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When Power Entails Responsibility: The Moderating Role of Power Construal in the Association between Leader-Employee Relationship Conflict and Conflict Management

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Abstract

Conflict is an inherent part of organizational life. Leader-employee relationship conflicts, which center around interpersonal tensions beyond specific tasks between leader and employee, can significantly impact workplace dynamics. Depending on what extent leaders construe their power as responsibility (PaR), they may be more inclined to adopt one conflict management strategy over another. This study focuses on two conflict management strategies in the face of leader-employee relationship conflict: problem-solving, which reflects high concern for both self and others, and forcing, which reflects high concern for self and low concern for others. It examines how construing PaR may influence leaders' preference for either approach. Using a multi-source, cross-sectional field design, data were collected from leaders and employees. Results revealed that leader-employee relationship conflict was significantly negatively related to problem-solving, but significantly positively related to forcing. Leaders' power construed as responsibility did not moderate either relationship. These results suggest that relationship conflict between leaders and employees is associated with increased use of self-focused strategies and decreased problem-solving approaches on the part of leaders, regardless of leaders' power construed as responsibility. The study discusses theoretical and practical implications of these findings. Strengths and limitations are also considered.

Keywords: relationship conflict, power construal, responsibility, leader-employee conflict, conflict management strategies

When Power Entails Responsibility: The Moderating Role of Power Construal in the Association between Leader-Employee Relationship Conflict and Conflict Management

Conflict is an inherent aspect of human interaction and an inevitable part of organizational life. As Thakore (2013) states, "Whenever there is interaction, there is conflict." Organizational leaders (including HR practitioners) spend on average, up to five hours each week managing conflicts, amounting to approximately 359 billion U.S. dollars in lost productivity annually (CPP GLOBAL & Hayes, 2008). Beyond significant explicit financial losses, workplace conflict contributes to higher employee turnover rates, terminations, and project failures, further increasing organizational costs (CPP GLOBAL & Hayes, 2008). Additionally, conflicts are closely linked to burnout, somatic complaints, and threaten overall employee well-being (Frone, 2000; Sonnentag et al., 2013).

Current literature distinguishes three primary types of conflict: relationship, task, and process conflicts (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). *Relationship* conflicts involve interpersonal tensions stemming from personal differences, beliefs, or dislikes. *Task* conflict, in contrast, revolves around disagreements regarding work-related issues, while *process* conflict arises from disputes over task execution and role distribution. Although different conflict types yield varying outcomes, relationship conflicts have been consistently regarded as the most detrimental for performance, organizational costs, collaboration and employee well-being (De Dreu et al., 2005; De Wit & Weingart, 2003; Dijkstra et al., 2005; Lau & Cobb, 2009; Pretirose & Muafi, 2021).

Much of the existing research on relationship conflict has focused on intragroup dynamics, often overlooking the influence of hierarchical differences among members (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; Frone, 2000; Oore et al., 2010; Way et al., 2015). In organizational contexts, hierarchies are both inevitable and particularly salient in leader-follower relationships (Fousiani, 2020; Nyaga et al., 2013). Leaders and employees fulfill

distinct organizational roles: while leaders exercise decision-making authority and control valuable resources due to their positional power (Fousiani, 2020; Mercadal, 2021), they are also highly dependent on employees to execute tasks and achieve shared goals, resulting in mutual interdependence (Tjosvold & Wisse, 2009). Leader-employee relationship conflicts may undermine this dynamic by fostering interpersonal tensions, particularly when left unaddressed (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Therefore, understanding how such conflicts, which are shaped by positional differences, relate to conflict management strategies is crucial.

Research on conflict management suggests that leaders may demonstrate varying degrees of concern for their employees. This level of concern for others is one of the key dimensions used to distinguish between conflict strategies in the Dual-Concern Theory (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert; 1997). Prior research on relationship conflict within teams has consistently linked it to strategies characterized by low concern for others, such as forcing (De Dreu, 1997; Janssen et al., 1999; Marques et al., 2015). In contrast, relationship conflict is generally negatively associated with strategies that reflect high concern for others, such as problem-solving (De Dreu, 1997; Janssen et al., 1999).

Building on this framework, the present paper proposes that leader-employee relationship conflict is similarly associated with forcing and problem-solving strategies. However, given that leaders hold primary responsibility for conflict resolution in hierarchical relationships (Guttman, 2004; Heifetz & Laurie, 2002), their leadership characteristics may significantly influence their choice of strategy. Specifically, leaders' construal of their power as a responsibility (PaR) may moderate how they respond to relationship conflict with either forcing or problem-solving strategies. Leaders who construe their PaR are more likely to act in the interest of the wider group rather than focusing solely on achieving goals (Scholl et al., 2022). Hence, those construing their PaR may be more inclined to manage relationship

conflict in a way that shows increased concern for others over concern for self, compared to those who emphasize the responsibilities less.

This study contributes to the conflict management literature in two key ways. First, it extends findings on relationship conflict by examining its dynamics within leader-employee relationships. Second, it introduces leaders' construal of PaR as a moderating factor, offering a more nuanced understanding of how power construal influences conflict management. In doing so, the study challenges the assumption that relationship conflict is inherently linked to forcing strategies.

