The Influence of Conflict Management, Leadership, and Communication on Employee Job Satisfaction

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Abstract
The purpose of the current study was to provide scholars and practitioners with greater insight into the interplay between a supervisor’s leadership, conflict management, and communication competence; and how these behaviors influence the job satisfaction of employees. This study was also designed to provide a better understand of the role communication competence plays in the presentation of leadership and conflict management by supervisors. Participants included 245 full-time working adults from a variety of organizations in the Midwest. The findings indicated that the communication competence of supervisors served to be the greatest predictor of employee job satisfaction and was found to mediate the relationship between leadership and job satisfaction and conflict management and job satisfaction.

Key words: Communication competence, conflict management, leadership style, job satisfaction.
Working with others and managing conflict are not activities separate from work. Not only are people continually confronted with conflict but the way in which it is managed is vital in the success of the organization and its members (Tjosvold, Leung, & Johnson, 2006). Thomas and Schmidt’s (1976) often cited study estimates that supervisors devote approximately 20% of their time managing conflict. While conflict in the workplace is not necessarily negative, the determination as to whether positive outcomes are realized is dependent on how conflict is managed (e.g., Tjosvold, 1991, 1998). Conflict research has provided a link between leadership and effective conflict management by indicating that effective leaders are oriented toward promoting conditions and relationships open for discussion of opposing views among colleagues and employees (Tjosvold, 2008). As a result, effective conflict management allows leaders to develop quality relationships with their employees (Chen & Tjosvold, 2007), which in turn, enhance employee involvement and performance (Tjosvold, Hui, & Law, 1998).

Prior research indicates that leadership and conflict management are enacted through communication (Barge, 1994; Tjosvold, 2008) and have a task and relational component (see Holladay & Coombs, 1993; Jehn, 1995, 1997). Similarly, communication competence has been described as an individual’s appropriateness and effectiveness in communicating with others and also has a task and relational component imbedded in its messages (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Thus, it appears that communication competence may be associated with effective leadership and conflict management due to their shared focus on task and relational behaviors. Despite this possible association, there appears to be a lack of research examining how communication competence is related to the leadership and conflict management of supervisors. There are many phenomena that influence the communication, leadership, and conflict management behaviors of supervisors. Many of these emanate from the nature of the work environment and the expectations of employees. Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) (Burgoon, 1978), may help to explain this point and will serve as a theoretical framework for this study. In essence, EVT explains how people evaluate normative behavior violations. There are three main assumptions of EVT. First, people have expectations about how individuals are supposed to behave in any given situation. Depending on the context, individuals have ideas about what constitutes normative behavior in different situations. For example, the culture in which the organization is imbedded may influence an employee’s expectations and the appropriateness of a supervisor’s behaviors (see Madlock, 2012a). According to Madlock (2012a), in the case of Mexican workers it is expected that their supervisor will tell them what to do and how. This one-way downward style of communication meets the Mexican workers’ expectations. Second, when people violate our expectations of behavior, it causes arousal. Basically, when someone does something we do not expect them to do; we take notice and pay attention. For example, a violation would take place if a supervisor from the U.S. managed a Mexican workforce by including employees in decision making, soliciting input, and allowing employees to have a level of autonomy. Although these behaviors are expected by employees located in the U.S. they would violate the expectations of workers located in Mexico (Madlock, 2012a). Third, after an expectancy violation, individuals make an evaluation. Using the example of a U.S. supervisor in Mexico, such a deviation from the Mexican workers expectations about how a supervisor should behave would likely be labeled by the employee as bad.

Similarly, employees have expectations of how their supervisors should communicate, lead, and manage conflict and evaluate these behaviors on these expectations. Understanding what these expectations are and behaving in a way that is congruent with these expectations would likely bring about the greatest positive results and is a focus if this study. Therefore, the
current study focused on the interplay between a supervisor’s communication competence, leadership, and conflict management in traditional face-to-face (FtF) work settings located in the U.S.; and how these behaviors influence the job satisfaction of employees. This study was also designed to provide a better understand of the role communication competence plays in the presentation of leadership and conflict management by supervisors. Since effective leadership has been related to task and relational behaviors (Northouse, 2013), a closer examination of leadership style was considered here.

