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For-Profit Business Leaders' Perceptions of Technology and Conflict Resolution in the Workplace

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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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Dedication

Psalm 139:13 (New International Version) says that God created my inmost being. My journey to pursue a doctorate was not a path that I envisioned in childhood and yet I know that it was a path that God planned for me before I understood the reality. I dedicate all that I am to a God who loved me enough to breathe life into me and to create a path filled with experiences and people that equipped me to purse a doctorate. I dedicate this dissertation first and foremost, to my Savior.

For the people that God placed in my life that created a beautiful system of support and encouragement, I thank you dearly. You have been the quilt of my life. To my grandparents, Henry, Estelle, Fred, and Alberta – While in your lifetime, something like this would have seemed impossible, your generational threads carried on in faith, in me. I give honor to my family line. To my parents, Fred III and Kate – You always gave me hope and let me fly – Thank you for your steadfast support!! To my sister, Tricia. Thank you for your quiet encouragement, a constant reminder of love carrying us through. To my children, Morgan, Cameron and Grant – Oh my babies – We did it!! Thank you for walking by my side. I love you deeply and while "Dr." is an incredible title, my most treasured title will always be, "Mommy." To Dennis, my life partner – To have your love and support in every step of this journey, reminding me of what was possible and selflessly cheering me on was one of the most precious gifts I've ever received. Thank you for being my strength when I was tired and for loving me through it all!

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Abstract

This dissertation explored for-profit business leaders' experiences with technology and conflict resolution. With the rise of technology in communications in the workplace and the risk of miscommunications leading to negative impacts on organizational and individual performance, understanding leader experiences is vital to organizational success. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand for-profit business leaders' (1) perceptions of technology and conflict resolution in the virtual workplace and (2) perceptions of their leadership styles and the impact on conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. Prior literature regarding the impact of technology on communications revealed mixed results with some studies indicating that higher levels of social cues improved communications and other studies suggesting that higher levels of social cues were detrimental. A qualitative research study was performed by conducting one-on-one semistructured interviews with 10 for-profit business leaders who were identified using a purposeful selection process. Interviews were transcribed and a values coding process was used to look for themes across the interviews. The research revealed leader preferences to use on-camera technology tools to communicate with employees when resolving conflict in order to obtain verbal and nonverbal inputs. Additionally, the leaders self-identified as using a collaborative leadership style and actively listening to engage their employees and create a safe and open environment for conflict resolution.

Keywords: conflict, conflict resolution, technology, social cues, technology choices, computer-mediated communications

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak undoubtedly exposed a level of dependency on technology by individuals and organizations at a time when the implications of *technology* on human interactions reveal mixed results (Jasimuddin, 2014; Raina & Marchewka, 2018; Riordan & Trichtinger, 2017). Raina and Marchewka (2018) described how "technology has come to dominate every facet of human life, including human communication, so much so that now communication is mediated largely through technology" (p. 1). Leffel et al. (2012) suggested three potential breakdowns that occur during communications that contribute to conflict, including (a) the sender not sending the message, (b) the message being incorrect, or (c) an incorrect interpretation of the message by the recipient. With the rise of computer-mediated communications (Raina & Marchewka, 2018) and the common communication issues that create conflict (Leffel et al., 2012), organizations are at risk for assuming leader conflict resolution skills are transferring effectively to email, videoconference, and instant messaging.

According to McKibben (2017), conflict is a natural occurrence in human interactions. Leaders who demonstrate an ability to effectively manage conflict serve a critical role in organizational success and are perceived as more effective leaders than those less competent in conflict management (Capobianco et al., 2004; Runde & Flanagan, 2013). Effective conflict resolution skills in leaders contribute to organizations that thrive in performance, productivity, and employee job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2016; McKibben, 2017). At a time when 97% of Americans under the age of 44 are using mobile devices and 76% of adults are using email or other forms of messaging for communication during COVID, understanding how technology trends in the workplace are affecting leader experiences with conflict resolution is imperative to the success of organizations (Anderson & Vogels, 2020; Raina & Marchewka, 2018).

Furthermore, the growing rate of technology use in communications and the expansion of global markets raises another area of concern about the risk of communication breakdowns and conflict (Raina & Marchewka, 2018; Richard & McFadden, 2016).

Increased Communication Across Global Markets

In addition to the rise of technology-use as a communication tool, global markets are becoming increasingly more connected, driving the need for organizations to communicate effectively across cultures using technology (Richard & McFadden, 2016). According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis (2018), worldwide employment by U.S. multinational enterprises (MNEs) increased from 42.4 million in 2017 to 43.0 million workers in 2018 representing 1.4% growth. The sheer volume of employees working for multinational enterprises creates the opportunity for leaders and employees to work across cultures. The Society for Human Resource Management (2019) explained that this "cross-pollination of talent reflects several factors, including the globalization of the world's economy and complexities inherent in operating abroad" (p. 2). The complexities represent a myriad of challenges, including collaboration, cultural differences, and language barriers (Society for Human Resource Management, 2019). The challenges identified by the Society for Human Resource Management (2019) are further reflected in other studies that highlight globally diverse team interactions.

In a study conducted by Malhotra and Majchrzak (2014) of 54 geographically dispersed teams who depended on computer-mediated communications, researchers found that the selected communication media and the level of use were key factors in effective communications. This demonstrates a need to understand factors that may affect communications in a computer-mediated communications environment. Similarly, Richard and McFadden (2016) identified challenges in communicating across cultures using email due to differences in cultural norms

pertaining to writing styles. The findings suggest a need for continued research in communication and technology.

Mixed Results Computer-Mediated Communications

Hutagalung (2017) described communication as a basic human activity that is often "the source of conflict" when poorly managed (p. 3). Conflict is an unavoidable part of an organization (Khan et al., 2016). With technology use on the rise and conflict occurring as a natural component of communication in organizations, researchers are beginning to explore the cross section of conflict and technology. There is a growing need to explore this point of intersection from multiple perspectives.

Shin et al. (2017) explored the differences in participant reactions to conflict when in person versus video chats. While researchers in this study found higher levels of conflict resolution success in video chats, scholars in other studies exploring computer-mediated communications have found contradictory results. According to Raina and Marchewka (2018), there have been a reveal conflicting results regarding effectiveness. In studies supporting media richness theory, researchers asserted that face-to-face communications were more effective than computer-mediated communications due to higher levels of social cues (Raina & Marchewka, 2018). In contrast, a study of 76 participants comparing face-to-face and text-based communications revealed greater levels of self-esteem impact using text-based communications (Gonzales, 2014). Jasimuddin (2014) found a balanced approach leveraging face-to-face and computer-mediated communications valuable in a qualitative case study of engineers where some engineers experienced more difficulty in communicating face-to-face.

Riordan and Trichtinger (2017) found that email recipients were not able to effectively interpret the emotional intent of email messages. Consequently, the use of email as an effective

method of conflict resolution given the potential for misinterpretation is questionable. Although success was observed in conflict resolution in video chats, there was a lack of success in interpreting the emotional intent of email messages. The mixed results regarding the use of technology in communications and conflict resolution calls into question a need for added insights to help the workplace effectively navigate conflict.

Conflict Resolution as a Leader Skill

McKibben (2017) echoes other studies arguing that conflict is "inherent to the human condition" (p. 100). It occurs naturally when there are different perspectives and goals. Given the fact that conflict is an evitable part of any organization, conflict resolution skills are essential in leaders as ineffective resolution could cause potential personal and organizational adverse impacts. Specifically, at the individual level, McKibben (2017) noted issues associated with employee turnover, stress, distrust, and reduced job satisfaction. At the organization level, Khan et al. (2016) described concerns impacting overall team performance, productivity, stability as well as the inability for individuals and organizations to achieve their goals. Conversely, leaders who manage conflict well can use it to energize teams and encourage new ideas and ways of thinking (Abolo & Oguntoye, 2016).

Research conducted by Hutagalung (2017) revealed that interpersonal communication skills such as empathy, openness, and supportive behaviors are known to contribute to effective conflict resolution. The concept of using technology to communicate and resolve conflict is an emerging phenomenon. With technology use on the rise and digital natives on the cusps of entering the market who lean heavily into technology for communications, it is important for for-profit business leaders to be intentional about their selection of communication methods to resolve conflict to lead effective organizations.

Statement of the Problem

The rise of technology in communications in the workplace presents the opportunity for leaders to use synchronous, asynchronous, visual, and nonvisual methods that include videoconferencing, email, instant messaging, and other solutions when managing conflict (Shin et al., 2017). The methods range in their ability to convey emotions, voice, and nonverbal cues, impacting communications (Ko, 2016) and conflict resolution. While the innovations provide flexibility, they also raise concerns about leaders' awareness and sensitivity to conflict resolution effectiveness based on the selected communication media.

In today's fast-paced business environment, the perception of urgency results in leaders who prioritize responsiveness but fail to recognize the risk of miscommunicating or negatively impacting employee morale (Braun et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2016; Rosen et al., 2019). The concerns are further complicated by a rise in globalization which increases the potential for miscommunications and conflict due to a lack of cultural understanding (Richard & McFadden, 2016). Additionally, the convergence of multiple generations in the workplace with varying levels of comfort and experiences with technology (Raina & Marchewka, 2018) brings about new challenges regarding differences in preferred methods of communications by age group when addressing conflict. The need for businesses to understand technology trends in the workplace are affecting leader experiences with conflict resolution is imperative to individual and organizational performance (Glavas et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2016; Runde & Flanagan, 2013). In the absence of effective leadership conflict resolution, organizations risk employee absenteeism, lawsuits, reduced innovation, employee stress, and poor performance (Glavas et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2016; Runde & Flanagan, 2013). Nguyen et al. (2020) explained that research will be needed post the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how computer-mediated

communications behaviors have changed given the increased dependency during the pandemic. While overall computer-mediated communications competency increased during the pandemic, it is unknown how it will shift communication effectiveness or preferences after the pandemic (Nguyen et al., 2020). This further extends the need to understand how leaders experience technology and conflict resolution during the pandemic.

Positionality Statement

As an organization development and learning strategy consultant for over 20 years, I have observed for-profit business leaders increasingly transition to using technology to interact with employees. Given my role, I am often in a position of confidence with leaders and their direct reports. This position enables me to hear the perspectives and concerns expressed by both audiences. I have observed leaders using technology as a communication channel to navigate conflict. In some cases, the technology appears to expedite and enhance conflict resolution effectiveness and in other cases, it seems to add complexity and slow the resolution. In this research study, I have sought to understand how technology trends in the workplace affect leader experiences with conflict resolution.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study (Stake, 1995) was to explore for-profit business leaders' perceptions of technology and conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. Additionally, the purpose of the study was to explore for-profit business leaders' perceptions of their leadership styles and the impact on conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. By considering leadership style, the research offered insights into whether leadership style contributes to how leaders use technology to communicate when resolving conflict.

Research Questions

At the core of any research was a desire to gain insights into a main question or set of questions. The research main questions were informed by the study's objective (Sayre, 2001). This research focused on gaining insights into leader experiences with technology and conflict resolution using a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995). The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do for-profit business leaders select communication channels when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual environment?

RQ2: What are for-profit business leaders' perceptions of the influence of leadership style on communication channel selection when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual environment?

RQ3: What are for-profit business leaders' perceptions of the impact of technology when communicating with employees to resolve conflict?

Theoretical Lens

The examination of leader experiences with technology and conflict resolution presented the opportunity to consider the implications of the media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; West & Turner, 2018). The media richness theory (MRT) focuses on the selection of media for communications based on the richness of the communication channel relative to its ability to provide immediate feedback and a variety of social cues (Daft & Lengel, 1986; West & Turner, 2018). The media richness theory (MRT) was defined by Daft and Lengel in 1986 to provide a framework that articulated the level of richness for a communication medium to offer immediate feedback and social cues (Daft & Lengel, 1986; West & Turner, 2018). When first presented, MRT was based on face-to-face communications, telephone, and written communications such

as personal documents, memos, and numeric documents (Bjorvatn & Wald, 2019; Daft & Lengel, 1986; West & Turner, 2018). MRT offered a perspective that certain types of media were more suited for different types of communications with richer mediums such as face-to-face providing the best approach for more complex topics with greater risk for ambiguity or confusion (Anders et al., 2020; West & Turner, 2018). Daft and Lengel (1986) suggested that less complex content with low risk for uncertainty and ambiguity could use less rich communication mediums such as personal documents. Research surrounding MRT has continued to evolve with the introduction of more advanced computer-mediated communications by measuring media richness in terms of two-way feedback, multiple types of cues, the ability to communicate language, and a personal focus (Anders et al., 2020; Armengol et al., 2017). Interview questions were included to understand leader experiences with selected media during conflict resolution as it relates to MRT (Daft & Lengel, 1986). MRT was used in the analysis process to describe potential MRT influences for media selection. The ability to explore media selection based on the topic and richness of the communication media offered valuable perspectives on leader conflict resolution experiences with employees.

