he experienced the situation as a conflict

Even this dispute stands as fundamentally unsolved and is ongoing at the time the paper is written. This case terminates our sampling of conflicts from the empirical data that has been collected on the field. The examples chosen provide an overview on the complete set of data



gathered, and paint a picture of complexity and, for the most, of undefined lines that divide one conflict from the other.

### **Introducing the Conflict Management Escalation Procedure**

The eight examples presented in this section are representative of the larger pool of the conflicts that make up the totality of the data. As discussed below, not all conflicts are escalated to a higher level, on the contrary, many conflicts are managed even without a mediator, or by a direct manager. These eight examples in the findings were chosen due to their complexity, richness, potential for analysis and inclusive content that provided a description and meaningful, general picture for each of the four categories they are classified in. Moreover, as confirmed in our interviews with managers, executives and HR-personnel, as well as internal documents, it became clear that in the organisation studied there is a clearly defined procedure in regards to conflicts and conflict management. In all of the cases presented above, with the exception of (*S2*), regardless of the type of conflict or other circumstances, one or more of the parts involved contacted a superior in order to manage the dispute. In five of the situations presented (*T1*), (*T2*), (*P1*), (*R1*), and (*R2*) a direct supervisor was summoned, and in (*P2*) a higher-placed manager was involved, while as in (*S1*) the HR department helped managing the situation. In the data collected, we also saw a few examples involving the psycho-physical care unit and the union.

Managers undergo conflict management training. We have an HR-portal which all managers have access to, and there you can click under conflict management. (...) There is an escalating process. If you cannot sort the issue yourself you do not talk to HR right away, but usually you involve your boss and sometimes involve another executive before talking to HR. In the very end it may be a question of negotiating a potential termination of contract, however then the conflict is of a very serious nature and that rarely happens. So there is a conflict management procedure for our managers, which I believe that managers are more comfortable with than not.

As was explained in the interview with the HR manager, as well as depicted in the conflict stories and confirmed in the internal documents, there is a conflict management procedure for the managers in the organisation. The working procedure of conflict management in the organisation studied can be described as an escalation process, which looks as follows: as incompatible differences appear between two or more disputants, a conflict situation arises. If the disputants cannot manage the conflicts themselves, one or more parties may escalate the situation to involve a third party mediator, most commonly the direct manager. Oftentimes, the mediator gathers the disputants in a meeting, allowing the disputants to explain their view of the situation and to try and understand their differences, and to reach a solution. However, it is not necessarily the disputants that must escalate the situation. In eleven of the examples in our study, it was another team member who contacted the manager to inform him/her that there was a situation which he/she should deal with. Moreover, in several situations, the disputants have different managers, in which one or both managers may be contacted as mediators, depending on the context. If both direct managers are involved as mediators, the

managers first hold meetings with their respective employee and then hold a joint meeting including all four parties (two disputants and two managers). If the direct manager(s) cannot resolve the conflict, the situation is normally escalated further, to include one or several more mediators. These potential additional mediators are the manager's manager, the HR-department, the psychological well-being unit, or the Union, depending on what the situation requires. As was told in the interview with the HR-representative, usually the manager's manager is the natural second step of the escalation process, however, exceptions may exist.

To summarize, the escalation procedure can be described as a staircase where the first level is the direct manager, the second level is the manager's manager and the third and final level involves the HR/Union and/or the psychological well-being unit. Even though these common elements have been observed in the organisation with a high level of consistency, there are many factors that are not fixed. For example, the escalating process does not necessarily move in a linear escalation "staircase" in which the next level needs to be reached if the conflict is not resolved. As was told in the interviews, many conflicts are solved, or in any case managed, without need for escalations, or after just escalation by one level, to the nearest manager, while other conflicts require further steps, e.g. to the manager's manager, or the HR department. As it appears, no matter the type of conflict that exists, the way to approach conflict management follows the same institutionalised procedure, although there may be exceptions. This proves an interesting starting point for discussion, showing that regardless of the type of conflict that exists, the organisation studied follows a well-established conflict management procedure.

## **Discussion**

### **Implications of the Conflict Management Escalation Procedure**

The above presented data provided this study with a number of findings, which consequently allow for a critical discussion of the data. One of the most significant findings in this paper was the conflict management escalation procedure (CMEP) used in the organisation. In seven out of the eight stories about workplace conflicts presented, one or both sides followed the CMEP, a trend which was consistent throughout the whole set of cases collected by the authors of this report. Out of the total 48 stories collected, 34 instances present the same procedure in the managing of the conflict. This is central to understanding the CMEP, since it indicates that the variable 'conflict type' (either task, process, relational or status) is not a deciding factor when it comes to managing the conflict in the immediate. Rather, the procedure is consistent regardless of the conflict type that exists. An explanation to why not all conflicts were managed in accordance with the CMEP can be that not all conflicts are necessarily managed, or are not managed by a third party. An example being (S2), as presented in the findings.