**Leadership Style**

Leadership style was chosen here because it consists of two distinct communication behaviors (task and relational) that leaders engage in to motivate others (Northouse, 2013). Effective leaders tend to strike a balance between task and relational behaviors by considering individual capabilities and needs, and at the same time being very active and involved in leading followers towards achieving goals (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Kirkbride, 2006). Since leadership has been conceptualized as a behavior that is enacted through communication (Barge, 1994) and can be divided into the content (task) and the presentation (relational dimension) of the messages (Holladay & Coombs, 1993) the styles approach appeared appropriate for the current study.

The Ohio State and the Michigan studies were among the first to develop the styles approach to leadership. The Ohio State studies (Hemphill & Coons, 1957) identified two types of behaviors explaining what leaders do: leaders provide structure and nurture subordinates. At nearly the same time, the Michigan studies (Cartwright & Zander, 1960; Likert, 1961, 1967) identified the behaviors of effective leaders to contain employee-oriented behaviors and production-oriented behaviors.

Research in the workplace related to the styles approach indicated that relationship oriented leadership was displayed more frequently, preferred more often, and had the greatest impact on employees’ communication and job satisfaction than did task oriented leadership (Madlock, 2008). Additional research involving the effects of leadership style include its relationship to group satisfaction (Anderson, Madlock, & Hoffman, 2006), effective communication skills (Mintzberg, 1994), interpersonal communication (Quick & Macik-Frey, 2004), and rapport building (Campbell, White, & Johnson, 2003). It was also found that work team success depended on a leader’s ability to engage in task and relational behaviors and to manage conflict before the conflict negatively impacted the team (Hinds & Bailey, 2003).

Of particular interest here and making the tie between leadership and conflict management was the work of Tjosvold (2008) who indicated that when managing conflict effective leaders are oriented toward promoting open communication that involves discussion of various points of view. Also, effective conflict management allows leaders to develop quality relationships with their employees (Chen & Tjosvold, 2007), which in turn, enhances employee involvement and performance (Tjosvold, Hui, & Law, 1998). Therefore, in addition to leadership, conflict management was included in the current study.

**Conflict Management**

According to Rahim (2001), conflict is an interactive process that manifests itself in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individuals, groups, or organizations). Although workplace conflicts may emerge at all levels of an organization (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2007), the focus of this study is at the supervisor/subordinate level. Communication is central to conflict in that communication often creates conflict, reproduces conflict, and is the way in which it is constructively or destructively managed (Wilmot & Hocker 2007). Like leadership, conflict is rooted in communication and can be
divided into task and relational dimensions (Jehn, 1995, 1997). Task conflict arises when task knowledge and an understanding of the necessary activities to reach team goals is not fully understood or shared by team members (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). The result may be disagreements among members about work content, appropriate tasks, or assignment of team activities. Relational conflict arises when the understanding of team members’ individual cultures, values, and norms is insufficient (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Relational conflict may evoke negative emotions and interpersonal disagreements between members not directly related to tasks. Moreover, the way in which conflict is managed and the styles used have been a major area of concern for researchers (see Papa & Canary, 1995).

Different theoretical models have been proposed to analyze the way in which individuals manage conflict, however; all of them share a task and relational dimension (see Blake & Mouton, 1964; Tjosvold, 1998) like the styles approach to leadership. Putnam and Wilson (1982) developed a measure of conflict management (used in the current study) that tapped into the five styles introduced by Blake and Mouton (1964) but yielded the three conflict management styles of solution oriented (consisting of collaboration and compromise), non-confrontation, and control. The control style is similar to the competition/dominant style (Blake & Mouton, 1964) in that it involves enforcing one’s own views on others. Non-confrontation taps into the avoiding style (Blake & Mouton, 1964) representing an intentional withdraw from the conflict situation. The solution orientation style encompasses both collaboration, which pertains to integrating the views of all involved and compromise, which is associated with finding a middle ground solution. Specific to the styles approach to managing conflict, collaboration and compromise are viewed as positive styles, whereas avoidance, accommodating, and competition are thought to be destructive styles (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, Magner, & Shapiro, 2000).

Therefore it could be extrapolated that there would be a positive association between a supervisor’s leadership styles (task and relational) and their conflict management styles of collaboration and compromise and a negative association between a supervisor’s leadership styles (task and relational) and their conflict management styles of non-confrontation and control. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were advanced.