Leader-Employee Relationship Conflict and Conflict Management

Relationship conflict involves interpersonal tensions and plays a distinct role in workplace dynamics. It centers around personal incompatibilities in values, beliefs, or opinions (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Different to task or process conflict, relationship conflict exclusively focuses on personal issues between individuals that are unrelated to the task at hand. This conflict type often causes the emergence of feelings of annoyance, frustration or even anger, thereby involving a significant affective compound (De Dreu et al., 2004; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Similarly, leader-employee relationship conflicts involve interpersonal tensions between a leader and their employee and are unrelated to specific tasks. These conflicts often evoke strong emotional reactions and emphasize the hierarchical differences between the two roles (De Dreu et al., 2004). For example, a leader criticizes an employee for being unavailable on Friday afternoons. The employee, who values that time for family, feels their priorities are not respected, leading to a conflict rooted in differing personal values.

General relationship conflict is associated with a variety of negative outcomes, which have prompted the examination of different conflict management strategies (De Dreu et al., 2005; De Wit & Weingart, 2003; Dijkstra et al., 2005; Lau & Cobb, 2009; Pretirose & Muafi, 2021).

General research aligns with the strategies outlined in the Dual Concern Theory (De Dreu et al., 2001; Beitler et al., 2018). The theory suggests five different strategies based on the level of concern for oneself and concern for others. The five strategies are: problem-solving (high concern for both self and others), yielding (high concern for others; low concern for self), forcing (low concern for others; high concern for self), avoiding (low concern for both self and others), and compromising (moderate concern for both self and others) (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert; 1997). Beitler et al. (2018) further categorized conflict management strategies as either active or passive. Active conflict management strategies involve directly addressing the conflict, as seen in forcing and problem-solving approaches. Passive strategies include avoiding and yielding approaches, as these do not involve directly addressing the conflict (Beitler et al., 2018). This paper will exclusively focus on conflict management strategies where the leader actively confronts the conflict, as it is the leader who usually assumes this responsibility (Guttman, 2004; Heifetz & Laurie, 2002).

Forcing is classified an active-destructive strategy, as it entails imposing one's will through persuasive arguments, threats, or positional commitments, often at the expense of the relationship (Beitler et al., 2018). Individuals who engage in forcing tend to adopt rigid stances, show little interest in the needs of others, and may use intimidation techniques to achieve their goals (De Dreu et al., 2004; Rahim, 2003). Problem-solving is considered an active-constructive strategy and regarded as beneficial for conflict management, as it not only resolves conflicts but may also strengthen the relationship between the involved parties (Beitler et al., 2018). It aims to maximize satisfaction for both parties, often through open communication and information exchange about priorities and preferences (De Dreu et al., 2001). Compromising, while technically classified an active strategy, does not clearly align

with either end of the two dimensions outlined by the Dual-Concern Theory (Beitler et al., 2018; Van de Vliert; 1997). Therefore, it will not be included in this study.

Prior research has identified a significant positive correlation between relationship conflict and the use of forcing strategies, as well as a negative correlation between relationship conflict and problem-solving approaches (De Dreu, 1997; Janssen et al., 1999). While not the primary concern of this study, several psychological and relational mechanisms may help explain why relationship conflict promotes more self-interested conflict management strategies and hinders collaborative approaches. These insights contribute to a broader theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of conflict behavior.

Relationship conflict often triggers strong negative emotions, which can foster competitive behaviors, reduce concern for others, and increase self-interest (Rhoades et al., 2001). This heightened self-interest and reduced concern for others is a characteristic typical of forcing strategies (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert; 1997). Moreover, relationship conflict has been linked to increased psychological strain and diminished trust (Curşeu & Schruijer, 2010; Dijkstra et al., 2011), both of which impair the cognitive and relational capacities needed for effective problem-solving (Starcke et al., 2008; Tallman & Hsiao, 2004; Zand, 1972). In leader-employee relationships, differences in positional power may further affect the use of forcing or problem-solving. During conflict, leaders may exert less effort to emphasize with employees' perspectives (Fiske, 1993; Galinsky et al., 2006; Keltner & Robinson, 1997; Yip & Schweitzer, 2018). As a result, leaders experiencing relationship conflict with an employee may be more likely to adopt forcing strategies and less likely to engage in problem-solving approaches, which require a high level of concern for others (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert; 1997). Based on this theoretical framework, I hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Leader-employee relationship conflict is positively associated with leaders' use of forcing.

Hypothesis 2: Leader-employee relationship conflict is negatively associated with leaders' use of problem-solving.

The Moderating Role of Power Construed as Responsibility

One of the most distinct features of leader-employee relationships is the difference in hierarchy and the associated positional power. Power itself refers to the asymmetric control over valuable and limited resources (Emerson 1962; Fiske, 2010; Keltner et al., 2003). Although power and leadership are distinct concepts they are often closely interrelated (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Yukl et al., 1990). Not every individual who holds power is necessarily a leader, but leaders typically possess more power than followers because of the authority and control granted to them in their position, including influence over decision-making, information sharing, reward and punishment allocation (Fousiani, 2020; Van Vugt, 2006).

The way leaders view and interpret their power, also known as power construal, can significantly shape their behavior and its outcomes. Power can be construed as a responsibility, where leaders feel intrinsically obligated to act according to the needs of the situation and the broader interests of their group or organization (Scholl et al., 2022). Leaders who associate their position with increased responsibility are less likely to engage in risky decision-making, as they consider a wider range of factors beyond immediate goal pursuit, including ethical and organizational concerns (Lejuez et al., 2002; Scholl et al., 2022). Raising leaders' awareness of their responsibilities has been shown to reduce their inclination toward risk-taking (Scholl et al., 2022). In addition, construing PaR is associated with less selfish behavior (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008; Fousiani & Wisse, 2022) and a greater

willingness to consider others' perspectives and advice during decision-making processes (Scholl et al., 2022).