Limitations of the Study

The research study was based on leader self-reflection and transparency in their responses about employee interactions, limiting the perspectives of the study to those shared by the leaders. Additionally, the study was limited to the experiences of approximately ten identified leaders and cannot be generalized for all organizations. Finally, the study did not include a review of cultural differences that could affect the findings.

Significance of the Study

The findings from this research provide suggestions to organizations to improve leader conflict resolution effectiveness, resulting in improved individual and organizational communication and performance. The research may help organizations recognize the need to understand how the virtual environment may be impacting leader effectiveness. The research could serve as a resource to help organizations build leader conflict resolution skills in a virtual environment.

Assumptions of the Study

While there were assumptions involved in the research study, the findings provide value and reveal key topics and themes regarding conflict resolution and computer-mediated communications. The research study was based on the following key assumptions:

- Leaders were using computer-mediated communications to interact with employees.

- Leaders had experiences with conflict and conflict resolution with employees.

- Leaders were able to recall situations with employees that involved differences in perceived goals and needs.

- Leaders answered the interview questions with honesty.

- Leaders were making media selection decisions to communicate with employees.

Definition of Key Terms

Computer-mediated communication. Communications between groups or individuals using technology instead of face-to-face in-person communications (DeClerck & Holtzman, 2018).

Conflict. The expression of a struggle between multiple parties when there are differences in perceived goals and resources that inhibit the ability for the parties to achieve their goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018).

COVID-19. A respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 that is thought to spread from person to person through respiratory droplets transmitted when talking, coughing, or sneezing. The virus was identified in 2019 and categorized as a pandemic in 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). The impact of the pandemic caused a global shift in virtual work and education. According to a study conducted by Upwork of over 1000 hiring managers in the United States, nearly 42% of the workforce remained virtual 9 months into the pandemic (Ozimek, 2020).

Leader. For the purpose of this research, a leader was defined as an individual who has positional power over followers based on their role in the organization and possess the ability to influence change over followers (Northouse, 2013).

Summary

The impact of leader effectiveness in conflict resolution contributes to the overall success of organizations (Abolo & Oguntoye, 2016; Khan et al., 2016). With the surge of communications via technology because of COVID-19 and previous technology use growth trends in the United States, understanding how leaders are experiencing technology trends and conflict resolution is not only important but vital to the health and sustainability of organizations (Anderson & Vogels, 2020; Raina & Marchewka, 2018). This research will contribute to a broader understanding of the impacts of computer-mediated communications.

Organization of the Study

This research study was organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provided the introduction, statement of the problem, positionality statement, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, limitations of the study, significance of the study, assumptions of the study, definition of key terms, and a summary. In Chapter 2, a literature review situates the research within the context of leader conflict resolution skills, communication effectiveness based on media selection, technology and demographic shifts impacting leader communications. The exploration of these topics provides insights into the cross-section of research regarding computer-mediated communications and conflict resolution effectiveness relative to face-to-face communications (Vossen et al., 2017). Chapter 3 describes the research method by outlining the methodology, research design, the study participants, data collection and analysis. Additionally, Chapter 3 discusses trustworthiness and ethical considerations to ensure confidence and credibility. The findings from the case study research are shared in Chapter 4 with a summary of the meaning of the research and implications on future research in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Conflict occurs naturally in human behavior and organizations when there is an interdependency between multiple parties and a perceived difference in goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Khan et al., 2016; McKibben, 2017). When managed effectively, conflict can lead to creative problem solving, innovation, improved relationships, higher levels of individual and team performance, and an increased ability to achieve strategic goals (Abolo & Oguntoye, 2016; CPP Global, 2008; Eckerd College, 2021; Lamm et al., 2020; Lytle, 2015). Conversely, poorly managed conflict negatively impacts individuals and teams, leading to high turnover rates, employee stress, poor performance, reduced productivity, and a decreased ability to achieve organizational goals (CPP Global, 2008; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Lamm et al., 2020; McKibben, 2017). For example, in a research study conducted in 2008 by CPP Global with over 5,000 employees in nine countries, the data revealed an estimated 2.1 to 3.3 hours spent on average per week per employee managing conflict, equating to $359 billion in paid hours in the United States annually (CPP Global, 2008). Recognizing the impact of conflict on individuals and organizations (CPP Global, 2008; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Janssen & Giebels, 2013; Lamm et al., 2020; McKibben, 2017; Overton & Lowry, 2013), for-profit businesses must consider how the expansion of computer-mediated communication (Anderson & Vogels, 2020; Raina & Marchewka, 2018; Shin et al., 2017) is affecting leader conflict resolution.

This chapter summarizes the current and relevant literature related to the research study and the literature search methods. Next, the literature review builds a case for the study by first exploring historical and current thinking on practical leader conflict resolution skills and assumptions about those skills related to the communication delivery method. The literature focuses on available research regarding communication effectiveness based on the selected

media, emphasizing articles that differentiate between communication mediums that provide or do not provide social cues. Finally, the literature review presents information about changes occurring in technology and the workforce demographics that create an expedited need to understand leaders' experience and conflict resolution with computer-mediated communications.

Literature Search Methods

The Abilene Christian University distance learning portal served as the primary resource to access peer-reviewed journal articles. Google Scholar was also used to identify articles for a more comprehensive search. Then, articles were located within the Abilene Christian University distance learning portal to ensure consistency with the required academic rigor. When reading research articles, the references were reviewed to identify additional scholars and topics. The following key search words were used to identify source content: *virtual work*, *virtual communications*, *communication-mediated*, *digital communications*, *leader communications*, *conflict resolution*, *COVID communications*, *leader conflict resolution*, *leader communication competencies*, *face-to-face communications, virtual communications, online communications, online social cues, email communication, online dispute resolution, texting, leader-member exchange theory, media richness theory, and communication theories*. Finally, several resource books were referenced throughout the research process on leadership, conflict, and communications.

Literature Review

The role of for-profit business leaders is critical as leaders have accountability for "influencing individuals and groups to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2013). Whether the definition of leadership focuses on traits or processes, the leadership role directly contributes to conflict management and the performance outcomes of organizations (Glavas et al., 2018;

Hickman, 2016; Kotter, 2012; Northouse, 2013). In the first literature review, conflict is defined

as a basis for understanding the leader role in conflict resolution.

Conflict Defined

According to McKibben (2017), conflict is a natural occurrence in human interactions.

Conflict can be defined as differences in interests, goals, principles, or feelings (Capobianco et

al., 2017) and surface when there is an "expressed struggle between at least two interdependent

parties" (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018, p. 3) where the concerns are incompatible (Thomas &

Kilmann, 2015). Workplace conflict can occur at any level in the organization and between

levels in the organization; there are three common workplace conflict types, including: task

conflict, relationship conflict, and value conflict (Shonk, 2020). Task conflict focuses on such

areas as work expectations, policies, procedures, and resource use (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003;

Shonk, 2020). In contrast, relationship conflict is more personal with differences in personality

styles and conflict styles in group dynamics (Plocharczyk, 2013; Shonk, 2020). Value conflict

evolve around differences in identities, values, and beliefs (De Graaf, 2021; Shonk, 2020).

There are many contributing factors that result in task, relationship, or values conflict,

including communications breakdowns. Leffel et al. (2012) identified three common breakdowns

that occur during communications that contribute to conflict, including (a) the sender not sending

the message, (b) the message being incorrect, or (c) an incorrect interpretation of the message by

the recipient. Conflict, whether it is a result of communication breakdowns or differences in

goals, values, or perceptions is a certainty in organizations. The ability for leaders to recognize

conflict and manage it effectively is critical to the success of organizations.

With the rise of computer-mediated communications (Raina & Marchewka, 2018) and

the common communication issues that create conflict (Leffel et al., 2012), organizations are at

risk for assuming leader conflict resolution skills are transferring effectively to the virtual workplace. The lack of awareness about the impact of technology on leader conflict resolution effectiveness could adversely affect organizational performance (Khan et al., 2016; McKibben, 2017).

Organizational Impact of Leader Conflict Resolution

Runde and Flanagan (2013) suggested that leaders who manage conflict effectively can shift conflict from a problem to an opportunity. By recognizing the conflict and responding in a way that demonstrates patience and openness to the conflict, leaders are able to model and encourage constructive behaviors that lead to creative problem solving (Runde & Flanagan, 2013). Leaders who demonstrate an ability to effectively manage conflict serve a critical role in organizational success and are perceived as more effective than those less competent in conflict management (Capobianco et al., 2004; Runde & Flanagan, 2013). Effective conflict resolution skills in leaders contributes to organizations that thrive in performance, productivity, and employee job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2016; McKibben, 2017).

Furthermore, leaders who use effective conflict resolution skills can energize teams and encourage new ideas and ways of thinking (Abolo & Oguntoye, 2016). Conversely, leaders with poor conflict resolution skills contribute to high employee turnover, stress, distrust, and reduced job satisfaction (McKibben, 2017). Conflict resolution skills in leaders can serve as a critical differentiator in organizations that navigate effectively through conflict compared to organizations that allow themselves to be managed by the conflict (Khan et al., 2016).

Leader Conflict Resolution Skills

In the last 5 years, there have been many peer-reviewed academic articles regarding conflict resolution, conflict management, technology, leadership communications, and disputes.

However, research is limited when exploring topics' cross-sections to understand the impacts of computer-mediated communications on leader conflict resolution skills (Vossen et al., 2017). Exploring potential differences in leader conflict resolution competencies using computer-mediated communications is essential to understanding potential differences in knowledge, skills, abilities compared to face-to-face.

Guttman (2004) identified eight leadership skills for resolving conflict: (1) be candid by openly surfacing the conflict, (2) be receptive by inviting different perspectives, (3) depersonalize the issue by keeping it in the context of a business issue, (4) be clear about how the decision will be made about the resolution, (5) do not allow individuals to triangulate by taking sides against another person, (6) learn to listen, paying attention to the messaging, (7) place ownership where it is appropriate and accept accountability where needed, and (8) acknowledge successful conflict management. In addition to the skills identified by Guttman, Smiley (2022) found that leaders who managed conflict effectively were comfortable "bringing conflict out into the open" (p. 11). They did not shy from confronting the conflict.

In a study conducted by Schulze et al. (2017), researchers found that the knowledge, skills, and abilities used to communicate effectively face-to-face had very little congruency with the knowledge, skills, and abilities for effective computer-mediated communication. When assessing such knowledge, skills, and abilities as attentiveness, motivation, expressiveness, and exposure (e.g., the differences in perceptions in need to exhibit those behaviors differed). The researchers concluded that the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for a leader to communicate effectively were rooted in the communication media selected. In research published by Newman et al. (2020), the mode of communication or media selection was one of five key success factors for leader communication effectiveness in a virtual environment. The

remaining success factors included: communication frequency, predictability, responsiveness, and clarity (Newman et al., 2020).

Uzun and Ayik (2017) used a communication competence scale to assess leader conflict management skills and found strong correlations between communication competencies and conflict management effectiveness. Leaders who exhibited strong communication competencies in empathy, social relaxation, and support were more effective in managing conflict. Furthermore, the empathy communication competency served as a predictor of the leaders' use of integrating, avoiding, obliging, or compromising conflict management styles (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Uzun & Ayik, 2017). With the connection between leadership communication skills and conflict resolution, the questionable effectiveness of computer-mediated communications (Rains et al., 2017; Riordan & Trichtinger, 2017; Shin et al., 2017) creates grave concerns for leader conflict resolution effectiveness in the online environment.

Conflict resolution has significant impacts on organizational performance and productivity (Khan et al., 2016); research is needed to help organizations equip leaders with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to operate in a technology-charged environment. Glavas et al. (2018) concluded that "conflict resolution is a skill without which managers could hardly succeed in their business" (p. 361). Recognizing factors that contribute to effective conflict resolution skills in leaders is imperative, given the impact to the organization.