When the mediation by one or more direct managers failed to settle the dispute between two parties, the matter was in many cases escalated further by one or more levels, which was seen in 19/48 situations studied in this paper. Around half of these situations were escalated to a manager's manager and the other half were escalated to involve also an HR-representative.

Only in a few cases did an employee turn to the worker's union or to the unit responsible for the physical and psychological well-being of the employees. Contacting the union or the psychological well-being unit thus do not appear as indicative of underlying existent trends as contacting a higher-placed manager or the HR-department. Nevertheless, and most importantly, the CMEP shows that conflicts are not seen as an extraordinary element to the organisation, but rather as something that occurs on a day-to-day basis and, as a consequence, the CMEP is embedded into the organisation's practices. This perspective helps us describe and understand how the studied organisation works with conflict management. This will be further elaborated in the following section, by introducing the theoretical framework of institutional work.

### **Institutionalisation of the Conflict Management Escalation Procedure**

To help explain the recurrence of the CMEP, this paper draws upon the theoretical framework of new institutional theory and the concept of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The CMEP within the organisation studied can be described as an institution, as told by Scott (2001), meaning that it is a cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative element that acts by providing stability as well as meaning to social life. Although the CMEP does not exist as a formal document, we can denote a high degree of uniformity in the CMEP in the organisation by the triangulation technique of combining and contrasting data from the various sources (Seale, 1999). These sources include the interviews with the employees, the internal documents and the interview with the HR-representative, which all point to the existence of the CMEP. The HR-representative stated in the interview that "there is a conflict management procedure, which I believe managers are more comfortable with than not". This statement can be linked to the decoupling of behaviour and formal structure, which relates to the potential differences that can appear in an organisation between what the organisation claims to do *versus* what the organisation actually does. As was claimed in the findings, the procedure is not always followed in the exact same way, exceptions to the procedure may occur, e.g. by escalating the process directly to an executive without informing the direct manager.

Moreover, the concept of institutional work incorporates the notion that "all human action has institutional effects" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p.13), and is central to organisational studies. As such, all human activities contribute in the creating, maintaining and disrupting of the institution of the CMEP, rather than its accomplishment and, therefore, what is important in institutional work is the process, rather than the accomplishment of a particular state (Lawrence et al., 2011). This statement resonates well with the concept of conflict management, which in recent years has turned its focus to the process of management of a conflict, rather than the accomplishment of resolving or terminating a conflict (Rahim, 2002). Conflicts are nowadays seen as more or less familiar consequences to organisations, and firms have adapted themselves and their processes to this notion, by focusing on the process of managing rather than the elimination of conflicts (Hignite et al., 2002). This was evident in our findings, when interviewees were asked explicitly if the conflict situation was resolved. Several respondents indicated that the conflict situation was managed rather than terminated,

was still on-going, put aside for the moment, or handled only to some extent, thus indicating that the situation may not have been fully resolved, or resolved satisfactorily.

The process of conflict management aims to enhance learning, effectiveness and performance in organisations, while the outcome or accomplishment is to optimize the conflict level in order to achieve group effectiveness (Carton & Tewfik, 2016). It follows that the CMEP, as depicted in the findings, is constantly being maintained and reproduced in the conflict management processes by the actions of the parties involved, thus repetition by many actors over the course of years has strengthened this procedure. Regardless of whether an employee is consciously and actively aware of the guidelines, or whether he or she just acts on the basis of convention (common practice that is strengthened by its repetition in the stories), the CMEP is shared by almost all of the respondents, confirmed in the interview the HR and, to some extent, in the internal documents. In all cases examined, we have noted the two cornerstones of institutional work, intentionality and effort, as per Lawrence and Suddaby (2011). All individuals perform actions that constitute work. For example, as a disputant contacts a direct manager directly or through email, phone etc. in order to help manage a conflict situation, institutional work is performed, which helps maintain the institution of conflict management. This being said, according to recent studies, an actor does not need to have the intention to do institutional work, to perform it in practice. Institutional work can, in other words, happen without a conscious will (on the part of the actors) to create, maintain or disrupt institutions (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009). In terms of analysing the conflict stories collected, it was however cumbersome to determine which actions depicted in the stories were made with effort and intention, and which were not, as the stories were not observed first-handily by the authors, but rather told in arrears. Nevertheless, during the interviews, no clear elements arose that pointed to the fact that employees at the company were aware of their impact on the institution through their actions.