This study proposes that leaders' construal of PaR moderates the relationship between leader-employee relationship conflict and their selected conflict management strategy (De Dreu et al., 2004; Janssen et al., 1999). When leaders construe their power as a responsibility, they are more likely to stay oriented toward their employees' needs (Scholl et al., 2022). This sense of obligation may counteract the increased concern for self over others typically provoked by relationship conflict (De Dreu et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., 2001). In other words, leaders high in PaR may resist defaulting to forcing strategies, instead maintaining a commitment to relational harmony and showing appreciation for their employees' perspectives (Lejuez et al., 2002; Scholl et al., 2022). Thus, PaR may weaken the positive relationship between leader-employee conflict and forcing, by buffering the leaders' self-focused impulses in relationship conflict situations. Therefore I hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3: Leaders' construal of PaR weakens the positive relationship between leader-employee relationship conflict and leaders' use of forcing.

When leaders who construe PaR actively engage in leader-employee relationship conflict, their intrinsic motivation to act in the broader interests of their group may help alleviate some of the psychological strain typically associated with such conflict (Strauss et al., 2017). In this way, construing PaR may implicitly buffer against the strain experienced during leader-employee relationship conflict that often impairs effective problem-solving (Starcke et al., 2008; Tallman & Hsiao, 2004; Zand, 1972). Additionally, leaders who construe PaR tend to show greater perspective-taking and are less likely to default to self-serving behavior (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008; Fousiani & Wisse, 2022; Lejuez et al., 2002; Scholl et al., 2022). This may serve as a protective factor, helping to sustain concern for others during leader-employee relationship conflict, where competitive impulses typically

undermine such concern (Rhoades et al., 2001). In essence, the study argues that PaR alleviates the negative association between leader-employee relationship conflict and leader problem-solving. I hypothesize the following:

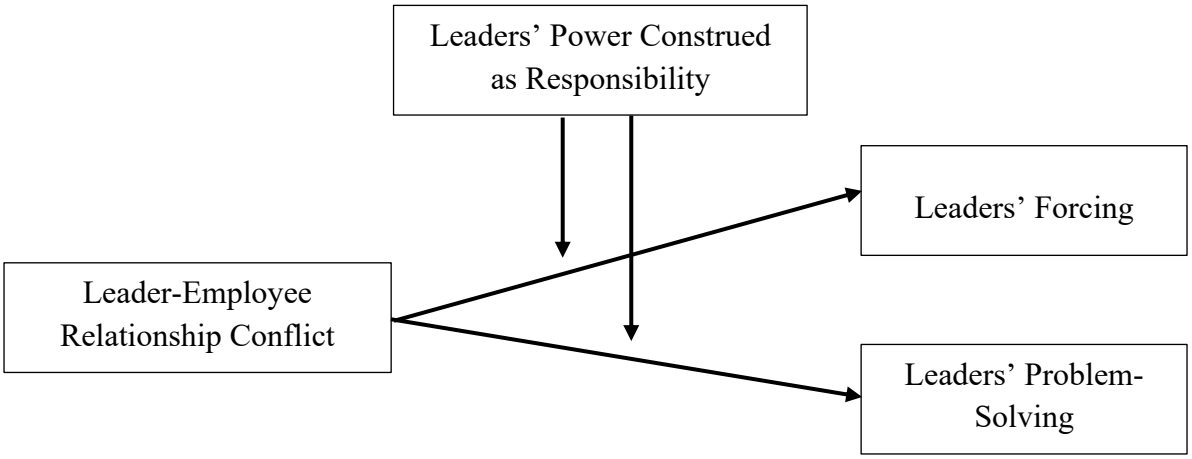
Hypothesis 4: Leaders' construal of PaR weakens the negative relationship between leader-employee relationship conflict and leaders' use of problem-solving.

Overview of this Research

This study examines how leader-employee relationship conflict relates to leaders' use of forcing or problem-solving strategies and explores whether leaders' construal of PaR moderates this relationship. Teams of leaders and employees will complete tailored questionnaires: employees will report on degree of relationship conflict and their leaders' conflict management style, while leaders will self-assess their own power construal. Additionally, the remaining three strategies (avoiding, yielding, compromising) from the Dual-Concern Theory (De Dreu et al., 2001) will be explored in relation to leader-employee relationship conflict and PaR in an exploratory analysis for the sake of completeness.

Figure 1

Final Research Model



Methods

Participants

The final leader sample consisted of 84 leaders, after excluding those who either did not provide consent (n = 2), or did not meet the inclusion criteria (n = 11), such as lacking employee participation. The mean age of the leaders was 48.8 years (SD = 10.1, range = 24 - 68). Among the leaders, 29.8% identified as female and 70.2% as male. On average, leaders reported working 42.8 hours per week (SD = 7.8, range = 27 - 70). The most common nationalities were Dutch (46.4%), German (29.8%), and other European nationalities (26.2%). Industries represented in this sample included IT, healthcare, manufacturing, or education.