Leadership Style and Conflict Resolution

Northouse (2013) explored multiple leadership models and styles to outline the various types of interactions between leaders and employees. Leadership styles offer insights into how leaders engage and interact with their employees. While the trait approach to leadership focuses on personality characteristics, the skills approach focuses on skills and abilities (Northouse,

2013). Northouse (2013) provided a description of leadership styles by describing the extent to which a leader uses delegating, supporting, coaching, or directing behaviors to influence employees. Across the leadership styles, leaders use various communication skills to influence their employees. The ability for a leader to apply their leadership style along with such skills as communications, problem-solving, and social judgement are foundational competencies (Mumford et al., 2000; Northouse, 2013; The Center for Creative Leadership, 2022) in managing conflict. The ability for leaders to understand the needs and perspectives of their employees and adapt their behaviors accordingly demonstrates an ability to adjust their leadership style to the needs of the employees (Mumford et al., 2000; Northouse, 2013).

Hocker and Wilmot (2018) emphasized the importance of recognizing the perspectives of self and others as well as communications. In a review of leadership styles, the extent to which a leadership style encourages perspective-taking and communications with employees may affect the leader's approach to conflict resolution. In a collaborative, transformational, or coaching leadership style for example, the leader focuses on communicating, soliciting input, and being empathetic to the socioemotional needs of the employee (Chrislip, 2002; Lawrence, 2017; Northouse, 2013). The collaborative leadership style recognizes individuals and their needs as supported by a Gallup (2015) research study indicating the importance of acknowledging the human side of employees. In contrast, a leader with a more transactional leadership approach does not focus on the individual needs of employees but influences through rewards systems and corrective actions (Northouse, 2013). The differences in leadership styles influences leader-employer interactions and therefore has the potential to influence communication and conflict resolution approaches.

Communication Effectiveness Based on Media Selection

Research regarding the effectiveness of communication-based on media selection has yielded mixed results, with some studies finding that computer-mediated communications improved communication results (Thiemann et al., 2019; Turnage & Goodboy, 2016) and other studies showing less effective results (Rains et al., 2017; Riordan & Trichtinger, 2017; Shin et al., 2017). The following literature reviews explore how the social presence and nonverbal cues affect media selection (Ko, 2016; Shin et al., 2017). An additional factor contributing to media selection is the ability for real-time interactions between the sender and receiver, as shared in the literature reviews of research by Thiemann et al. (2019), Riordan, and Trichtinger (2017), and Kruger et al. (2005). Finally, literature is shared to address the impact of media selection based on the emotional nature of the conflict (Chen & Tseng, 2016; DeClerck & Holtzman, 2018; Shin et al., 2017).

Social Cues. A key element in comparing computer-mediated communication options is the ability of the media to support social presence (Ko, 2016). Ko (2016) described that social presence refers to the ability of the communication medium to allow for nonverbal cues such as facial expression and body language. When social presence is high, the ability for individuals to interpret communications more effectively increases (Ko, 2016). While the use of voice contributes to an increase in social presence, it does not offer the same level of communication interpretation as mediums that provide visual cues (Ko, 2016). The ability to use webcams that support both visual and voice cues support heightened levels of social presence when compared to voice or nonvisual forms of communication (Ko, 2016).

Conversely, Shin et al. (2017) found that an increase in social cues could be detrimental and be a barrier to the message, creating negative results and outcomes. Turnage and Goodboy

(2016) identified similar negative impacts with heightened social cues based on the leader-follower relationship. Turnage and Goodboy (2016) determined that employees with out-group membership (Northouse, 2013) were more likely to use email to communicate negative information to leaders. Employees with out-group membership tend to experience less autonomy with their leaders and function more closely to their defined job description (Northouse, 2013). Employees with in-group membership experience autonomy with their leaders and typically have higher quality relationships with more trust and influence (Northouse, 2013). Since employees with out-group membership have lower quality relationships with their leaders compared to their in-group counterparts, out-group members had an increased comfort in communicating with a communication medium that offered fewer social cues. Thus, the findings indicate differences in the effectiveness of having social cues during communications. This contributes to a perspective that media selection is essential to consider during leader and follower communications, particularly concerning communications during the conflict.

Real-Time Feedback. In addition to social cues, the potential for real-time feedback is a contributing factor in media selection (Thiemann et al., 2019). Real-time feedback is a crucial element as it allows both parties involved in the communication to validate interpretations (Riordan & Trichtinger, 2017). Since individuals send and hear messages from their perspective (Kruger et al., 2005), the potential for inaccurate interpretation of communications in the absence of real-time feedback can be heightened. This concept was evidenced in a study conducted by Riordan and Trichtinger (2017). They found that research study participants were far more confident that the receiver of their emails interpreted their emails accurately than the results revealed. The researchers found that email recipients were "biased in their attention to negative information than positive information" (p. 19). The data suggests that human emotions are more

complex than computer-mediated communications can capture, creating increased challenges for conflict resolution. The researchers concluded that "overconfidence at the keyboard and its reliance upon friendship and situational knowledge....is ineffective at best, detrimental at worst" (p. 21). The inability for an email to provide immediate two-way feedback creates concerns for the consistent use of email to accommodate communication needs during conflict effectively. As a low media-rich solution based on the media-rich theory, email lacks social cues and two-way feedback. While email could be used for less complex communications, the research suggests that it should serve as a single-source solution.

Emotional Sensitivity. In emotionally charged situations, research studies show that media selection affects the outcome of the interactions (Chen & Tseng, 2016; DeClerck & Holtzman, 2018; Shin et al., 2017). For example, in a study conducted by Chen and Tseng (2016), researchers found that participants involved in a more positive, functional level of conflict with low levels of anger effectively used face-to-face communications. In contrast, those in less functional conflict and higher levels of anger were more effective in computer-mediated communications. Similarly, Shin et al. (2017) found that individuals who interacted using video chats compared to face-to-face communications were less emotionally aroused during the conflict and navigated the conflict more positively. In addition, DeClerck and Holtzman (2018) identified differences in how individuals responded to criticisms via text and face-to-face based on the level of trait mindfulness. For individuals with high levels of mindfulness, the selected media did not have an impact; however, individuals with low levels of mindfulness experienced criticism much more harshly when delivered via text messages compared to in-person (DeClerck & Holtzman, 2018).

The research suggests that leaders need to consider media selection based on both the topics being discussed during times of conflict and the individual needs of the follower. When communication methods are growing rapidly with the expansion of technology (Hickman, 2016), the importance of selecting the optimal solution is critical to leader communications and conflict resolution. In addition to factors such as the topic being discussed and individual follower needs (Northouse, 2013; Turnage & Goodboy, 2016), technology and demographic shifts have the potential to contribute to growing concerns about leader conflict resolution and computer-mediated communications (Lacey et al., 2017; Pew Research, 2021).

Technology & Global Business Shifts Affecting Leader Communication

Several technologies and demographic shifts create a heightened concern for leader conflict resolution effectiveness and computer-mediated communications. With technology use on the rise (Pew Research, 2021; Raina & Marchewka, 2018), global enterprise growth (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2018), and a more diverse U.S. workforce (Lacey et al., 2017), the blend of factors are essential to consider in both communications and conflict resolution. The statistics regarding increases in cell phone use as a measurement for technology growth, global enterprise growth, and increases in diversity in the U.S. workforce provide a framework to understand the shifts occurring in the United States. Furthermore, a summary of the literature is offered to suggest the importance of these factors to communications and ultimately, conflict resolution.

In a Pew Research (2021) study conducted January – February 8, 2021, researchers found that 97% of Americans own cell phones, with 85% owning smartphones. This represents a drastic increase from 2011 when 35% of Americans owned smartphones. The extensive use of cell phones in the United States demonstrates the stark growth in communications using

technology. Therefore, ignoring the potential impacts on conflict resolution could be detrimental to both individuals and organizations.

Worldwide employment by U.S. multinational enterprises (MNEs) increased from 42.4 million in 2017 to 43.0 million workers in 2018 (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2018). As a result, the potential for leaders to manage teams of employees cross-culturally is growing. The shifts create opportunities for individuals and organizations to consider how communications are affected as leaders' problem-solve and navigate conflict. As the global markets increase, communicating across cultures also increases. In a study conducted by Richard and McFadden (2016), they found cultural differences in approaches to emails, leading to violations of cultural norms and writing styles. Richard and McFadden (2016) explained that the "lack of understanding of cultural nuances might result in misunderstandings and breakdowns in communications" (p. 307). With the risk of breakdowns in communications due to cultural norms by email, the ability to resolve conflict via technology becomes increasingly more difficult.

Summary

An examination of literature regarding the definition of conflict, leader conflict resolution skills, communication effectiveness based on media selection, and trends affecting leader communication such as technology and demographics provides an understanding of this research study's key drivers. Hickman (2016) explained that the workplace is rapidly changing as it relates to technology. As a result, research must consider essential cross-sections of impacts across various leadership skills such as conflict resolution.

Khan et al. (2016) shared several concerns regarding ongoing conflict and its impacts on individuals and organizations. In addition to health impact, conflict can prevent individuals and organizations from achieving their goals. Based on that research, the lack of conflict resolution

could result in an ongoing conflict that becomes a barrier to achieving goals. While some conflicts can create positive results and serve as a motivator for creative ideas, as Khan et al. (2016) explained, unhealthy conflict can lead to the ultimate demise of an organization. The impacts are both physiological and psychological (Khan et al., 2016). The inconclusive results of the research studies present an opportunity to explore further the implications of computer-mediated communications on leader conflict resolution effectiveness. The current insights suggest that there is not a single response to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of technology on communications but a set of factors contributing to the effectiveness and ineffectiveness. An exploration of leader conflict resolution experiences using computer-mediated communications extends the body of knowledge to help individuals and organizations.

In the next chapter, the research methodology is presented with a summary of the research design, selection criteria, setting, interview protocol, data analysis and interpretation, ethical considerations, and limitations. The research methodology outlines details regarding the basic qualitative study research approach to interpret the results of virtual one-on interviews with ten leaders. The research is designed to provide perspectives on leader experiences with technology and conflict resolution to assist organizations in capability building in a globally, technologically advancing world.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the qualitative research methodology with a summary of a basic qualitative research study, interview protocol, population, data collection procedures, and coding and data analysis, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and summary. The purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to explore how technology trends in the workplace are affecting leader experiences with conflict resolution. Additionally, the purpose of the study was to examine how leaders utilize technology to handle conflicts based on their leadership style. By considering leadership style, as defined by the participant, the research offered insights into whether leadership style contributes to how leaders use technology to communicate when resolving conflict.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do for-profit business leaders select communication channels when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual environment?

RQ2: What are for-profit business leaders' perceptions of the influence of leadership style on communication channel selection when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual environment?

RQ3: What are for-profit business leaders' perceptions of the impact of technology when communicating with employees to resolve conflict?

Research Design

Sayre (2001) asserted that a clear understanding of the research objective is foundational to determining the research methodology and design. Additionally, the philosophical underpinnings can serve as drivers in defining whether or not a quantitative or qualitative

research design will address the research objectives (Byrne, 2017). In a field of study that seeks to expand understanding of leader experiences with conflict resolution using technology, applying qualitative methodology offers a more diverse range of topics to surface when compared to a quantitative study. Sayre (2001) suggested that qualitative research studies are not intended to offer a definitive answer but to expand the understanding and contribute to greater areas of insight. The research study illuminated the leader experience in a way that brings attention to future areas of research needed.

Selection Criteria

A purposeful selection process (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018) was used to identify 32 leaders from the LinkedIn Learning, Education, Training, and Professionals group which consists of over 300,000 members across industries. A purposeful selection process enabled me to use a deliberate set of selection criteria to identify leaders who were "likely to provide insight into the phenomenon being investigated due to their position, experience, and/or identity markers" (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 96). I reviewed the profiles of individuals to identify 32 leaders with a goal of having ten leaders included in the research study to provide sufficient information to address the research questions (Leavy, 2017; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Since qualitative research focuses on creating an understanding of experiences in context (Stake, 1995), the sample size was not a focus as much as the experience of each leader selected.

The following criteria were used to identify potential participants:

- For-profit business leaders who had other leaders reporting to them such as business owners, business unit leaders, department heads, and division heads.
- At least 5 years managing employees. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) reports a median tenure of managers as 4.9 years with their employer. Using a guide of 5 years as

the minimum created alignment to the typical length of time individuals at that level remain with their organizations**.**

- Approximately three to four leaders in organizations with 50-250 employees; three to four leaders in organizations with 251-999 employees and three to four leaders in organizations with 1000 or more employees.