In the light of institutional work, the CMEP is being maintained by the actions of the individuals. They, in other words, perform institutional work by reinforcing the institution, the CMEP itself. Accordingly, individuals within the organisation studied, regardless if it is a disputant, manager, HR etc., use their own agency in a maintenance and reiterative process of conflict management through a mix of escalation and communication (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2011), engaging both agency and structure (Zilbert, 2013). The examples presented in addition to the totality of the data collected, offer support for identifying the CMEP as an institutionalised procedure. Whether the conflict entailed disagreements related to task, process, relationship or status, an overwhelming majority of the actors involved resorts to escalating the conflict (*S2* representing the only exception in the findings). Thus, each time an employee contacts a manager or the HR department about a conflict situation, the practice is renewed (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This may happen at an early stage of the conflict, as in the cases of (*R1*) and (*P2*), or at a later stage like in the case of (*S1*). The regularity with which this occurs highlights a repetition that we interpret as being evidence of an institutionalisation, and of the institutional work that holds the procedure intact. *Au contraire*, alternative options for conflict management were not seen to be utilised in the organisation.

Ergo, the creation of new competing institutions may potentially be hindered, according to our findings, as the institution of the CMEP is seemingly left unchallenged.

When the CMEP institution was created or when it is going to be disrupted is as of this date not possible to say, but what is clear is that individuals who are part of the organisation comply with the institution. They are, so to speak, taught that ‘this is how we do in the company’. This happens in direct and indirect ways. The first is the case for executive directives, which translate for example into internal documents, specific management training on conflict management and HR policies, all of which are included in the present paper’s data. New managers are taught via management training courses how to deal with conflict situations, as was told in the interview with the HR-representative. This further strengthens the claim that the CMEP is something that is institutionally embedded into the organisation, and this training process contributes to the maintaining of the institution, as per Lawrence & Suddaby (2006). The employees are in these instances told what to do in an explicitly stated, direct way. Most of the interviewees proved to be actively aware of the guidelines at the company, which are given in a formal or informal way. The indirect way to transmit the institution from person to person is that of learning it from being immersed in an institutional context that reiterates it. New and old employees see, observe and experience what other employees and managers do when it comes to facing workplace conflicts, and consciously (or unconsciously) take up their way to treat these issues, learn it, and in turn reproduce it. The institution is thus maintained through the course of time, as claimed by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006).

In sum, institutional work and more generally, new institutionalism has helped in explaining how and why the CMEP at the organisation comes to be. In particular, the theories have helped explained that the CMEP is not the direct result of top-down decisions that impose it as a formal rule on the employees. Its origin is therefore not to be sought in any regulation source, but rather in the repeated practices of individual agents at the company (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The CMEP is empirically driven in our data, it arises from what the interviewees, HR-department and internal documents express. The CMEP is a way of working on an issue that is taken for granted by everyone at the company. Individuals learn it, make it theirs, and reproduce it without someone (for example a manager) else pushing this practice onto them. This process is, in other words, free or almost free from being imposed or enforced, but is instead ingrained in their way to do things and renews and maintains itself by means of individual agency put in practice.

### **Conflict Management and Conflict Co-Occurrence**

In addition to the CMEP, this paper further identifies a number of additional points of analysis, deriving from the data gathered. In line with previous research, our findings show that in the organisation studied, multiple conflicts can exist in the same conflict scenario, as was e.g. seen in the example of the string quartet (Murnighan & Conlon, 1991). Several previous studies on conflict management claim that as there are various types of conflicts, there are subsequently various strategies to managing conflicts accordingly (Carton & Tewfik, 2016; De Wit et al, 2012; Murnighan & Conlon, 1991; Fowler, 2013; Rahim, 2002; De Dreu

& Weingart, 2003; Jehn et al., 2012). A conflict type is thus oftentimes “paired” with an adequate conflict management strategy. The findings of this study does not necessarily contradict these theories, however, and most importantly, our paper shows that in addition to the existence of multiple conflict types and strategies, there may be institutionalised procedures to managing conflicts, complementing the conflict management strategies, as was explained in the previous section. Nevertheless, in over 50% of the conflicts scenarios (28/48) studied in this paper, the situations contained, in addition to its main conflict type, elements of other types of conflicts, thus supporting the notion of plurality of conflict types in a given conflict situation. The conflict situations studied in this paper could be classified according to the four categories of task, relationship, process and status conflicts, by coding the conflicts in accordance with their closest adjacency to the ideal characteristics of each category, although they could still be characterised as multifaceted in nature. In other words, the most dominant aspect of the conflict was the deciding factor in the categorisation process in the empirical section.