The final employee sample consisted of 236 employees, after excluding those who either did not provide consent (n = 15) or failed to meet eligibility criteria (n = 63), such as being underage, lacking a participating leader, or failing attention checks. The mean age was 41.6 years (SD = 11.5, range = 19-71). Of the employees, 49.2% identified as female and 50.8% as male. All employees indicated working under their current supervisor for at least one month. The most common nationalities reported were Dutch (39.4%), German (26.8%), and other European Nationalities (33.5%).

Design and Procedure

The present study employed a multi-source, cross-sectional field design. Initially, students from the University of Groningen contacted one to three individuals in leadership positions within their social network. These leaders were then asked to share their contact information, which the students forwarded to the research team. Researchers subsequently reached out to the leaders via e-mail, providing information about the study's purpose and design. Leaders were invited to participate and asked to provide the e-mail addresses of up to ten direct employees, who indicated a willingness to take part in the study. Researchers then

reached out to the employees, similarly, informing them about the study. Separate follow-up emails containing links to the appropriate questionnaire were sent out to interested leaders and employees.

Participants were informed that the study aimed to examine leader characteristics, employee work behaviors, and the quality of leader-employee relationships. Questionnaires were available in Dutch, German, and English. German and Dutch participants received questionnaires in their native language, while individuals of other nationalities were provided with the English version, given their fluency.

The leaders' questionnaire took about 20 - 25 minutes to complete, and measured power construal, conflict management strategy, and generativity, among other variables. The employee's questionnaire took approximately 10 - 15 minutes, and measured conflict type, power construal, organizational citizenship behavior, and others. In both questionnaires, participants were requested to provide demographic information, including gender, age, and the industry in which they work.

This study focused on three key variables: Leader-employee relationship conflict and the leaders' conflict management strategy were reported exclusively by employees, while leaders' power construed as responsibility was assessed from the leaders' perspective.

Participation in this study was voluntary, based on informed consent, and all responses were kept confidential. The study received ethical approval from the University of Groningen's ethics committee prior to data collection. Upon completion, all participants received a detailed summary of the findings with practical recommendations for team improvement.

Measures

Leader – Employee Relationship Conflict (E)

Leader-employee relationship conflict was measured using the scale developed by Jehn and Mannix (2001) and captured employees' perceptions of the degree of a relationship conflict with their supervisor.[1] Leader-employee relationship conflict was assessed through three items included in the employee questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Example items include: "How much relationship tension is there between your supervisor and yourself?" and "How often do you get angry while working with your supervisor?". Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all or never*) to 7 (*A lot or very often*). The scale was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha value of $\alpha = .88$.

Conflict Management Strategy (E)

Conflict management strategies were assessed using items adapted from the scale developed by De Dreu et al. (2001), with employees providing the responses (see Footnote 1). To measure the extent of leaders' use of forcing and problem-solving behaviors, participants completed eight items in total, with four items assessing each strategy (see Appendix 1). Each item began with the prompt: "Whenever I have a disagreement or conflict with my supervisor, my supervisor usually…", followed by a specific statement. Examples of items assessing leaders' forcing included "pushes his/her own point of view" and "tries to maximize his/her own gains". In contrast, problem-solving was measured using items such as "examines issues until he/she finds a solution that really satisfies himself/herself and myself" and "examines ideas from both sides to find a mutually optimal solution".

As part of an exploratory analysis the strategies yielding, avoiding and compromising were also examined using the same scale format by De Dreu et al. (2001) (see Appendix 1). A sample item for leaders' use of yielding was "tries to accommodate me," for avoiding

[1] ICC(1) and ICC(2) were calculated to assess the appropriateness of aggregating employee-level data. The results supported aggregation, so analyses were conducted using aggregated data.

"tries to avoid a confrontation with me," and for compromising "insists we both give in a little".

Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*To a great extent*). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values as follows: forcing (α = .91), problem-solving (α = .94), yielding (α = .90), avoiding (α = .90), and compromising (α = .87).

Power Construed as Responsibility in Leaders (L)

Leaders' power construed as responsibility was measured using an adapted version of the scale developed by De Wit et al. (2017), modified to fit the context of this study (see Fousiani & Wisse, 2022; see Appendix 1). In the questionnaire tailored for leadership positions, participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which they view their power construed as a responsibility. Each item began with the prompt: "In my work, I tend to see my power in terms of", and continued with statements such as: "…the responsibilities it gives me towards my subordinates.". Leaders rated the degree of agreement on a seven-point Likert response scale, ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) 4 representing a neutral answer (*Neither agree nor disagree*). The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha value of α = .73.

Control Variables

Research suggests that leaders' gender can influence the choice of conflict management strategies in workplace settings (Rahim & Katz, 2019). To account for this potential bias, leader gender was included as a control variable (1 = *Female*, 2 = *Male*). Additionally, the number of hours worked per week were controlled for, as it may impact conflict management approaches (Drory & Ritov, 1997). Leader age was also included as a control variable, given its established influence on workplace interactions and engagement (Yang & Matz-Costa, 2017).

Results

Correlations and Descriptives

All descriptive statistics and Pearson's *r* correlations are presented in Table 1. Leader-employee relationship conflict was significantly and positively correlated with leaders' forcing and significantly and negatively correlated with leaders' problem-solving. In contrast, it was not significantly correlated with leaders' PaR (as assessed by leaders). Leaders' forcing and problem-solving (as assessed by employees) were significantly and negatively correlated with each other. Neither the correlation between leaders' forcing and PaR, nor the correlation between leaders' problem-solving and PaR reached statistical significance.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Central Variables

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Leader-employee relationship conflict (E)	1.79	.81						
2. Forcing (E)	2.64	1.05	.48**					
3. Problem-solving (E)	5.05	1.06	-.54**	-.50**				
4. Responsibility (L)	5.83	.87	-.02	-.19	.06			
5. Gender (L)[1]	1.70	.46	.07	.04	-.02	-.04		
6. Age (L)	48.76	10.14	.19	-.10	-.08	-.07	.08	
7. Hours worked per week (L)	42.85	7.82	.17	-.01	.04	.08	.41**	-.02

Note. All correlations are Pearson's r. E = employee-rated; L = leader-rated.