**H1:** There will be a positive relationship between a supervisor’s leadership styles (task and relational) and their conflict management styles of collaboration and compromise.

**H1a:** There will be a negative relationship between a supervisor’s leadership styles (task and relational) and their conflict management styles of non-confrontation and control.

Despite what is known about conflict management and leadership, the interplay between leadership, conflict management, and communication competence is still unclear. Since relationship quality between superiors and subordinates is developed through communication (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), and effective conflict management (Kraus et al., 2008) and effective leadership (Northouse, 2001) are also enacted through communication; the role of communication competence appeared warranted and was included in the current study.

**Communication Competence**

Communication competence is a behavior that is learned and has been described as a multi-faceted concept (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2004), which has been studied in a diverse array of disciplines such as leadership, business, human-computer interaction, and conflict (see Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Despite the attention given to communication competence it lacks definitional consensus and theory (Jablin & Sias, 2001; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Reviews of communication competence include associations with goal achievement, effectiveness, and successful relationship building in addition to the categories of behavior and social cognition.
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(e.g. Jablin, Cude, House, Lee & Roth, 1994). Although there are numerous definitions of communication competence, one definition that is often cited and used in this study is that of Spitzberg and Cupach (1981). They define communication competence as “a form of interpersonal influence in which an individual is faced with the task of fulfilling communication goals (effectiveness) while maintaining conversational and interpersonal norms (appropriateness)” (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1981, p. 1). Put another way, communication competence has been said to encompass task related components, such as: knowledge and skill (Spitzberg, 1983; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002), as well as relational competencies, including: interpersonal skills, motivation, negotiation, and listening (Cushman & Craig, 1976; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002).

Underlying the notion of communication competence is communication effectiveness (see Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995), which has been broadly linked with leadership effectiveness (Klauss & Bass, 1982) and effective conflict management (Tjosvold, 2008). Effective leaders tend to communicate using more metaphors, symbols, imagery and persuasive argumentation to sway others to accept their position (Bass 1985). Leaders not only need to have visions and plans for achieving goals, but also must be able to articulate their visions in effective ways that influence their followers (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). A leader can help followers understand why and how the activities they are engaging in are meaningful through language and interpersonal communication (Pondy, 1978). For example, leaders seen as nonverbally immediate are perceived as competent communicators whose followers report feeling more valued, respected, and satisfied (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Further, the communication competence of supervisors enhances their employees’ level of organizational identification (Myers & Kassing, 1998) and satisfaction (Berman & Hellweg, 1989). A valued outcome associated with effective communication, leadership, and conflict management is job satisfaction (see Bass, 1990; Madlock, 2008; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1996), therefore; it was included in the current study.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction has been defined as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (Locke, 1969, p. 1297). The most common factors leading to worker stress and dissatisfaction are those emanating from the nature of the job itself, within which interpersonal relationships between employees and management take place (Kenny & Cooper, 2003). While there has been considerable speculation as to the antecedent factors related to job satisfaction, its major effects on employees are quite clear. Low job satisfaction has been shown to be associated with high rates of absenteeism, tardiness, and turnover (Porter & Steers, 1973), and low levels of commitment (Firth, Mellor, Moore, & Loquet, 2004). Job satisfaction and leadership have been extensively researched within a vast array of organizations (Bass, 1990) and the use of both task and relational leadership has been reported to have a direct impact on subordinates’ job satisfaction (see Castaneda & Nahavandi, 1991; Madlock, 2008). Research has also indicated that subordinates reported being satisfied when their supervisors’ engaged in both relationship and task oriented leadership behaviors (Castaneda & Nahavandi, 1991). Therefore, it was reasoned here that similar relationship would exist in the current study. Thus, the following hypothesis was advanced.

H2: There will be a positive relationship between a supervisor’s leadership styles (task and relational) and their employees’ job satisfaction.

Relevant to conflict management, studies have found that cooperative styles of conflict management generally yield positive outcomes in the workplace, whereas uncooperative styles
produce negative outcomes (Meyer, 2004; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1996). Additionally, effective conflict management has been shown to be positively related to employee job satisfaction, satisfaction with supervision, positive supervisor–subordinate relationships, long-term cooperation, and attitudinal and behavioral compliance (Alexander, 1995; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1996). Specifically, supervisors who frequently use collaborative and compromise conflict management styles experienced significantly less episodes of conflict and more positive outcomes than those who use other forms of conflict management (Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995). Research has also indicated that of the conflict management styles, collaboration and compromise were considered to be constructive styles (Van de Vliert, 1997), whereas non-confrontation and control were considered to be destructive styles. Therefore, the following hypotheses and research question were advanced.