Conflict situations may include asymmetrical elements between the parties involved, as elaborated by Jehn et al. (2010; 2012). This was evident in several of the conflict scenarios, e.g. (T1), where the co-workers disagreed about what to include in a report, and in (S2) where two executives clashed. In the latter, the interviewed party even stated that he was not sure whether or not the other party would even acknowledge the situation as a conflict, whereas he clearly saw it as a conflict situation. This asymmetry in perceptions can result in either constructive or detrimental outcomes, depending on if the parties involved in the conflicts perceive the situation as challenging or threatening, as claimed by Jehn et al. (2012). However, according to the authors’ previous study from 2010, the asymmetry of conflict perceptions is in itself detrimental to the team or the organisation, as the parties would generally benefit from being unanimous about the understanding of the conflict situation. Consequently, according to this line of research, in situation (S2) the conflict situation would benefit from both parties acknowledging the conflict in order to facilitate management of the conflict.

Moreover, in regards to whether or not members of executive teams were more politically oriented, savvy and suited for handling conflict scenarios, as claimed by De Wit et al. (2012), managers at the organisation studied do have access to the HR-portal which contains information about conflict management and, as part of their management training, managers undergo particular conflict management courses. Therefore, this study may to some extent indicate that that managers and executives in the organisation studied in theory should be more prepared and ready for dealing with conflicts compared to employees without managerial responsibilities, which could therefore support the claim by De Wit et al. (2012). However, this claim was not further studied in practice due to the fact that the authors did not separate between hierarchical levels in the interviews. The purpose of this paper was to depict and study general workplace conflicts in a specific context, which is why no division was made in regards to hierarchy, division or position. Rather, conflicts were studied in this paper in regards to their particular contexts, inside the organisation studied, which in several cases involved various hierarchical levels, departments etc.

## **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

It is important to note that the full extent of the conflict situation may not have been explored, as the situations were merely depicted by one side of each dispute in this study. Thus, the conflict situations may contain other aspects or elements of conflict, if the same episodes were to be told by other parties involved in the conflicts. It would therefore be interesting to study conflict situations as told by all parties involved, in order to contrast and compare the stories to a larger extent. As this study focuses on conflict management processes as seen in a particular context, the results may differ to other organisations and also to previous conflict literature. The setting of this study is a Swedish organisation that manufactures vehicles. This implies a series of premises that may be fundamentally different from other contexts, or which other studies may entail. Different national and organisational cultures, different attitudes towards procedures and rules, different ways in which formality is interpreted may reflect in differences in how conflicts are experienced, approached, and managed. Thus, for example, organisations that are not as large, or do not structure work in projects to such extents may yield different data and different findings. For instance, if a conflict arose in a company of five employees, the impact of the conflict may be different than if the same conflict arose in an organisation of 10,000 employees. It would therefore also be interesting to study if other, similar or dissimilar, organisations made use of comparable procedures to managing conflict situations, as was seen in the organisation studied in this paper. As discussed, conflicts are highly situational, and it follows that different data on conflicts can produce different outcomes in the analysis of that very data. Our own findings, thus, are characterised by a certain level of specificity, in that they are dependent on the context in which they are made sense of. A comparative study of other organisations and their conflict management procedures could therefore be needed in order to shed light on these questions.

## **Conclusion**

This case study has examined the intricacy of conflict management at a Swedish vehicle manufacturer, answering the research questions (1) *How do conflicts and conflict management practices unfold in an organisation?* and (2) *How can conflict management practices be explained by the theoretical concept of institutional work?*. The study's contributions are multiple. First and foremost, we have shown that in the organisation studied, regardless of the type of conflict, there is a general approach towards managing the situation, in this paper referred to as the conflict management escalation procedure (CMEP). This procedure embodies conflict management at the organisation studied in a consistent and coherent way, by the escalation of a conflict situation to involve a third party mediator. While the CMEP does not necessarily exclude the presence of particular strategies for conflict management, it supplements existing conflict management theories by presenting an institutionalised approach for the management of conflicts, regardless of conflict type, as seen in an organisation. The processes behind the procedure were explained with the help of the theoretical framework of institutional work. The procedure at the company, regardless if seen as formal or informal, stands as an unchallenged institution that is maintained by the practices of the employees at the company. Thus, by means of their agency, these individuals reinforce

the procedure over time and perform institutional work that maintains the conflict management escalation procedure. The reliance on a single procedure for the management of all conflict situations, regardless of conflict type, has not been thoroughly covered in previous literature. Consequently, our study may extend and supplement the previous theoretical work that pairs specific conflict management strategies with conflict types. In this sense, our study represents a novelty. Second, and in line with previous research, our findings show that in the organisation studied, multiple conflicts can exist in the same conflict scenario and can be classified according to the various conflict types as identified by contemporary conflict literature. Third, this study provides practical contributions to managers and organisations by identifying and depicting the CMEP of the organisation studied, thus allowing other organisations and managers to be inspired by or mimic the procedure if found adequate for their respective context. Finally, little literature has to this date applied the theoretical concept of institutional work on conflict management. A fourth and final element of contribution is therefore the application of new institutional theory to the area of conflict management.

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