- At least 6 months of experience managing employees in a virtual environment during COVID. Since conflict is a natural human occurrence (McKibben, 2017), 6 months provides a time that task, relationship, or value conflict is likely to have occurred. Limiting the time period helped ensure participants were able to share recent experiences.

Setting

One-on-one interviews were conducted virtually using a conference call phone line, allowing participants to join from their setting of choice. I was in a home office for privacy and used the freeconference.com service to ensure optimal call quality.

Data Collection Procedures

Saldaña and Omasta (2018) suggested that the purpose of a research study and the research questions are key drivers in identifying effective data collection methods. According to Saldaña and Omasta (2018), interviews offer the most effective way to obtain data about "people's experiences, feelings and interpretations" (p. 180). Rubin and Rubin (2012) asserted that interviews enable the researcher to gain insights into differing perspectives of research participants. This basic qualitative research study used one-on-one semistructured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) and the following data collection procedures:

- Obtained permission from the Abilene Christian University IRB (see Appendix A).

- Reviewed the profiles of leaders in the LinkedIn group Learning, Education, Training, and Professionals to identify approximately leaders who met the selection criteria.

- Emailed 32 leaders and invited them to participate in the research study using a standard email (see Appendix B) that included:

  o Research study purpose, description, and research questions

  o Interview process description and reference to the recording and transcription review

  o Time commitment and timeline

  o Request to confirm acceptance to participate by returning an attached consent form.

  o Link to a secure Google Doc to obtain demographic data (see Appendix C), including their job title, number of employees in the company (50-250, 251-999, 1000+), description of management/leadership development, current number of employees they manage, number of years of experience managing employees, length of time managing employees in a virtual environment.

- After receiving each participants consent form and demographic data to confirm that they met the selection criteria, a follow-up email was sent with the interview protocol and available 1-hour meeting time options to coordinate an optimal interview time. One interview was scheduled for each participant.

- Participants were sent a meeting invite with a secure conference call line for the interview. The freeconference.com conference call service was used to ensure the call was recorded and transcribed.

- Following the interview, participants were emailed a copy of the transcription. This process is referred to as member-checking (Roberts, 2010).

During the interview, I took notes to assist in identifying potential themes. This strategy also enabled me to generate emerging understandings and refine my interview guide to ensure adequacy and richness of shared perspectives with each subsequent interview.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was sent to a leader who met the selection criteria for review and feedback; however, they were not invited to participate in the study. The purpose of the review process was to validate the instrument. The feedback was be used to update the interview protocol. The interview questions included a set of open-ended questions that began with broader questions to establish rapport followed by more narrowly focused questions to explore the experiences of the participants. Distributing the interview protocol prior to the interviews helped establish trust and rapport with participants prior to the interviews. It also established credibility and confidence in the process and research approach by showing thoughtful preparation.

The interview questions were designed to support a conversational style as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012). The interview questions were aligned to the research questions with an intent to understand the leaders' experience with conflict resolution using technology.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was used to gain insights and perspectives from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The semistructured approach to interviewing provided the opportunity to ask a predefined set of open-ended questions to guide the conversation, while allowing flexibility to make adjustments and refine questions based on emerging understandings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Simons, 2012). Interviews were conducted virtually, using conference call line technology with recording and transcription service capability.

Prior to starting the interview recording, I reminded participants that I planned to

record the interview and take notes during the conversations. I explained to participants that the purpose of the recording was to help ensure accuracy (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

I used general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) to analyze the qualitative data from the one-on-one interviews. A general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) provides an approach for analyzing and interpreting raw data to enable themes to emerge.

Following each interview, the narrative data were transcribed into textual data for coding purposes. I analyzed the notes and transcriptions for recurring themes. I created electronic folders to manage the textual data for ease of access by participant so that each folder contained a copy of the consent form, scanned notes, and interview transcription. Once all the interviews were complete, I read through all the transcriptions to begin forming a broad understanding of participants' experiences as it related to technology and conflict resolution. Next, I reviewed the content again and highlighted key concepts that provided insights into my research questions. To further synthesize my initial thoughts, I took notes in a single electronic file for reference.

Leavy (2017) described coding as a process that enables the researcher to assign labels, words, or phrases to data for the purpose of classification. I leveraged the values coding approach to look for key themes within each interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). After performing the initial coding on each interview transcription, I compiled the responses by question to search for trends in themes. Next, I identified terms to describe the themes for each question based on participant interview responses.

Trustworthiness

Connelly (2016) described trustworthiness as the rigor used in a research study to demonstrate confidence in the data, the interpretation of results, and the methods. To build confidence and trustworthiness in the findings, I:

- Used standard coding procedures to look for themes to demonstrate credibility and alignment to standard qualitative research studies.

- Used literature reviews to validate interpretations and understanding based on other academic research.

- Documented notes during the interviews to compliment the transcriptions as a technique demonstrate dependability in the process. The notes were dated and maintained with the transcriptions.

- Compiled the findings and ensured connectivity to the original research questions to demonstrate credibility and alignment to the original goals.

- Provided a copy of the transcription to each leader involved in the interviews for member-checking to support confirmability.

- Provided "rich, detailed descriptions" (Connelly, 2016) of the leader experiences to enable transferability and learnings by readers.

Ethical Considerations

A critical element in any research study is to ensure the research is managed in a way that honors and maintains a focus on ethical considerations (Anderson & Herr, 2015). To demonstrate ethical standards, I demonstrated respect for the individuals in the study by providing them information about the study and the opportunity to make a decision regarding participation. Since participants shared information about their experience with conflict

resolution that relates to interactions in the workplace, I reported findings in a way that protected individual responses. I employed several techniques to protect my participants, including not disclosing the names of organizations, business units, or individuals or descriptors that might reveal participant identity. I shared this approach with participants to create confidence in the process to maintain confidentiality to foster an environment where participants felt open to sharing authentically. Participants signed consent forms prior to participating in the study.

The participants involved in the study received a copy of the transcription and research study findings to support member checking as a technique to validate the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants will benefit from the research by gaining increased understanding of conflict resolution and technology for leaders. Since conflict resolution can serve as a key differentiator in successfully performing organizations, the leaders will be able to use the findings to explore opportunities to improve conflict resolution techniques. At the individual level, participants will gain insights into personal effectiveness in conflict resolution that could be enhanced.

Limitations of the Study

The research study used leaders within the LinkedIn group Learning, Education, Training, and Professionals which could insert biases based on the experiences and expertise of the individuals associated with that group. The study was limited to the experiences of 10 for-profit business leaders and cannot be generalized for all organizations.

Summary

The basic qualitative study and one-on-one interview approach used in this research study offered a process to effectively explore leader conflict resolution experiences and technology.

The research study has merit in not only expanding understanding for the involved participants but also a myriad of organizations and leaders as it relates to conflict resolution and technology. At a time when technology is becoming an integral part of daily lives (Raina & Marchewka, 2018), understanding the impacts on leader conflict resolution skills is imperative.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I present the findings for the study *For-Profit Business Leaders'*
Perceptions of Technology and Conflict-Resolution in the Workplace. This basic qualitative
study aimed to explore for-profit business leaders' perceptions of technology and conflict
resolution in the virtual workplace. Additionally, the purpose of the study was to explore for-
profit business leaders' perceptions of their leadership styles and the impact on conflict resolution
in the virtual workplace. This chapter includes an overview of the themes that emerged from
each interview question. An introductory paragraph provides a summary of each theme followed
by supporting participant interview statements in their own words.

The leaders consisted of for-profit business leaders who have other leaders reporting to
them, have at least 5 years of experience managing employees, are in organizations of 50 or
more employees, and have at least six months of managing employees in a virtual environment
during the COVID-19 pandemic. To explore how technology trends in the workplace are
affecting leader experiences with conflict resolution, I conducted semistructured interviews with
each participant to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do for-profit business leaders select communication channels when resolving
conflict with employees in a virtual environment?

RQ2: What are for-profit business leaders' perceptions of the influence of leadership
style on communication channel selection when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual
environment?

RQ3: What are for-profit business leaders' perceptions of the impact of technology when
communicating with employees to resolve conflict?

I asked the participants nine semistructured interview questions (See Appendix D) to understand the leaders' experience with conflict resolution using technology and the potential influence of leadership style on conflict resolution. I distributed transcriptions to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy. The participant section of this chapter describes the participants while maintaining anonymity, followed by a summary of the data collection procedures. Additionally, the coding process offers insights into the approach used to identify common themes to address the research questions. Finally, participant quotations are provided to understand the leaders' experiences with conflict resolution using technology and the potential influences of leadership style on conflict resolution.

Participants

Ten leaders were purposefully selected from the LinkedIn group, Learning, Education, Training, and Professionals, who met the selection criteria. Participants were provided a link to a secure Google Doc to obtain demographic data (See Appendix B), including their job title, number of employees in the company, description of management/leadership development, number of years of experience managing employees, length of time managing employees in a virtual environment. Table 1 describes the demographic data, replacing leader names with leader numbers to protect participant identity.

Table 1

Meet the Participants

Name	Years managing employees	Job title	Company size
Leader 1	More than 30	Chief Learning Officer	1,000+
Leader 2	11–20	Online Sales Manager	1,000+
Leader 3	21–30	Director	251-999
Leader 4	5–10	Training Manager	1,000+
Leader 5	11–20	Head of Learning Design & Delivery	1,000+
Leader 6	11–20	Senior Director, Leadership Development	1,000+
Leader 7	21–30	Manager	1,000+
Leader 8	11–20	Chief People & Diversity Officer	1,000+
Leader 9	21–30	Marketing Director	50-250
Leader 10	11–20	Finance Executive	1,000+

Meet the Participants

The following section describes the participants' backgrounds based on data collected in the secure Google document, LinkedIn profiles, and interviews.

Leader 1. Leader 1 is a chief learning officer at a company with over 1,000 employees. Leader 1 shared having deep, immersive leadership and management training and has managed employees for over 30 years, including the virtual environment for more than six months. Leader 1 describes their leadership style as collaborative and inclusive.

Leader 2. Leader 2 is an online sales manager at a company with over 1,000 employees. Leader 1 shared completing leadership and management training courses throughout their career, including management essentials and emotional intelligence. Leader 2 has managed employees for over 11 years, including the virtual environment for six months. Leader 2 describes their leadership style as democratic.

Leader 3. Leader 3 is a director at a company with 250 - 999 employees. Leader 3 completed several leadership and management training courses, including a leadership certification. Leader 3 has managed employees for over 21 years, including the virtual environment for six months. Leader 3 describes their leadership style as coaching and empowering.

Leader 4. Leader 4 is a training manager at a company with over 1,000 employees. Leader 4 has completed several leadership and management training courses and grown as a leader by reading and engaging mentors. Leader 4 has managed employees for over five years, including the virtual environment for more than six months. Leader 4 describes their leadership style as collaborative.

Leader 5. Leader 5 is the head of learning design and delivery at a company with over 1,000 employees. Leader 5 has completed several leadership and executive learning programs. In addition, Leader 5 has managed employees for over 11 years, including the virtual environment for more than six months. Leader 5 describes their primary leadership style as coaching, supporting, and delegating; however, they lean into a directive style based on the employee's experience level being managed.

Leader 6. Leader 6 is a senior director, leadership development at a company with over 1,000 employees. Leader 6 has completed several leadership and management training courses

and is certified in various leadership assessment tools. Leader 6 has managed employees for over 11 years, including the virtual environment for more than 6 months. Leader 6 describes their leadership style as collaborative.

Leader 7. Leader 7 is a manager at a company with over 1,000 employees. Leader 7 has completed several leadership and management training courses. Leader 7 has managed employees for over 21 years, including the virtual environment for more than six months. Leader 7 describes their leadership style as collaborative.

Leader 8. Leader 8 is a chief people and diversity officer at a company with over 1,000 employees. Leader 8 has completed several leadership and management training courses. In addition, Leader 8 has managed employees for over 11 years, including the virtual environment for more than 6 months. Leader 8 describes their leadership style as delegating.

Leader 9. Leader 9 is a marketing director at a company with 50-250 employees. Leader 9 has completed several leadership and management training courses as a part of continuing education credits and received leadership mentoring. Leader 9 has managed employees for over 21 years, including the virtual environment for more than 6 months. Leader 9 describes their leadership style as coaching.