**H3:** There will be a positive relationship between a supervisor’s conflict management styles of collaboration and compromise and their employees’ job satisfaction.

**H3a:** There will be a negative relationship between a supervisor’s conflict management styles of non-confrontation, and control and their employees’ job satisfaction.

**RQ1:** Which behavior displayed by a supervisor; leadership style, conflict management, or communication competence, will serve as the greatest predictor of their employees’ job satisfaction?

While the importance of a leader’s conflict management style has been demonstrated, more needs to be known about the mechanism through which the conflict management of supervisors influences the work attitudes of their employees. Since both leadership and conflict management are communication based behaviors (Barge, 1994; Tjosvold, 2008), it is possible that communication competence is the mechanism that serves as the conduit between leadership, conflict management, and the job satisfaction of employees. Prior research indicated that trust was one factor that appeared to serve as a mediator between a supervisor’s conflict management and employee outcomes of job satisfaction and turnover (Chan, Huang, & Ng, 2008). Instead of trust the current study examined the mediating role of communication competence. Thus, the following hypotheses were advanced:

**H4:** A supervisor’s communication competence will mediate the relationship between that supervisor’s leadership style (task and relational) and his or her employees’ job satisfaction.

**H5:** A supervisor’s communication competence will mediate the relationships between that supervisor’s conflict management behaviors of compromise and collaboration and his or her employees’ job satisfaction.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 245 full-time working adults (130 men and 115 women, $M_{age} = 33.5$ years, age range: 19-64 years) from a variety of traditional FtF brick and mortar organizations located in the U.S., whose average tenure at their current job was ($M = 9.7$ years). The participants also reported working for a variety of organizations including, education (10.3 %), government (14.3%), service (26.3%), high tech (16.6%), manufacturing (13.1%), civil service (10.3%), and other (9.1%).

**Procedures**

A network sample was utilized for the current study consisting of full-time working adults (in traditional FtF brick and mortar organizations located in the U.S.) recruited by the primary author and students enrolled in communication courses at large Mid-Western University. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured.
because the author was the only person handling the completed surveys. To ensure that the participants were working adults the following procedure was utilized. The participants were given an email address located on the cover letter in which they were asked to report the name of their organization in the subject line of the email followed by their name and telephone number in the body of the email. Participants were then instructed to return the completed questionnaire in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided by the researcher. Also in the lower right hand corner of the envelope they were asked to write their name as it appeared in the body of the email. Only envelopes with verifiable information were used in the study. Of the 400 original questionnaires 256 were returned resulting in a 64% return rate. Of the 256 returned questionnaires, 11 could not be used due to missing data; leaving 245 questionnaires that were utilized in the current study. Periodically (approximately every 30 surveys), the author called and verified that the participants who completed the questionnaires were the persons they claimed to be.

**Measures**

**Job satisfaction.** Job satisfaction of employees was measured by the eight-item Abridged Job In General Scale (AJIG) (Russell et al., 2004). A 5-point Likert-type response format (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) was used in the current study. The scale is comprised of single word to short statements regarding an employee’s overall perception of their job (e.g., good, better than most, undesirable). The AJIG Scale was found to have strong reliability with a Cronbach’s coefficient alpha of .87 (Russell et al., 2004). Cronbach’s coefficient alpha for the current study was \( \alpha = .93 \) (\( M = 24.10, SD = 2.48 \)).

**Leadership style.** Leadership style was measured by the 20-item Leadership Style Questionnaire developed by Northouse (2001). The instrument measures the task and relational leadership styles, and when summed, represents a general leadership profile. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) was used in the study. For the current study, employees reported on their immediate supervisor’s leadership style. Prior research reported scale reliabilities for overall leadership as .93, task leadership style was .90, and relational leadership style was .92 (Madlock, 2008). Cronbach’s alpha for the current study (total leadership style) was .93 (\( M = 73.45, SD = 13.68 \)), (task leadership style) was .89 (\( M = 37.04, SD = 7.24 \)), and (relational leadership style) was .91 (\( M = 36.41, SD = 7.88 \)).