[1]Gender was coded as (1 = female, 2 = male).

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Concerning the covariates, including leader gender, age and hours worked per week, no significant correlations emerged with any of the main variables. However, gender and hours worked per week were positively and significantly associated with one another.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses were tested using PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 1; Hayes, 2022). Two moderation models were tested separately: one with forcing and another with problem-solving as outcome variables.[2]

The model examining leaders' use of forcing as a conflict management strategy, including leader-employee relationship conflict, leaders' power construed as responsibility, and all covariates (leader gender, age and hours worked per week), was statistically significant: $R^2 = .33$, $F(6, 77) = 6.18$, $p < .001$. Similarly, the model examining leaders' problem-solving was also significant: $R^2 = .33$, $F(6, 77) = 6.20$, $p < .001$.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, results presented in Table 2 indicate that leader-employee relationship conflict was positively and significantly associated with leaders' use of forcing strategies (as rated by employees). Thus, supporting Hypothesis 1 and suggesting that higher levels of perceived relationship conflict were linked to increased use of leader forcing. Additionally, the covariate leader age was significantly and negatively correlated with leaders' use of forcing strategies, regardless of leader gender or hours worked. Supporting Hypothesis 2, leader-employee relationship conflict was significantly and negatively associated with leaders' use of problem-solving (as rated by employees), as shown in Table 2. Table 2 also shows that the direct relationship between leaders' PaR was not significantly associated with either leader forcing or problem-solving behaviors.

[2] Before conducting the analysis, all necessary assumptions were tested to ensure the validity of the results.

Hypothesis 3 and 4, which proposed moderating effects of PaR, were not supported. Specifically, the interaction between leader-employee relationship conflict and leaders' PaR in predicting leaders' use of forcing strategies (Hypothesis 3) was non-significant. Similarly, the interaction term for leader-employee relationship conflict and PaR in predicting leaders' use of problem-solving strategies (Hypothesis 4) was also non-significant (see Table 2).

Table 2

PROCESS Macro Model 1, Results for Hypothesis Testing

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*p*	95% CI
Dependent Variable: Leaders' Forcing				
L.-E. Relationship Conflict	.71	.13	.00***	.46; .96
Leaders' PaR	-.22	.11	.06	-.45; .01
L.-E. Relationship Conflict x PaR	-.19	.17	.26	-.53; .15
Leader age	-.02	.01	.02*	-.04; .00
Leader gender	.15	.24	.53	-.32; .62
Weekly working hours	-.02	.01	.27	-.04; .01
Dependent Variable: Leaders' Problem-Solving				
L.-E. Relationship Conflict	-.76	.13	.00***	-1.01; -.50
Leaders' PaR	.05	.11	.67	-.18; .28
L.-E. Relationship Conflict x PaR	.23	.17	.18	-.11; .57
Leader age	.00	.01	.70	-.02; .02
Leader gender	-.11	.24	.64	-.58; .36
Weekly working hours	.02	.01	.17	-.01; .05

Note. L.-E. = Leader-Employee. PaR = Power as Responsibility. 95% CI = 95% Confidence Interval. Gender was coded as (1 = Female, 2 = Male).

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Further Exploratory Analyses

For the sake of completeness, leaders' use of compromising, yielding, and avoiding strategies were also examined in relation to leader-employee relationship conflict and PaR in leaders. Each model included the same predictors, namely leader-employee relationship conflict, leaders' PaR, along with control variables for leader gender, age, and hours worked per week. The model examining leaders' compromising, as rated by employees, was not statistically significant ($R^2 = .11$, $F(6, 77) = 1.52$, $p < .18$). In contrast, the model examining leaders' yielding behaviors, as rated by employees, reached statistical significance at an alpha level of .01 ($R^2 = .18$, $F(6, 77) = 2.87$, $p < .01$). The model examining leaders' avoiding, as rated by employees, only narrowly missed significance levels ($R^2 = .13$, $F(6, 77) = 1.93$, $p = .09$).

All values related to associations among leader-employee relationship conflict, leaders' PaR, and conflict management strategies are presented in Table 3 (see Tables). Leaders' use of compromising strategies was not significantly associated with either relationship conflict or PaR (as rated by leaders), nor was the interaction effect significant. For yielding, leader-employee relationship conflict was significantly negatively associated with leader yielding (as assessed by employees). However, neither the relationship between leader yielding and PaR nor the interaction term were significant. Regarding avoiding strategies, no significant association was found with leader-employee relationship conflict. However, there was a significant negative relationship between leaders' PaR and their use of avoiding strategies ($p < .05$). The interaction effect between leader-employee relationship conflict and PaR was non-significant.

Discussion

In the present study, I investigated how leader-employee relationship conflict influences leaders' use of forcing or problem-solving strategies, and whether leaders' construal of PaR moderates this relationship.