Leader 10. Leader 10 is a finance executive at a company with over 1,000 employees. Leader 10 has completed several leadership and management training programs with deep experience in situational leadership. Leader 10 has managed employees for over 21 years, including the virtual environment for more than 6 months. Leader 10 describes their leadership style as situational while leaning into coaching and directional when needed.

The Interview Process

I conducted one-on-one virtual interviews using a secure, recorded conference call phone line with each study participant. The interview protocol was emailed to the 10 participants prior to the interview and a semistructured interview approach was used to ask the nine interview questions, probing when needed for clarity. The freeconference.com conference call service was used for the recording and transcription. In addition, the narrative data were transcribed into textual data for coding purposes. Following the interviews, participants were emailed a copy of the transcription to support member-checking to ensure accuracy in the interpretation.

Data Analysis and Themes

The values coding approach was used to look for key themes within each interview. After performing the initial coding on each interview transcription, I compiled the responses by question to search for trends in themes. Next, I identified terms to describe the themes for each question based on participant interview responses. All participant responses are not included for each theme as they were defined as outliers and removed. Participants shared their experiences with conflict resolution using technology and the potential influences of leadership style on conflict resolution. The information obtained during the interview answered the research questions presented earlier in this chapter. The themes are based on recurring interview responses from participants and support questions related to leadership style, communications, conflict resolution, and managing in a virtual environment. Table 2 provides a chart of the themes by interview questions. The results of the interview questions are further described in the following section with supporting quotations from participant interviews.

Table 2

Themes by Interview Question

Question Number	Question	Theme
Q1	Describe your leadership style	Collaborative Leadership Style
Q2	Discuss how your leadership style influences your approach to managing conflict.	Other-Focused
Q3	Discuss how your leadership style influences how you manage conflict in a virtual environment.	Safe and Engaging Environment
Q4	What impact do you think technology has on leader and employee communications?	Potential to Enhance or Deteriorate
Q5	Discuss the communication channel you select when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual environment.	Body Language
Q6	Discuss why you prefer certain forms of technology when communicating with employees.	Purpose Driven Technology Choices
Q7	Discuss how you build rapport with your employees in a virtual environment.	Projection of Humanistic Behaviors
Q8	What strategies do you recommend to promote communication in the workplace?	Standard, Ongoing & Authentic
Q9	What strategies do you recommend for resolving conflict in a virtual environment?	Being Attentive & Actively Listening

Collaborative Leadership Style

Leaders described themselves as having primarily collaborative and coaching leadership styles. These styles are reflected in participant responses that demonstrate a desire to be inclusive and engage employees in decision-making while giving employees the autonomy to do their work independently.

Leader 1: "I think my leadership style is very collaborative and inclusive, and other-focused. I always focus on the person I am working with or the problem we are trying to solve."

Leader 2:

> I very much have a very Democratic approach to leadership. I like to get the group involved more with decisions, especially decisions that might impact their day-to-day functions, processes, and work lives. Because I mean they are the ones who are on the front line doing a job, I always like to make sure that they are well involved. Ultimately their decision does come to me, but I like to get them more involved.

Leader 3:

> I am grounded in coaching and helping people. For me, it is all about asking questions. It is about taking barriers out of people's way. It is much more of a, let me empower you and let you run and see what I can do to help support you along the way.

Leader 4:

> I enlist the strengths of everyone on my team and request their opinion, input, and feedback, and try to understand the impact on them and our team as a whole. In that sense, I tend to request more collaboration than just me being a specialist. I need to leverage those folks that are experts in their area.

Leader 5:

> It depends on the colleague I am working with and their experience level. If it is someone brand-new coming in, it will be very specific and directional. It is hard for me to have people like that because I do not do that as often. So, I lean more towards coaching, supporting, and delegating based on where they are at in their needs.

Leader 6:

> My leadership style is open and collaborative. I try to create a culture on my team where people can raise concerns, issues, and tensions. If there is tension, good or bad, they can raise those tensions, and we assume good intent.

> Leader 7: "I am more of a collaborative coaching type leader, and it depends on the group you are working with. If it is a large group, I may be more of a democratic leader because I cannot be that coach."

> Leader 8: "I ask questions because I want them to come up with solutions independently. I do not hand-feed. I do a lot of delegating, like here it is tell me what you would do with it."

Leader 9:

> I am probably more of a coach in terms of my style. I think my style is very much assessment and identifying areas where we can improve and implement things to meet our goals. I am not what I would call a micromanager; I try to identify people I can trust, whom I think can do a good job, give them the expectations, and then step back and let them do their thing. So, it is a team thing with me and sort of a systems approach.

> Leader 10: "I believe in situational leadership, understanding the situation, adjusting your time and oversight, and your guidance accordingly. However, you also give more coaching and direction in areas you know they need to help."

Other-Focused

Leaders with a collaborative leadership style tended to be other-focused, striving to understand the perspective of their employees. They encouraged employee voice and demonstrated curiosity and interest in their employees by asking probing questions and

prompting discussions. Additionally, the collaborative leadership style created an environment where leaders wanted to understand their employees' motivations, interests, and desires.

Leader 1: "I try to dig down and dig into what their agenda is. What is their desire? What would be ideal?"

Leader 2:

I encourage hearing different opinions. I might not agree with them, and everybody on the team might not agree with else's opinions, but I encourage sharing those opinions. It helps manage the conflict piece because they can share the information and get it off their chests. Again, I might disagree with what they say, and we might not change things because of their concerns, but I think it is just the fact that they are being heard. It is okay for them to voice those opinions.

Leader 3: "It is just asking questions, clarifying, and acknowledging how people feel while working through that process."

Leader 4:

In trying to maintain a collaborative workforce or a collaborative team, I try to understand the difference of opinion and how it might impact our team and our results. Furthermore, if there is something that we can collectively do to get to that result that we are seeking to attain, then let us get there. You must understand the motivations of each employee and what is important to them.

Leader 5: "Because of my supportive coaching and delegating style, I seek to draw out what is going on with the other person and their view, helping me understand the why."

Leader 7: "A collaborative coaching style means everyone has that voice, and I appreciate varying viewpoints. So, if there is conflict, I try to put myself in that person's shoes to understand why there is difficulty or struggle or a challenge."

Leader 8:

I would much rather be direct and address it and move on than for it to linger because it just does not get better with time. So, I feel like it is just easier to talk it through by saying talk to me about your perspective, and then I will talk to you about my perspective and then, together, come to a solution that works for both.

Leader 9:

Some coaching is trying to say, hey, look; this is your role; this person's role is very different. You focus on this piece because that is your job. However, they are focused on this piece because that is their job. Neither one is or is terrible or is good. It is just that you are coming both at this from different perspectives. If I can help them try to understand what is of importance to that other person, then they can come to some resolution that fits both.

Leader 10:

My experience has been that many people are just seeking to know why. However, moreover, it is something that can go a long way. Why didn't it go that way? What could they do differently? What could they do to have it go their way in their future? So having that foundation of knowing them and knowing their motivators and building that trust is helpful with a lot of that conversations.

Safe and Engaging Environment

Leaders with a collaborative leadership style were intentional about engaging with employees and putting them at ease to share in the virtual environment. They used various techniques to create a safe and engaging environment that fostered a climate of discussion and openness.

Leader 1:

When you are in a virtual environment, I think one thing that I have had to shift is to slow down, ask more probing questions, allow more time to do that, and not rush immediately to okay. I allow time for myself and the other person to process. I have used the other technique to ask, "How are you doing? How are you feeling? Therefore, asking those two real human questions and slowing down enough for the person. I think I have done it long enough now that people know that I am going to go there for the first few minutes of our interaction, and they also know that I am a trusted, safe place to be able to share, and it does not go anywhere what they share. That opens the conversation up to what needs to be discussed from a work perspective or a conflict perspective and allows them to bring up something that may conflict with what they are currently experiencing.

Leader 2:

I feel that the style I have taken in managing my team is really and truly a very open and safe environment. Thus, they all know they can speak up, and they will not have any backlash or anything like that. I encourage hearing different opinions. I might not agree with them, and everybody on the team might not agree with else's opinions, but I encourage sharing those opinions. Whenever we have meetings, I ask for their input, and I am always asking, "Hey, I am thinking about making this change. Is there something

that I am missing?" I am thinking about how it will impact them and their jobs. I think it
is just being able to have those open conversations. Again, just creating that safe
environment.

Leader 3:

It is much more time-consuming, and I found myself preparing more. That was a lesson
for me as we moved to virtual. It is just making sure I am ready, even to the point where I
have good notes before entering it. I could kind of wing it a little bit before because you
had that physical presence you needed with someone, whereas now, you have to stay
focused. So, I need to have a little bit of an outline of notes and even a sample question or
two.

Leader 4:

If one person feels apprehensive about something, I am shifting and 100% laser focused.
I will call them and spend time with them to understand their concerns. Can we mitigate
them? Can we not? Is this a legitimate concern? Was it a misunderstanding?

Leader 5:

If you have that trust in place, it makes those kinds of conversations so much easier. Then
you can get through the heated moments; you can stop and listen to each other, so it
works in your favor to have a trusted relationship.

Leader 6:

I do not avoid conflict, and I must ensure that my team does not avoid it with me. I am
open to conflict and disagreement, but I have to show up in a way that reinforces that
message. So, if someone raises a concern, I encourage them to do it respectfully, and if I
disagree with you, I will not respond by saying why you are wrong. I think people get

very closed off depending on how conflict is raised. So, the culture that I like to set is, please raise concerns as you have them so we can work through the tensions and do it respectfully. Then, we can have a dialogue about it.

Leader 7:

A collaborative coaching style means everyone has a voice, and I appreciate varying viewpoints. If there is conflict, I try to put myself in that person's shoes to understand why there is difficulty or struggle or a challenge. I try to approach it in that manner and try to, depending on the conflict, either win them over or listen to what their situation might be.

Leader 10:

It must be a lot more formal. I tended to side on the less formal because I did not want to come across as me ambushing somebody or anything else. In a virtual environment, that becomes more challenging because I meet with everybody face-to-face. Those water-cooler conversations, seeing me in the cafeteria, or meeting me for a coffee break are not happening.

Potential to Enhance or Deteriorate

Leaders found that technology can either enhance or deteriorate communications with employees. While technology can increase access and frequency of communications between leaders and employees, it also creates concerns about constant access without balance or breaks. Additionally, the myriad of technology choices can lead to confusion about which technology is best based on the communication need. Leaders cited positive and negative attributes related to technology and leader and employee communications depending on how the technology is used.

Leader 1:

>Technology has made communication quicker. We can have a meeting, pulling leaders and teams together. You must get everybody to fly in, losing time. You lose the option to schedule quickly and may have to wait 30 days out. I am speaking specifically for my global company. I think that the pace of business has increased. So, I think that technology has helped. The other thing that I will say is that communication has improved. I know for some of our senior leaders, there was much waste in their day because they would go from one meeting to another. There was much waste moving between meetings. So, they have more time and more access. It has been more accessible and effective with talent who may not be co-located. So, I think technology has improved communications.

>Leader 2: "I have team members in various cities, and now that they have Microsoft Teams and conversations going on, they do not feel like they are on an island by themselves, working eight hours a day being isolated."

Leader 3:

>It can be a Godsend or a curse. When we all moved to virtual at the outset of the pandemic, the pendulum swung a bit far from where we were trying to use technology that could interfere with our productivity. So, I took the team through a couple of activities to discuss standard operating procedures (SOPs) for technology. When do you call? When do you text? When do we need to make sure we are using our videos? How are we going to use each of the platforms? First, we had to define the parameters and how they would be used.

Leader 4:

    I think it can have a considerable impact. Earlier, I mentioned the importance of understanding and knowing your employees, and when that relationship is not there, technology will add another layer on top of that of complexity. We have all seen an emoji that conveyed a question mark more than understanding. If that relationship with that employee is not there, technology will add another layer of complexity and make things a little murkier.

Leader 5:

    The beauty of technology is having many different avenues of communicating in many ways. That is also the downside. There are so many ways that you can communicate. Furthermore, to me, email is out of control. I get hundreds and hundreds of emails a day. It is bogged down and takes up time that is not meaningful. What is meaningful to me is getting on the call, seeing people's faces, hashing through utilizing the technology, and getting to the solution or moving things forward or coaching or whatever the case may be. So, there is beauty in the technology, and there are downsides, and I am sorry, there are times when you just need to get on the phone and have a conversation. That lost art of having a conversation is just so important. We have so many different avenues. Sometimes, we rely too much on technology. We lose sight of the importance of talking.