**Communication competence.** Communication competence was measured by the 12-item Communicator Competence Questionnaire developed by Monge, Backman, Dillard, and Eisenburg, (1982). The scale is designed to assess the competence of the communicator. The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). For the current study, employees reported on their immediate supervisor’s communication competence. Prior research reported scale reliability of .93 (Madlock, 2008). Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was .90 (\( M = 41.07, SD = 6.92 \)).

**Conflict management style.** Conflict management style was measured by the 30-item Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (Form B) developed by Putnam and Wilson (1982). The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*), which was modified from the original 7-point scale to allow for consistency throughout the questionnaire. For the current study, employees reported on their immediate supervisor’s conflict management style. Cronbach’s alpha for the current study (non-confrontation) was .87 (\( M = 27.62, SD = 8.27 \)), (solution oriented strategies/collaboration) was .83 (\( M = 18.70, SD = 4.71 \)), (compromise) was .81 (\( M = 14.94, SD = 3.81 \)), and (control strategies) was .86 (\( M = 18.62, SD = 6.15 \)).
Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that there would be positive relationships between the task and relational leadership style of supervisors and their conflict management styles of collaboration and compromise. Results of Pearson’s correlational analysis supported the hypothesis by indicating significant positive relationships between the task leadership style of supervisors and their conflict management styles of collaboration \((r = .50, p < .001)\) and compromise \((r = .40, p < .001)\). Also, significant positive relationship were found between the relational leadership style of supervisors and their conflict management styles of collaboration \((r = .68, p < .001)\) and compromise \((r = .63, p < .001)\).

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<tr>
<th>1. Job Satisfaction</th>
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<td>3. Relational Leadership</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.41**</td>
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<td>4. Communication Competence</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.54**</td>
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<td>5. Nonconfrontation</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Collaboration</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>.83</td>
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<td>7. Compromise</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>.81</td>
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<td>8. Control</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
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Note: "** statistically significant at \(p < .001\), * statistically significant at \(p < .05\)

Hypothesis 1a predicted that there would be negative relationships between the task and relational leadership style of supervisors and their conflict management styles of non-confrontation and control. Results of Pearson’s correlational analysis supported the hypothesis by indicating significant negative relationships between the task leadership style of supervisors and their conflict management styles of non-confrontation \((r = -.49, p < .001)\) and control \((r = -.32, p < .001)\). Also, significant negative relationship were found between the relational leadership style of supervisors and their conflict management styles of non-confrontation \((r = -.48, p < .001)\) and control \((r = -.48, p < .001)\).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that there would be positive relationships between the task and relational leadership style of supervisors and their employees’ job satisfaction. Results of Pearson’s correlational analysis supported the hypothesis by indicating significant positive relationships between task leadership style and employees’ job satisfaction \((r = .37, p < .001)\) and between the relational leadership style and employees’ job satisfaction \((r = .41, p < .001)\).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that there would be positive relationships between a supervisor’s conflict management styles of collaboration and compromise and their employees’ job
satisfaction. Results of Pearson’s correlational analysis supported the hypothesis by indicating significant positive relationships between the conflict management style of collaboration and employees’ job satisfaction ($r = .42, p < .001$) and between the conflict management style of compromise and employees’ job satisfaction ($r = .34, p < .001$).

Hypothesis 3a predicted that there would be negative relationships between a supervisor’s conflict management styles of non-confrontation, and control and their employees’ job satisfaction. Results of Pearson’s correlational analysis supported the hypothesis by indicating significant negative relationships between the conflict management style of non-confrontation, and employees’ job satisfaction ($r = -.19, p < .05$) and between the conflict management style of control and employees’ job satisfaction ($r = -.21, p < .001$).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that a supervisor’s communication competence would mediate the relationship between that supervisor’s leadership styles (task and relational) and his or her employees’ job satisfaction. The mediating paths for job satisfaction and task leadership style were analyzed. There was a direct association between task leadership style and communication competence ($\beta = .69, p < .001$). The association between task leadership style and job satisfaction was also significant ($\beta = .37, p < .001$). But, when communication competence was included in the model, the association between task leadership style and job satisfaction became not significant ($\beta = .01, p > .05$). The Sobel test revealed significant full mediation ($z = 17.01, p < .001$). See Fig. 1 for mediation model.