Previous literature suggests that relationship conflict may heighten self-concern over other-concern, thereby increasing the likelihood of using forcing strategies over collaborative problem-solving (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Nyaga et al., 2013; Rhoades et al., 2001). Thus, I hypothesized that leader-employee relationship conflict would be associated with an increased use of forcing-strategies and decreased use of problem-solving strategies. I further proposed that leaders who construe PaR would be less prone to this increase in forcing, as the ethical awareness and concern for others' well-being associated with PaR may weaken the positive relationship between leader-employee relationship conflict and leader forcing (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2008; Lejuez et al., 2002; Scholl et al., 2022). Regarding problem-solving, I hypothesized that PaR would buffer the negative association between leader-employee relationship conflict and the use of problem-solving by counteracting the cognitive and emotional inhibition typically linked to such conflicts (Starcke et al., 2008; Strauss et al., 2017; Tallman & Hsiao, 2004; Zand, 1972).

The present study provided support for Hypothesis 1 that leader-employee relationship conflict is associated with increased leaders' use of forcing strategies. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, problem-solving strategies were used less frequently in the context of such conflicts. Secondly, contrary to Hypothesis 3 and 4, leader power construed as responsibility did not exert the expected moderating effect on either leaders' forcing or problem-solving. Leaders who reported differing degrees of responsibility in their role did not demonstrate a meaningful difference in their use of forcing or problem-solving strategies when managing relationship conflict with an employee.

Theoretical Implications

Previous research has shown a general tendency to rely on forcing strategies when managing relationship conflicts (De Dreu, 1997; Janssen et al., 1999). This study extends these findings to the leader-employee context and offers robust support for a positive association between leader-employee relationship conflict and the use of forcing strategies. This indicates that the preference for forcing also applies in interactions defined by structural hierarchy and positional power imbalance. In the present study, older leaders appeared to rely slightly less on forcing strategies. This aligns with literature suggesting that older adults are more motivated to prioritize positive over negative interpersonal experiences, making them less likely to engage in conflict strategies such as forcing, which could threaten relationship quality (Beitler et al., 2018; Carstensen et al., 2003).

Additionally, the current study found a significant negative association between leader-employee relationship conflict and problem-solving. This corresponds with research suggesting that leader-employee relationship conflict may hinder problem-solving by increasing psychological strain, diminishing trust, and impairing relational and cognitive functions necessary for effective problem-solving (Curşeu & Schruijer, 2010; Dijkstra et al., 2011; Starcke et al., 2008; Tallman & Hsiao, 2004; Yip & Schweitzer, 2018; Zand, 1972). Therefore, the finding that greater relationship conflict between leader and employee corresponds to reduced use of leader problem-solving strategies fits within the broader understanding of how relationship conflict hinders collaborative resolution.

Although not the focus of a hypothesis, the direct association between leaders' PaR and the use of leader forcing strategies only narrowly missed significance. This may point to an emerging trend: leaders who perceive a stronger sense of responsibility might be somewhat less inclined to use forcing tactics. However, given that the effect did not meet conventional thresholds for significance, it should be viewed as a direction for future inquiry rather than a confirmed result.

Regarding the hypothesized moderating role of PaR, the data did not support its influence on either forcing or problem-solving in the context of leader-employee relationship conflict. Contrary to expectations, PaR did not appear to sufficiently counteract the self-focused orientation that characterizes forcing strategies (De Dreu et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., 2001). In the case of problem-solving, even leaders with a strong sense of responsibility may find it difficult to engage in constructive conflict management when under emotional strain induced by relationship conflict (Dijkstra et al., 2011). Given that problem-solving requires cognitive effort and is particularly vulnerable to emotional disruption, it may be especially compromised during leader-employee relationship conflicts, even when power is construed as a responsibility (Kolfschoten et al., 2014; Linder et al., 2021). The non-significant results may suggest that the intensity of leader-employee relationship conflicts and its associated negative affect was too great to be mitigated by PaR.

Exploratory Analysis

Although not central to this study (given its primary focus on active conflict management strategies), exploratory analysis yielded noteworthy findings. For instance, the data revealed that higher levels of leader-employee relationship conflict were associated with a lower use of yielding strategies by leaders. Yielding is characterized by low concern for self and high concern for others (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert; 1997). Given that individuals in positions of power are generally less inclined to consider the perspectives of others (Fiske, 1993; Galinsky et al., 2006; Keltner & Robinson, 1997), and that yielding approaches require understanding and prioritizing the other party's needs, it is reasonable to observe a negative relationship between leader-employee relationship conflict and yielding behaviors in leaders.

A significant negative relationship was found between leaders' PaR and leaders' use of avoiding strategies (as assessed by employees). Avoiding is characterized by low concern

for both self and others (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert; 1997), while perceiving one's power as a responsibility is typically linked to a heightened awareness of broader interpersonal and organizational needs beyond task-related performance (Scholl et al., 2022). Given this contrast, the negative association between the two constructs appears theoretically consistent.

Practical Implications

Given the clear support for an increase in active-destructive conflict management strategies (i.e., forcing) and decrease in active-constructive strategies (i.e., problem-solving) in the context of leader-employee relationship conflict, organizations should consider implementing leadership-focused conflict management training. Such training programs should begin by educating leaders on the detrimental consequences of relationship conflict and the established associations between specific conflict management strategies. Leaders should be trained to recognize early warning signs of interpersonal tension and be introduced to practical early intervention techniques.