Leader 6:

    The most impactful is that it is less about the tool itself and more about what kinds of things the tools can do. For example, we have a tool called Matter Most. It is like a persistent chat, but it saves everything. If somebody wants to send just be something, we can do that, but then I can also see as things are getting created and areas where people

are not working together for a solution. It is right there in real-time. That has been a

massive game-changer. Having those kinds of tools, I think that is where collaboration is

going. Those are the things I think will continue to become even more critical. You have

probably facilitated a hundred different meetings where people would stand up and write

something on sticky notes. There are ways to do that now through technology. People can

still have their voice, and then team members can all collaborate around this virtual

space. Those are the types of things I think will help us not only deal with conflict but

just be better communicators.

Leader 7:

When communicating, it is crucial to use the right technology at the right time. If it is an

inappropriate message, I think the technology you are using should be everything you

have in your arsenal. You use your audio-video, use your email, and use everything you

have available to get that message across, but if it is light and not super important, email

or if you do text in your business, a text will do. I think that it is based on the leader as to

how well they use that technology, and I think that if you do not know when to use it, it

can just ruin things exponentially. Well, go south quickly. We quickly found that it is

based on how well the leader uses the technology. Furthermore, it is just essential to get it

right with communication.

Leader 8:

I think communications help because you have all these different venues to communicate,

but technology has been a blessing and a curse. Yes, it has made it much easier for us to

communicate, but I think what has happened is that now we are communicating all the

time. There is not a break. When you go home, you get emails and texts because

technology will allow you to work anywhere and anytime. The expectation is sometimes

that you are available 24/7. So, although it has enhanced the ability to communicate

because there are many different venues and it is so easy to do, the problem is, I think it

is burning out our employees.

Leader 9:

I think there are positives and negatives. With the culture we live in, everything is so fast-

paced and immediate. You are shooting a text or an email and then moving to your next

task while waiting for a response. It is convenient. If it is something that I need a yes or

no answer, or I do not need much input. Then, it is convenient to shoot a text or email. It

is nice to be under a time crunch, but it has become a norm. If it is crucial, I need it to be

at least a phone call, especially if there is something sensitive. It is so easy for people not

to look into the face of other people and be harsh or ignore a whole part of the

conversation. I guess what I am saying is that some incredible things make us more

efficient with technology. However, in terms of conflict resolution, most of that needs to

happen if not face-to-face, and person-to-person, then an over-the-phone type of

conversation.

Leader 10:

All the technology sets available have pros and cons: email, instant messaging, or

collaboration platforms. It really could be anything; it could be SharePoint or teams. I

think the biggest thing that I would say is that there almost needs to be protocols of when

to use certain things and when not, and I will give you an example. Email can be

significant, and it can be good to inform. It is not great necessarily to communicate and

have back and forth dialogue. I think understanding and knowing the purpose is essential.

While it can be super convenient if you have a quick question, I see it used far too often, and then we have the unintended consequence of any of those platforms. In particular, email and instant messaging create challenges with focus. Calendars get full quickly, so those become the only avenues for people to be able to communicate and sort of share things during the day. However, that often means that they are multitasking in the meeting that they are in. You lose a bit. You sacrifice focus in the meeting, so you have that convenience of an electronic communication format. However, then in my experience with it, it creates a sort of instant gratification as well, especially when someone expects a response. The expectation becomes essential.

The other thing I will mention as another unintended consequence is that emails; can create guilt. That is not quite the right word, but a sense of obligation to keep your emails to a reasonable level. What I see and where I see that manifest is people working nights, weekends, on their phone while they are at their kids' soccer game or whatever the case may be. It just created this kind of On Demand, on-call type of atmosphere. I also think it is challenging personally and becomes challenging professionally. I believe that time away is good and allows you to come back with fresh thoughts and fresh thinking. If you are always on your phone and constantly having to message, you do not always get that.

Body Language

Leaders tend to look for communication channels that support an increased ability to use body language for visual and audio cues when resolving conflict. The nonverbal, real-time body language becomes an important factor in helping the leaders interpret and manage the conflict, with most preferring on-camera communication.

Leader 1:

> If a conflict is coming in asynchronously, I shift it to synchronously. So, that might be picking up the phone and giving them a call, which is now our computer. We make all our calls on the computer now. Then, I will say, "Let us schedule some time," and I will get us some time to talk through it. Sometimes, I might call them on their cell to talk or find a time to talk. One good thing I think that has happened in our culture is that we share such information via email now, using it asynchronously. However, if we need to discuss or decide something, we do it synchronously. So, I feel like there is less conflict coming across the email. In some ways, it might be easier to deal with conflict if you are dealing with the phone because then you are losing the on-camera visual and just listening to what they are saying. And then being able to reflect, here is what I hear you saying? I think with audio-only. I can focus my energies on what is being said and listen to what is not being said. In some ways, you can get further along with voice to voice than video to video.

Leader 2:

> It is always Microsoft Teams and turned-on cameras. We do that because it is the same as grabbing a couple of folks and taking them into a conference room. It is always going to be on camera on Teams. We are rarely just phone only. I think that managing the conflict in the virtual environment; is essential to have it where you can hear what they are saying and see those things. You can see their facial expressions. You can see if they are starting to blank out. You can see if they have drifted, looking somewhere else. I think it just has to go back to looking at body language. If you say something, you can see if they are

deflating or if they are perking up and they are getting excited. It is hard to get that interaction if it is just auditory.

Leader 3:

I am always going to want to be eye to eye. I am always doing it on video if I can. I will even ask team members; I would love to discuss eye to eye. Are you able to get on a video? Alternatively, let me know a time when you can do that. Furthermore, if they cannot, they say they are not in the space to do that then I will say, "Okay, this is pressing." I have found, for whatever reason, I feel like my team members are much more open if we do a phone call. At least personally for me, I feel like so much is lost in emails. People read between the lines or misread. I think you need to hear a voice. First and foremost, I want a face. Furthermore, you must hear their voice.

Leader 4:

If I am not able to do it face-to-face, my next go-to would be a video call, and if that is not available to me, then a call a phone call would be next. I try to stay away from a chat or email because I find that we end up going back and forth frequently, and there is some inferred speech that cannot carry as well as an actual in-person or face-to-face call. I find that we lose quite a bit if we do not have face to face. In the past and recent times, I had situations in which I got a long-winded email, and it was one of my team members commenting on someone on another team. The other team member then responded with a long-winded email, and there was a back-and-forth involving a few layers of management in the email. Furthermore, I said, "I think all of us have the best intentions, but instead of going back and forth on email, let us just get a meeting." We could get the

meeting on everyone's calendars three days out, but I could explain that it was the best

solution, and everyone understood that we would have a face-to-face.

Leader 5:

My preference is to see the person I am talking with to see their reaction to their

behaviors. That is my preference. I do not always get what I want, however. The next

best thing is that I need to hear the voice. I am not going to resolve conflict in an email or

a ping. If something goes back and forth, we need to set up a time to talk. This is not

productive because you can read too much into the written word versus hearing

someone's voice. If I have conflict, my preference is to see someone see the reactions as

we have a conversation.

Leader 6:

The first thing I am going to do is to I am going to say shut down the conversation if it is

in a collaboration space. If something is getting heated, people can be very bold, way

bolder with words on a screen than the words coming out of their mouths. It is almost like

you can have aggressive behaviors, more than getting on a phone because you lose the

tone, and you lose some things you can hear on a phone call. So, the first thing I would

do would be to say, "Let us stop talking about it here, in this online collaboration tool,

and I will call you. When can you meet to have a call?" Being overt in saying, let us stop

the conversation here and get on a phone call or get on a WebEx is how I would react.

After all, I want to make sure I am not misinterpreting something because I cannot hear

the tone.

Suppose something is getting much feedback on a collaboration tool and much

activity back and forth. In that case, that is something that would be a trigger that I would

say, hey, "Let us have a conversation about this because if it is 15 different people typing things, back and forth, I would say, this needs to move this to a different venue." If I need to see people's faces, I will probably put something on a staff meeting agenda if it would be contentious. So, I think part of it is proactive. If it is going to be a potential hot button, start it off in a way that builds that collaboration to address conflicts as they come up. And then watching how the team is collaborating and stopping one method of communication and saying this warrants a conversation.

Leader 7:

I think the method depends on the level of conflict. Suppose it is not a big deal or is just a miscommunication. Maybe someone just misread what I said, or I misread what you said, and we can clear it up quickly with an email. However, if it is a serious conflict or maybe a conflict that goes up the ranks, let us get on the phone call if possible. Furthermore, if we can get on Microsoft teams, which we use mostly, let us get on the video call. Let us just talk it out. It depends on the level of conflict and the level of the person who has the conflict. I like to get online with them face-to-face and have that conversation. The next one for me would be a phone call.

Generally speaking, you must be more intentional about all your interactions. If it is a conflict situation, I believe we must come on camera so I can check your body language. I want to look at you and see what is going on. It is not just a phone conversation. It is not just over email because things can get lost in translation very easily. I am doing my best to put audio and visual to the person so that we can look at one another and have a better understanding. Understanding comes not just in words but in the actions and seeing one another's body language.

Leader 8: "I always call with the video conference. And then what I will typically do for documentation purposes, I might follow up in an email with what we decided about how we are moving forward, so there is no question."

Leader 9:

> If it is very sensitive, I would say I would use Zoom or Microsoft Teams or something where that person and I can be face to face. Depending on the level of sensitivity, if that is not possible, and I need to talk to this person immediately, I will call them, but those are the two ways that I would talk to someone. There have been times where I have put together maybe an email about specific perspectives, just for suggestions and coaching, but not necessarily to process what is going on.

Purpose Driven Technology Choices

When determining the technology to use to communicate with employees, leaders in the study described how they identified the purpose of the communication and then selected the technology based on the purpose. If the purpose of a communication was to distribute information out to employees without dialogue, leaders selected a technology that supported one-way, asynchronous communication such as email. If the purpose of a communication was to solicit input, influence, or engage in dialogue real-time, leaders selected a technology that supported synchronous communication such as video or instant messaging. Furthermore, if the purpose of a communication was to ensure documentation of a message, leaders selected technology that provided a written account of the communication such as email or instant messaging.

Leader 1:

> If you are sharing information and it is one-way, like let me share a bunch of information with you, I think using video with voice. Having the audience see you is crucial when sharing lots of information because they can see and feel your passion coming through. It makes it more engaging if you influence, share, or communicate the change. So I think it is crucial to have a video going during that time. I think that is super important. If you send information out and document things, I think that comes across via email. We are sharing much information on Microsoft Teams. If there is a Teams channel and an entire group, I will try to use that to communicate and send information and have people sign up and be part of the channel. If I am trying to communicate something, it needs to get out, and I need to make sure that it gets to the right people; I will use email. And then, if I need an instant answer or a timelier response like within the day or I am expecting to sort of hear back from somebody, or it has a sensitivity, I will use the instant message. I very seldom like to use a cellphone in a work setting. I think you almost must have an agreement, like if it is their personal number. I like to contract with someone if I am going to use their cell. Sometimes, they appreciate it because I can go for a walk and talk or when I am driving home. Synchronous conversations via cell can make it more mobile and more accessible. Sometimes, we just use it personally. Our personal life is sort of bleeding over into our work life. Furthermore, we write little fun things. I am careful with contacting with cellphones because I feel like that is a level of invasion that I feel you need to honor that for people.

Leader 2:

> With video, I can see if they are distracted. Are they focused on this conversation? Or are they distracted doing something else? The other thing that is nice about using Microsoft Teams in the video is if somebody is out, I can ask if anyone minds if we record. And then, whoever was out is privy to that and can watch that meeting to help comprehend any information pertinent to them. They have the whole meeting recorded. That is something we did not have. Before, we could capture notes, but it is different from capturing the entire conversation in context.

Leader 6:

> I think it comes down to documentation. Sometimes you need to have documentation. If you think something is going to come back later in a good or wrong way, then it would lead me to do something as an example by email even though we have instant messaging and persistent chat, that goes away so that I will save a file.

> I would probably lean towards email when there are things that my team and I do where I will have them copy me on a message that's going maybe to someone else in the organization to throw some weight behind what the employee is recommending. For example, I will say, "Bring me into the email so I can help support the recommendation that you are putting forward." I cannot do that if I pick up the phone to call. We are a very hierarchical organization and putting my name in it may help reinforce their message.