The mediating paths for job satisfaction and relational leadership style were analyzed. There was a direct association between relational leadership style and communication competence ($\beta = .78, p < .001$). The association between relational leadership style and job satisfaction was also significant ($\beta = .41, p < .001$). But, when communication competence was included in the model, the association between relational leadership style and job satisfaction became not significant ($\beta = .068, p > .05$). The Sobel test revealed significant full mediation ($z = 14.43, p < .001$). See Fig. 2 for mediation model.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that a supervisor’s communication competence would mediate the relationship between that supervisor’s conflict management behaviors of compromise and collaboration and their employees’ job satisfaction. The mediating paths for job satisfaction and the conflict management behavior of compromise were analyzed. There was a direct association between compromise and communication competence ($\beta = .62, p < .001$). The association between compromise and job satisfaction was also significant ($\beta = .34, p < .001$). But, when
communication competence was included in the model, the association between the conflict management behavior of compromise and job satisfaction became not significant ($\beta = .11$, $p > .05$). The Sobel test revealed significant partial mediation ($z = 20.77$, $p < .001$). See Fig. 3 for mediation model.

![Fig. 3. Mediation model relating compromise conflict management, communication competence, and job satisfaction. Values represent standardized regression coefficients. The value inside the parentheses denotes the effect of compromise conflict management on job satisfaction, with communication competence as the mediator. *$*$*$p < .001$, *$p < .05$, ns = $p > .05$]

The mediating paths for job satisfaction and the conflict management behavior of collaboration were analyzed. There was a direct association between collaboration and communication competence ($\beta = .72$, $p < .001$). The association between collaboration and job satisfaction was also significant ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$). But, when communication competence was included in the model, the association between the conflict management behavior of collaboration and job satisfaction was reduced ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$). The Sobel test revealed a significant partial mediation ($z = 18.62$, $p < .001$). See Fig. 4 for mediation model.

![Fig. 4. Mediation model relating relational leadership style, communication competence, and job satisfaction. Values represent standardized regression coefficients. The value inside the parentheses denotes the effect of relational leadership style on job satisfaction, with communication competence as the mediator. $*$*$*$*$p < .001$, ns = $p > .05$]

Research question 1 sought to answer the question of which behavior displayed by a supervisor: leadership style, conflict management, or communication competence, would serve as the greatest predictor of their employees' job satisfaction. Using multiple regression, job satisfaction was regressed on a linear combination of the seven predictor variables that were entered into the model together. Results indicated that ($R^2 = .72$) 72% of variance in job satisfaction was accounted for by the combination of the predictor variables, $F(7, 237) = 96.06$, $p$
Overall, communication competence was the strongest predictor of employee satisfaction ($\beta = .52, t = 9.10, p < .001$) followed by collaboration ($\beta = .34, t = 5.88, p < .001$) and relational leadership style ($\beta = .23, t = 2.27, p < .01$). Task leadership ($\beta = .032, t = .42, p > .05$), compromise ($\beta = .035, t = .39, p > .05$), non-confrontation ($\beta = -.067, t = .39, p > .05$), and control ($\beta = -.102, t = .39, p > .05$) were not found to be significant predictors of employee job satisfaction.

**Discussion**

Organizational conflict consumes nearly 20 percent of a manager’s time (Thomas & Schmidt, 1976), and the determination as to whether positive outcomes are realized is dependent on how conflict is managed (e.g., Tjosvold, 1991, 1998). Conflict research has provided a link between leadership and effective conflict management by indicating that effective leaders are oriented toward promoting open discussion of opposing views among colleagues and employees (Tjosvold, 2008). Since both leadership and conflict management are enacted through communication (Barge, 1994; Tjosvold, 2008), it was reasoned here that both leadership and conflict management may be enacted through competent communication. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to improve our overall understanding of the association between leadership, conflict management, and communication competence. Specifically, the goal was twofold: first, it sought to determine what form of leadership style (task and relational), conflict management style, or the communication competence of supervisors would elicit the greatest level of employee job satisfaction. Second, was to better understand the role communication competence plays in the presentation of leadership and conflict management by supervisors.

The initial findings of interest centered on the correlational results of which it appears that employees prefer relational oriented leadership, yet task oriented leadership was present. Further, a positive association between a supervisor’s leadership styles and their conflict management styles of collaboration and compromise were indicated, whereas a negative association between a supervisor’s leadership styles and non-confrontation and control was found. These findings are also in line with prior research indicating that collaboration and compromise are considered to be positive conflict management styles and non-confrontation and control are considered to be negative conflict management styles (see Putnam & Wilson, 1982).