Beyond individual training, organizations can help reduce the likelihood of leader-employee relationship conflict by fostering a collaborative work culture that emphasizes shared values, builds trust among team members, and supports intentional and constructive communication among their employees (Calvert, 2018; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

Strengths and Limitations

A considerable strength of the present study is its reliance on well-established, reliable and validated scales for all core constructs, increasing the overall validity and reliability of the present results (Bao et al., 2019; De Dreu et al., 2001; De Wit et al., 2017; Fousiani et al., 2025; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Rispens et al., 2020; Scholl et al., 2023). Furthermore, since the present study is a field study, all data was directly sourced from the field of interest, increasing overall external validity (Samek, 2019). This study also uses

team-data from both leaders and employees, providing a broader overview of the relationship between the two parties. Another strength lies in the practical relevance of PaR. Although it did not have the hypothesized effect in the present study, existing research indicates that power construed as responsibility is not only theoretically meaningful but also malleable. Prior research has shown that priming participants with responsibility-oriented power construals can elicit more constructive, prosocial behaviors (Scholl et al., 2022). This suggests that PaR may be a viable target for intervention, making it a valuable concept for leadership development training.

Limitations

This study's treatment of conflict management strategies as disconnected, either-or categories (e.g., forcing versus problem-solving) may oversimplify the complexity of conflict management behaviors. However, research shows that leaders often employ multiple strategies simultaneously or quickly shift between them depending on the situation (Munduate et al., 1999). By treating these strategies as mostly disconnected categories, the study may have oversimplified the complexity of conflict management in organizational settings. As Yukl (2012) notes, leadership behavior is typically multifaceted and context-sensitive. Overlooking this dynamic interplay may limit the ecological validity of the findings.

Similarly, the study fails to consider the dynamic nature of leaders' power construal. Although individuals may have a general tendency in how they construe their power, the specific construal can vary depending on the context (Scholl et al., 2022). This study does not explore whether leader-employee relationship conflict itself influences a leader's construal of power. Furthermore, in this study leaders reported on their general sense of power as responsibility, while employees assessed the leader's typical conflict management strategies. However, given that the study focuses on situations involving negative emotional states, the

reported conflict management behavior may have been shaped by these states and might not fully reflect the leader's actual power construal during such conflicts.

Another limitation is the study's correlational nature. Because data was collected at a single point in time, causal relationships cannot be inferred, and only correlations can be discussed. This study also relies on self-report measures, which are inherently susceptible to biases such as social desirability bias (Durmaz et al., 2019; Van De Mortel, 2008). Moreover, the study may have been vulnerable to common-method bias, as both the predictor variable (leader-employee relationship conflict) and the outcome variables (leaders' use of forcing or problem-solving strategies) were assessed by employees (Podsakoff et al., 2023). Still, in this study, leaders' conflict management strategies were rated by employees rather than leaders themselves in order to avoid the overestimation of behaviors often found in self-assessments (Atkins & Wood, 2002). This other-assessment approach may help provide a more accurate representation of leaders' actual conflict management behaviors.

Additionally, the sample size is relatively small. Given that one of the findings approached conventional levels of significance, it is possible that a larger sample could have revealed significant effects. However, the current study lacks sufficient statistical power to confirm this possibility. Furthemore, the sample predominantly consisted of participants from Western Europe, which may limit the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings. In particular, perceptions of hierarchies and positional power distance can vary substantially across cultures, as highlighted by Hofstede (2011), and may affect how leadership and conflict between leader and employee are experienced and interpreted.

Future Research Directions

Future research should build on the limitations of the present study while contributing to a broader understanding of leader-employee relationship conflict and its management. One promising avenue is to explore the dynamic nature of both conflict management strategies

and power construal (Munduate et al., 1999; Scholl et al., 2022). In terms of conflict management, future studies could examine which factors predict shifts between different strategies over time, as well as investigate which strategies are often used simultaneously to manage leader-employee relationship conflict. Regarding power construal, future research should explore how leader-employee relationship conflict influences leaders' construal of their power. A longitudinal design could be particularly valuable in assessing whether relationship conflict predicts changes in power construal, treating power construal as an outcome variable. While this study focused exclusively on power construed as responsibility, future research should examine power construed as opportunity to better understand the contextual factors that influence either orientation (Scholl et al., 2022).

To further extend the present study, future research should incorporate additional variables that may clarify the mechanisms underlying the observed relationships. While this study confirmed a positive association between leader-employee relationship conflict and the use of forcing strategies, and a negative association with problem-solving, the underlying processes remain unclear. Given that effective problem-solving relies heavily on cognitive resources (Kolfschoten et al., 2014; Linder et al., 2021), future work could explore cognitive abilities or cognitive load as potential mediators in this relationship. Another valuable extension would be to examine employees' reactions to their leaders' conflict management strategies, shedding light on the relational consequences of different approaches. Additionally, emotional regulation could be investigated as a potential moderating variable. Given the emotional intensity often inherent in such conflicts (De Dreu et al., 2004; Jehn & Mannix, 2001), future studies could assess whether leaders with higher emotion regulation skills experience these conflicts differently. This line of research could be expanded through a longitudinal design, evaluating the effects of emotion regulation training on the occurrence and intensity of relationship conflict over time.

Since the present study primarily includes participants from Western European contexts, future research should examine leader-employee relationship conflicts across different cultures to enhance the generalizability of these findings. Cultural differences in how hierarchy is perceived and valued may significantly influence both the experience and management of such conflicts (Hofstede, 2011). In line with this, future studies could explore how employees across diverse cultural backgrounds respond to leader-employee relationship conflict.