Leader 7:

> I like email. Suppose I have a conversation with you on the phone or a video. In that case, I often follow things up in writing to make sure that we are clear because people

communicate differently, and they receive communication differently. So, I will follow up most communications with emails. Email is my primary way because whether I am talking on the phone or video, you usually get an email from me regardless. So, I think email just kind of drives home my points and anything I may have said either on the phone or in the video or maybe drives home the point of something that we have distributed via our internet just as a reminder to take a look.

Things are coming at people every day, all day. So, it is just essential to hit them with various types of communications because everyone does not necessarily receive audio-video communications as well as others.

Leader 9:

If I recall correctly, I want to say 7% of communication is just content. The rest is all of the nonverbals. Thus, you only communicate with 7% of your employees when you communicate via text or email, so you lose so much. How many times have we read something and thought to ourselves? Okay, are they angry with me?

Furthermore, that is the whole reason I am guessing. I did not create or invent them, but I am sure that is why we have emojis so that some of that nonverbal can be added to the communication, just to let people know, okay, what I said, I meant as funny or whatever. Usually, companies do not use emojis, so you just really miss out on the tone and what people are trying to say to you. So that is why phone calls and zoom meetings are, in my opinion, are the best to try to figure out what is going on and what the next steps need to be.

Leader 10:

> If I meet with a team member on Microsoft Teams, I always do camera. If there are five
>
> six-seven people, we stay off camera because one of the things that we found pretty early
>
> is if everybody is on camera, we end up getting some lagging, and it just hurts with the
>
> discussion. So we have adopted a little bit more of a hey, if you are speaking, pop up on
>
> camera; drop off camera if you are not speaking. If a team member says, "Hey, we ran
>
> into this, what is your thought?" or "Hey, I disagree, or someone is not getting along," or
>
> whatever the case. Then, I would lean more toward sending them an IM or an email to set
>
> up some time and talk through that type of discussion. I hate to keep saying situational,
>
> but I think that is just the reality. It is a managerial discretion or call.

Projection of Humanistic Behaviors

To build rapport with employees in a virtual environment, leaders in the study found it vital to allow time and space to connect with employees in a way that projected humanistic behaviors. The ability to demonstrate care and concern for employees beyond the work cultivated an environment that developed and maintained relationships. Leaders applied common practices such as no-agenda meetings, weekly one-on-ones, fun-fact team activities, virtual social events, personal photo sharing, and virtual coffee chats. While the virtual environment did not provide physical connectivity, leaders used on-camera social engagement activities to build rapport.

Leader 1:

> We have done in each team meeting to "get to know you," like the first year we were all
>
> together. We did this at every team meeting. We would have a question or some get to
>
> know you activity, and it was fun. This year, for example, we had everybody join a call.

We said, "Put a picture behind you that means something to you." It was fun to see some of the pictures popping up behind people and their background screens.

And then I do one-on-one listening tours. I call it listening conversations with the employees of my direct reports. I have a one-on-one, deep conversation. I send the questions out ahead of time to get to know them better, ask how they are doing, get feedback on their experience and be part of the team.

We have done fun summer activities where we will do a scavenger hunt or solve riddles together or team building. One of the things I do to build rapport is to share my mindset and belief and sort of what I am experiencing. However furthermore, I think that makes it safe for others to be able to share those same things. So that is one thing that I have been able to do and do quite successfully with building rapport.

You have to build in time to be able to share. It is a little bit of both space and time to go deep and learn, understand, and build those relationships. You have to build genuine, authentic relationships. You have to make time and space for conversations. Sometimes, we pick a particular question and ask everyone to share. They cannot be too high a gradient. We might ask, what is your favorite book? What is your favorite movie? What is your favorite food?

Leader 2:

We have team meetings, and I have one-on-one meetings. The building rapport piece occurs whenever we have a team meeting; we usually start with something random, like a fun fact. For Thanksgiving, it is something like, "Hey, what is your favorite side dishes at Thanksgiving?" Everyone goes around, and then we have extraordinary little things that we do now and again, like kicking off a contest or something like that. For the holidays

last year, I had people go around and take pictures of a couple of different holiday

decorations in their homes. I pull together Kahoot question activities. We make

comments, give high fives, thumbs-ups, and GIFs in Microsoft Teams.

Leader 3:

I think part of it is recognizing people's needs for morning check-ins. I might ask them to

take pictures at home, like the sunrise or something you cooked this week that you

enjoyed making. That has been helpful during covid with the lockdown out here in our

area.

We have regular calls where it is free form. There is no agenda. It is nothing about

work. It is just, how are you doing and what is going on? We have done wine tastings,

pottery painting, and cooking classes together. It has been fun. My team asked if we

could keep doing those things. We did a virtual cookie exchange and made cookies

together during the holidays last year.

I schedule the activities for about 3:00 in the afternoon. It is an excellent

investment of our time, and quite frankly, I do not think it is right to say we will do these

things after hours. I think the social piece is vital to our work. I have been pretty

consistent with that every month. I am noticing that the team needs it. I did not do as

much of that before COVID. Furthermore, I think it has paid off.

Leader 5:

I am fortunate that my team has been working together, but there are projects where you

join with groups that may not have worked together. When a new group of people is

brought together, I always start with introductions and where people are situated in the

group. If we were critical partners, I would set up additional time and try to get to know that person. Again, build that trusted kind of relationship.

We will sometimes use game-based polling or ask questions to get people more engaged in the process. For example, when I have new team members, I spend time getting to know them, asking things like what is important to you? How do you like to be recognized? When is your birthday? Tell me a bit of yourself, personally, those types of things which I still do in a virtual environment.

We do social chats where we share what is going on, like, what is the big trip? What do you have planned? Are you celebrating the holidays? Furthermore, just catching up personally. People seem to enjoy that. That has worked well. It creates a sense of connectivity and belonging, especially for new folks who might be new. If you spend a little time investing in that relationship, it goes a long way.

We heard across the organization that when the leaders scheduled virtual meetings, and it was just casual conversation, join if you want to participate; those went over well. We also did some volunteer things. People volunteered locally, and then we joined a call and shared what we did. For example, how do we support food banks? It does not matter which one or where you are. We would share what we are doing, share ideas and pictures. It was an excellent way of bringing the community together more cohesively.

Leader 6:

We have a grab your cup of coffee and join a call with the leadership team and let us just see each other's faces. There is no hierarchy and no agenda. That has been powerful. In our staff meetings, we use check-in questions. Whoever is facilitating the meeting picks

the check-in question, but it has been a game-changer for building that camaraderie on

our team in this virtual space.

I will give you an example. We discussed favorite foods and decided to do a

virtual activity to have everyone try different foods and vote for their favorites.

Everybody tried it, and it has been such a fun way for us to connect.

It is not just always these fun-loving things, sometimes, it is sad or challenging

things, but it just brings us together as humans. That is the way we have tried to drive the

connection. I found that the connectivity around the human pieces creates relational

bonds.

Leader 7:

There is no water cooler talk anymore. So, you have to have those conversations on the

phone. You know, how was your day? How is everything? If I cannot see your eyes, I

may not know that you may not be feeling well. I believe in being intentional and

reaching out to the other party, employees, peers, and co-workers. It is intentional about

asking them how they are not, just about knowing their workload or how you did that

task. However nevertheless, how are you, particularly in this environment?

Leader 9:

It is a little different because you do not see people every day. We communicate regularly

on assignments and things like that, and then usually there is a tangent where we might

talk about other things. Typically, I try to touch base with them at least once a week.

Leader 10:

One of the things that I quickly realized when we all shifted virtually quite frankly was

that the talk went almost straight to all business. When running around between meeting

rooms, you inevitably never start on time. So, there are always three, four, five, possibly up to 10 minutes of chatting time while the whole group or a couple of one-off conversations happen. And then, once everybody gets in the room, you do whatever you are there to do. We found that when we shifted to the virtual world, once everyone popped in, everybody was going. The problem is that there was no more transition time between meetings where you had to run from building to building. We did many really good things in trying to put out some best practices. One of them was spending time for small talk with your team, that kind of thing.

It has become a bit more targeted like that instead of unscripted. Before, you could grab lunch and talk about nonwork-related things. So, it almost becomes sort of a targeted purposeful discussion instead of some of that informal.

Standard, Ongoing and Authentic

To promote communications in the workplace, leaders recommended using a multifaceted approach that includes standard communications, ongoing communications, and authenticity. Several leaders recommended using charters or standard operating agreements to ensure clarity about how and when to communicate. Leaders often used a standing meeting cadence for employee one-on-ones and team meetings to provide an ongoing forum for communicating. And finally, leaders found it imperative to communicate in a way that was transparent and authentic to promote effective communications in the workplace. Leader 1: "Leaders need to create communication charters with their teams and be clear around how communications will happen, what channels they use, and even the norms around that communication channel."

Leader 2:

> It took six months to a year to help the team understand that they really could communicate with me, and they could trust me. So, I worked a lot on building trust and creating a safe zone for my team, and it did take some time for that to happen.

Leader 3:

> Part of me goes back to having those SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures). Here are the times when we need to be communicating with each other. Here are the times when you need to seek counsel.

> You do not have to set the cycles of one-on-one meetings with your direct reports. I think it is imperative having it come from them. It should be me asking them, what is a good cycle time for you so that we can put that in our calendars. I think it is about being open. I think it is never too busy for their phone call or email or whatever.

Leader 4:

> What has been an asset in promoting communication is showing my direct reports my vulnerability in leadership. I make mistakes, and I allow them to show me what I can make better, whether on my team or within our division.

> I have check-ins with my direct reports, and some of the questions I ask periodically are, what am I doing that I can do better? What can we do better? I ask those two questions frequently, and they are open-ended. I do not get many answers in the first two or three meetings, but I am getting some pretty good feedback by the fourth or the fifth meeting.

Leader 5:

I always talk about there is not just one way, and if you employ one tactic, you will never

be successful. For example, as a leader of a larger organization, we all like to

communicate by email, but then I have my leader meetings. We do quarterly calls where

it is everybody. I have one-on-ones with my direct reports, and I meet with the employees

of my direct reports. So, if we are working to communicate to the organization, we use

email, but then we have groups that we interact with and influence. We have them

communicate, and then we have champions within the business lines, and we utilize

them.

You must think about how you get to the audience in several different ways to

ensure that they see the transparent you and your authentic leadership style. Furthermore,

you cannot just do that one way. It takes a variety of ways and methodologies and more

than once. It is about simplicity and messaging, and how you ensure that it is not once

and done but that you leverage the multiple levers you have access to communicate.

Leader 6:

I have an all-hands meeting with my team. They can ask any question. It can be a

personal question. If I do not feel comfortable answering it, I will say I do not feel

comfortable answering it, but it does not mean people cannot ask. We have channels (MS

Teams) that my entire extended team has access to. There are some things from a

leadership perspective. We have got one that's kind of locked down and just for members

of the leadership team, but we share accomplishments.

We even have one that's a not work channel where people post family pictures

and recipes. It is about being less restrictive and giving people space to be themselves. I

think it is setting expectations, and then you have to follow through on it. So even if there

is something in an all-hands meeting, if we do not get to all the questions that come up,

we will copy the questions and put them into the channel. That way, we continue the

conversation, and people aren't like, well, I asked my question last time, and nobody got

to it.

Leader 7:

I think you must make sure it is a space, and to do so; you have to make sure that it is

okay to say what you need to say and say how you feel about certain things. If we make it

a safe space, I think people are more open to communicating. People are more open to

being themselves. So, you have to let others know you are safe by being yourself and

authentic.

Leader 8:

I do regular check-ins. I have weekly check-ins with my direct reports. I think it is super

important to get those on the calendar, and if you do not need them, you can at least get

on to say, "Hello. How is your family? How are you doing? How are you feeling?" So, I

think regular, regularly scheduled check-ins are super important. You need to get face

time with folks, and you need to learn about them.

Leader 9:

Encouraging communication is checking in to see how things are going, seeing if they

need anything, and confirming or assuring them that I genuinely have an open-door

policy. Then, if anything comes up, they can call me and know I will address it.

Leader 10:

>One of the things that I always like doing is just having a set cadence of meetings to keep the team informed. I always recommend it and try to push for it. It is all levels. I like to have weekly, sometimes bi-weekly one-on-ones with the team - 30 minutes, maybe an hour depending on what we must talk about, that kind of thing. Also, have a structured team meeting once every other week. Then, either monthly or quarterly, I have an entire team meeting, not my portion of the team but my leader. I like that format because it helps people stay connected to what the broader team is doing. It can also help connect the dots. I think it builds a little bit more of a team dynamic.
>
>I have found that because everybody is meeting and because people are multitasking, there is a lot more, I will call it, repeat messaging that needs to occur because there are distractions for one reason or another. Not everybody gets the same message or takes away the same thing. So, I found that there is a need to repeat.