More specifically, the findings associated with the regression model indicated that a supervisor’s communication competence was the greatest predictor of an employee’s job satisfaction, followed by collaborative conflict management, and relational oriented leadership style. These findings highlight the importance of communication in the job satisfaction of employees.

In addition to the results highlighted thus far, the findings of most interest were those associated with the mediation models. Specifically, communication competence was found to mediate the relationships between a supervisor’s task and relational leadership styles and the job satisfaction of their employees. Also, communication competence was found to mediate the relationships between a supervisor’s conflict management styles of collaboration and compromise and their employees’ job satisfaction. Broadly stated, in order for a supervisor to be effective, he or she must engage in leadership and conflict management behaviors that meet desired goals and are considered to be appropriate within the norms of a given context (Jenesen & Jenesen, 2006).

It should be noted that the current findings apply to a specific group of employees and supervisors located in the U.S. who are working in traditional Ftf brick and mortar organizations. As mentioned earlier in this study, the determination of what is considered to be effective and appropriate behaviors may be found in the expectations of employees (followers)
and the specific work setting. To elucidate this point, EVT (Burgoon, 1978) highlights how people evaluate normative behavior violations. People have expectations about how individuals are supposed to behave in any given situation or context, and depending on that context, individuals have ideas about what constitutes normative behaviors. If there is a violation of the expected behavior people take notice and then evaluate the behavior as either good or bad. In the case of communication competence, leadership, and conflict management in traditional work settings, which was examined here, it appears that employees expect their supervisors to be competent communicators by engaging in a combination of task and relational leadership styles and the conflict management styles of collaboration or compromise.

An additional point is that what is considered to be competent communication in one context may not be considered that way in another context. For example, in one context leaders may be expected to express empathy toward their employees (relational leadership), while in another context, leaders may be expected to primarily engage in task oriented leadership; as is the case in the realm of telecommuting (Madlock, 2012b). Both behaviors meet the expectations of followers in that specific context and the associated communication would be considered effective and appropriate. Thus, it appears that knowing the appropriate communication behaviors that are expected in a specific context may be one reason why some supervisors are viewed as effective leaders and managers of conflict while others are not. As pointed out by Adler et al (2004), in order to communicate competently, a person must “construct a variety of different frameworks for viewing an issue,” (p. 23) instead of relying on a single method. Perhaps, effective supervisors need to be cognitively flexible enough to know when to engage in behaviors suitable for the existing situation.

Based on the current findings recommendations for practitioners indicate that more might be done to enhance the communication competence, leadership, and conflict management related competencies of supervisors. These recommendations include, additional training on what is considered appropriate and effective communication in differing situations. Since communication competence is a learned behavior (Adler et al., 2004), and has such an influence on leadership and conflict management, it should be an area of consideration in leadership and conflict management training. Supervisors also need to be made aware that there are expectations associated with leadership and conflict management, and when violated, negative consequences may ensue.

**Limitations and Recommendations**

Although the current study adds to our understanding of leadership, conflict management, and communication competence in traditional work settings, it is not without its limitations. In order to fully understand the impact of the current findings a qualitative study needs to be considered in which the researcher can ask probing questions to uncover nuances not found in a quantitative study. Another limitation found here involves a level of uncertainty about the amount of time employees actually spent communicating with leaders. This information may indicate whether employees who frequently converse with leaders feel more connected and satisfied than those who rarely converse leaders. This may better help us understand if the amount of communication is a determinant in the communication competence of leaders.

Given the relevance of examining the leadership style, conflict management, and the communication competence of supervisors, there are a number of additional research directions that one could pursue. One possible direction centers on the examination of these variables in the virtual workplace. Given that over 20 million workers in the U.S. engage in telework (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2003) this may help to better understand the communication that takes
place in this emerging work arrangement. Research has already indicated that in the virtual work setting leaders must assume more responsibility for working with followers who are at a distance (Antonakis & Atwater 2002). Similarly, another possible direction for future researchers involves cross-cultural studies of leadership, conflict management, and communication competence. Given, today’s global economy, these research findings may prove to be of value.
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