Additionally, due to the study's leader-focused design, only leaders' age was included as a covariate. Including employee age may provide a more comprehensive understanding of age-related dynamics within leader-employee dyads, especially when examining employee outcomes. Prior research suggests that age differences can significantly influence leader-employee relationships (Kunze & Menges, 2016).

A final consideration is the relatively small sample size, which likely limited the statistical power of the study. Given that some findings approached conventional levels of significance, replication with a larger and more diverse sample is recommended to assess the robustness and generalizability of the results. In the case of replication with a larger sample, one might also consider employing alternative statistical approaches. Although the decision to aggregate employee ratings was statistically justified in this study, future research might benefit from multilevel modelling to explore within-group variance or individual-level influences more fully.

Conclusion

The present study enhances understanding of how leaders manage conflict in the workplace. It underscores the pivotal role that leader-employee relationship conflict plays in shaping conflict management strategies. The findings suggest that such conflicts are associated with a reduced leader's use of problem-solving and an increased tendency to rely

on forcing strategies. However, the study did not find support for a moderating effect of leader power construed as responsibility on the relationship between leader-employee relationship conflict and either conflict management strategy. Future research should expand on these findings by addressing current study's limitations and investigating additional factors, such as emotional regulation, which may further illuminate the dynamics underlying leaders' conflict management strategies.

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Tables

Table 3

Exploratory Findings: Compromising, Yielding, and Avoiding

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*p*	95% CI
Dependent Variable: Leaders' Compromising				
L.-E. Relationship Conflict	-.22	.14	.12	-.49; .06
Leaders' PaR	-.21	.13	.10	-.46; .04
L.-E. Relationship Conflict x PaR	.22	.19	.24	-.15; .59
Leader age	-.01	.01	.17	-.04; .01
Leader gender	.09	.26	.73	-.43; .61
Weekly working hours	.00	.02	.97	-.03; .03
Dependent Variable: Leaders' Yielding				
L.-E. Relationship Conflict	-.43	.13	.00**	-.68; -.18
Leaders' PaR	-.19	.12	.11	-.41; .04
L.-E. Relationship Conflict x PaR	.14	.17	.42	-.20; .48
Leader age	.00	.01	.80	-.02; .02
Leader gender	-.14	.24	.55	-.62; .33
Weekly working hours	-.01	.01	.62	-.04; .02
Dependent Variable: Leaders' Avoiding				
L.-E. Relationship Conflict	.13	.16	.40	-.18; .44
Leaders' PaR	-.33	.14	.02*	-.61; -.05
L.-E. Relationship Conflict x PaR	-.17	.21	.42	-.59; .25
Leader age	.00	.01	.91	-.03; .02
Leader gender	.60	.29	.04*	.02; 1.18
Weekly working hours	-.01	.02	.47	-.05; .02

Note. L.-E. = Leader-Employee. PaR = Power as Responsibility. 95% CI = 95% Confidence Interval. Gender was coded as (1 = Female, 2 = Male).

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Appendix 1

Measures for Leader-Employee Conflict, Power Construal, and Conflict Management

Questionnaire Items: Leader-Employee Relationship Conflict (Employee-rated)

How often does each of the following happen at work?

(1= not at all or never, 7= a lot or very often)

1. How much relationship tension is there between your supervisor and yourself?
2. How often do you get angry while working with your supervisor?
3. How much emotional conflict is there between your supervisor and yourself?

Questionnaire Items: Power as Responsibility (Leader-rated)

(1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

Think about the power that you have by being a supervisor. Then indicate to what extent you agree with the statements listed below.

In my work, I tend to see my power in terms of…

1. The responsibilities it gives me towards my subordinates.
2. The obligations it gives me towards my subordinates (e.g., take care of things that need to be done).
3. The responsibilities to ensure that important goals of my subordinates are met.

Questionnaire Items: Conflict Management Strategies (Employee-rated)

Everyone has his/her own way of dealing with conflicts and disagreements with others. How does your supervisor usually deal with conflicts or disagreements they may have with you? In other words, what is usually your supervisor's reaction when he/she disagrees with you on certain things?

Whenever I have a disagreement or conflict with my supervisor, my supervisor usually…

Forcing

(1= not at all, 7= to a great extent)

1. pushes his/her own point of view.
2. tries to maximize his/her own gains.
3. fights for a good outcome for himself/herself.
4. does everything to win.

Problem-Solving

(1= not at all, 7= to a great extent)

1. examines issues until he/she finds a solution that really satisfies himself/herself and myself.
2. stands for his/her own and my own goals and interests.
3. examines ideas from both sides to find a mutually optimal solution.
4. works out a solution that serves his/her own as well as my interests as good as possible.

Compromising

(1= not at all, 7= to a great extent)

1. tries to realize a middle-of-the-road solution.
2. emphasizes that we have to find a compromise solution.
3. insists we both give in a little.
4. Strives towards a fifty-fifty compromise

Yielding

(1= not at all, 7= to a great extent)

1. gives in to my wishes.
2. concurs (agrees) with me.
3. tries to accommodate me.
4. adapts to my goals and interests.

Avoiding

(1= not at all, 7= to a great extent)

1. avoids a confrontation about our differences.
2. avoids differences of opinion as much as possible.
3. tries to make our differences look less severe.
4. tries to avoid a confrontation with me.