Being Attentive and Actively Listening

Leaders recommended two critical strategies for resolving conflict in a virtual environment, be fully attentive and actively listen. In order to understand the needs and concerns of others, leaders suggested that the parties involved in the conflict need to pay attention to verbal and nonverbal behaviors, eliminating distractions. Leaders suggested that the virtual environment can be prone to distractions and therefore taking the time to be attentive can help individuals focus on the root issues while demonstrating value and respect for the other person. Freeing themselves from distractions oftentimes meant having cameras on during virtual interactions. Additionally, leaders recommended active listening as a means to understanding the core issues, motivations, and concerns in order to resolve conflict in a virtual environment.

Leader 1:

> I think it has to be synchronous. I do not think you can resolve conflict with, "Let me send you an instant message (IM)." I think that causes distrust, disrespect, and misunderstanding. So being synchronous requires courageous bravery. You must be there and make the time and space to have those conversations.

Leader 2:

> You need to ensure that there are no distractions for both the employee and the leader. From a leader's perspective, you must be attentive. You must listen to their concerns and create a safe environment to make sure that they feel safe and comfortable talking with you. For example, I do not particularly appreciate when people are disrespectful looking at their cell phones. It just does not show concern, and so I am very intentional about turning off other technologies or at least making them not visible so that I can be attentive to others in a virtual environment when resolving conflict.

Leader 3:

> I try to be present now and not be distracted. We reached some agreements as a team early on. We all have two screens. We have got a system where if I am moving into a discussion, facilitating through a conflict that people are having, we remind each other that it is essential to make sure I have got your full attention and you have mine. So, I will shut down my other monitor, and I want you to know I am here.
> Furthermore, I am listening, and that has been an incredible piece. I think it is a friendly reminder for my team to just shut everything else out at that moment and get that time. The distractions can be inherent in a virtual environment.

Leader 5:

> I do not think that face-to-face changes if you have a voice and, ideally, visual. It is the same tools and techniques, just paying attention to voice and visuals. The one thing I would say is being able to walk in somebody else's shoes. I think that comes out in understanding their concerns. What is bothering them? What is getting in the way for them? People bring different experiences and perspectives.

> Leader 7: "In the virtual environment, being intentional, paying attention to what people are saying or not saying is essential, and you can probably head off some things before they happen."

Leader 8:

> I would say that in a virtual setting dealing with conflict, you have got to be direct. You cannot let things linger. If you recognize something is going awry, you need to jump on it immediately and have that face-to-face or that over video conversation because nothing gets better over time. It is easier in a virtual environment when you are not walking by people in the hallway to bury your head in the sand and say, "Oh everything is fine." However, it will not get better unless you address it head-on.

Leader 10:

> I think it helps me to be able to see their body language so I can see their interest in the issue. It just kind of helps me understand where their head is. The only other thing that I would say is that I feel leaders sometimes forget the importance of taking time to communicate. There is no substitute for taking time.

Summary

Chapter 4 provided a summary of the themes identified as a result of the interview questions and responses from the 10 leader interviews. I used the participant interview results to explore for-profit business leaders' perceptions of technology and conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. Additionally, I sought to explore for-profit business leaders' perceptions of their leadership styles and the impact on conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. The coding procedure used to identify themes revealed that leaders find that technology can help or hinder conflict resolution, depending on how the technology is used. For leaders that are intentional, they find that technology can complement other leader behaviors such as communication skills and employee engagement techniques. Most leaders in the study self-identified as being collaborative leaders, resulting in leaders with a desire to understand and collaborate with their employees. As a result, the collaborative leadership style sought to understand employee perspective in order to resolve conflict in a virtual environment. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of this study, the implications for businesses and other organizations, as well as recommendations. Chapter 5 summarizes how the purpose of this study was achieved and offers suggestions for further research to expand on the topics of conflict resolution, communications, and technology for leaders.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The rise of technology in communications in the workplace allows leaders to use synchronous, asynchronous, visual, and nonvisual methods that include videoconferencing, email, instant messaging, and other solutions when managing conflict (Shin et al., 2017). In addition, the methods range in their ability to convey emotions, voice, and nonverbal cues, impacting communications (Ko, 2016) and conflict resolution. While the innovations provide flexibility, they also raise concerns about leaders' awareness and sensitivity to conflict resolution effectiveness based on the selected communication media.

This basic qualitative study aimed to explore for-profit business leaders' perceptions of technology and conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. Additionally, the purpose of the study was to explore for-profit business leaders' perceptions of their leadership styles and the impact on conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. Finally, by considering leadership style, the research sought to discover whether leadership style contributed to how leaders use technology to communicate when resolving conflict.

This chapter summarizes the findings, implications, and future research recommendations related to this topic. The research findings align with the literature review and demonstrate connectivity to the media richness theory (MRT). This chapter discusses the following topics: (a) Study Overview, (b) Summary of Findings, (c) Interpretation of Participant Responses, (d) Conclusion, (e) Implications for Change, and (f) Recommendations for Future Research.

Study Overview

This study was conducted using a basic qualitative study research approach to interpret the results of virtual one-on interviews with 10 leaders. The research was designed to provide

perspectives on leader experiences with technology and conflict resolution to assist organizations in capability building in a globally technologically advancing world.

Study Procedures

The data for this study were collected using a semistructured interview protocol with 10 for-profit business leaders who had other leaders reporting to them and had at least 5 years of experience managing employees. They were also in organizations of 50 or more employees and had at least 6 months managing employees in a virtual environment during COVID. Leaders were also members of the LinkedIn group Learning, Education, Training, and Professionals.

The interview protocol was emailed to the 10 participants prior to the interview. I conducted one-on-one virtual interviews using a secure, recorded conference call phone line with each study participant. The freeconference.com conference call service was used for the recording and transcription. Leaders responded to nine interview questions to share their experiences with technology and conflict resolution. I took notes during the interviews and asked clarifying questions as needed. The narrative data were transcribed into textual data for coding purposes. I reviewed each transcription for validity and emailed a copy to each participant for member-checking to ensure accuracy in the interpretation. I used values coding to look for key themes within each interview. After performing the initial coding on each interview transcription, I compiled the responses by question to search for trends in themes.

Participants

The participants in the study were for-profit business leaders who have other leaders reporting to them, have at least 5 years of experience managing employees, are in organizations of 50 or more employees, and had at least 6 months managing employees in a virtual

environment during COVID. Leaders were also members of the LinkedIn group Learning, Education, Training, and Professionals.

Research Questions and Recurring Themes

The following three research questions guided the research. Following each question are selected responses and the recurring themes that emerged from the participant interviews and the coding process.

RQ1: How do for-profit business leaders select communication channels when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual environment? Themes: (a) body language and (b) purpose-driven technology choices.

RQ2: What are for-profit business leaders' perceptions of the influence of leadership style on communication channel selection when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual environment? Themes: (a) collaborative leadership style, (b) other-focused, and (c) safe and engaging environment.

RQ3: What are for-profit business leaders' perceptions of the impact of technology when communicating with employees to resolve conflict? Themes: (a) potential to enhance or deteriorate; (b) projection of humanistic behaviors; (c) standing, ongoing, and authentic; and (d) being attentive, actively listening.

Summary of Findings

Media Richness Theory

The interviews conducted with the 10 participants in this research study resulted in several recurring themes. First, a connection between the media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; West & Turner, 2018) and the participant responses revealed an underlying theme of leaders' preference to use media-rich technology solutions with higher levels of social cues

during times of conflict in a virtual environment. Consistent with the media richness theory, the interview participants believed that more complex issues such as conflict require richer mediums (Anders et al., 2020; West & Turner, 2018), such as face-to-face interactions. In the virtual environment, face-to-face interactions were simulated with video-conferencing solutions that allowed leaders to observe body language, including facial expressions and tone of voice, for added communication inputs.

Interpretation of Participant Responses

For-profit business leaders who are members of the LinkedIn group Learning, Education, Training, and Professionals shared their perceptions of technology and conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. Additionally, they shared their perceptions of their leadership styles and the impact on conflict resolution in the virtual workplace. The participant interviews revealed nine recurring themes that addressed the three research questions. The recurring themes discussed in this section include: (a) body language; (b) purpose-driven technology choices; (c) collaborative leadership style; (d) other-focused; (e) safe and engaging environment; (f) potential to enhance or deteriorate; (g) projection of humanistic behaviors; (h) standing, ongoing, and authentic; and (i) being attentive, actively listening.

Body Language

Ko (2016) described social presence as the ability of a communication medium to convey nonverbal cues and body languages such as tone of voice and facial expressions. Ko (2016) further suggested that communication is enhanced with greater levels of social presence. When resolving conflict in a virtual environment, participants described a need to take in as many social cues as possible. As a result, participants preferred on-camera technology solutions that enabled them to see and hear participants during a conflict resolution discussion. One leader

indicated that their preference is always to see the person they are talking to see their reactions and behaviors. Another leader shared that body language helps them assess the impact of the communication during the conflict, indicating that they can visually see if the other person looks deflated or excited and engaged. While audio-only communications was an option used by leaders, most indicated that it was less favorable as it limited the amount of information that could be obtained about the person's response.

Leaders affirmed that email was not a preferred communication medium to resolve conflict as it lacked real-time, two-way interaction and social cues. This was articulated by a leader who said, "I feel like so much is lost in emails. People read between the lines or misread. I think you need to hear a voice. First and foremost, I want a face. Furthermore, you must hear their voice." Riordan and Trichtinger (2017) found a more significant disparity in interpretations of emails between the senders and receivers, substantiating the concerns that the leaders in the research study had about its ineffectiveness for conflict resolution. In making communication media selection choices when resolving conflict, a key determinant for leaders is the extent of body language needed to communicate effectively.

Purpose Driven Technology Choices

Newman et al. (2020) found that leader communication effectiveness in a virtual environment is based on five key areas: communication frequency, predictability, responsiveness, clarity, and mode of communication. Given the importance of communication mode in leader communication effectiveness, leaders in this study were asked why they chose certain forms of technology to communicate with employees. Leaders explained that the technology selection was based on the purpose or need for the communication. Factors such as the need to interact in real-time (synchronously) were compared to the need to interact one-way

or asynchronously. Leaders assessed the messaging need such as influencing, soliciting input, providing documentation, documenting results, problem-solving, or aligning on conflict areas.

The most direct method leaders selected for one-way communication that required documentation was email. A common statement shared by participants was reflected by one participant who indicated that email would be used to send information if a documentation trail was needed. In some cases, the documentation trail was used to leverage support from different stakeholders. In other cases, it was used for backup if future questions arose about a topic. Persistent chats and instant messaging techniques were also used when documentation threads were needed. The chats also provided the opportunity for rapid, real-time responses. One participant shared, "If I need an instant answer or a timelier response like within the day, or I am expecting to hear back from somebody, or it has a sensitivity, I will use the instant message." Leaders were more apt to use phone or video conferencing technology if the message was intended to influence, drive change, and manage sensitive conversations. As one leader explained, "Phone calls and Zoom meetings are, in my opinion, the best to try to figure out what is going on and what the next steps need to be."

Collaborative Leadership Style

Kotter (2012) described leadership as a set of processes used by individuals to establish direction, align people, and motivate and inspire people. Understanding how leadership is exhibited based on leadership styles provides insights into how leaders interact with employees when there is a conflict or perceived differences in interests and goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Northouse (2013) offered an overview of several leadership models, styles, and approaches. While the trait approach to leadership describes leadership relative to the leader's personality, characteristics, or traits, the process approach to leadership emphasizes the leader's interaction

with the followers. In the skills model approach to leadership, Mumford et al. (2000) describe social judgment competency as understanding and navigating the social setting when leading others. This approach includes adapting behaviors to others through communication and perspective-taking (Mumford et al., 2000). Lawrence (2017) described collaborative leadership as "shared vision and values, interdependence and shared responsibility, mutual respect, empathy and willingness to be vulnerable, ambiguity, effective communication, and synergy" (p. 91). The participants in this research study often used the language of collaborative leadership when describing their leadership styles with a heightened focus on empathy, communication, and synergy, which also aligns with the social judgment competency. As leaders apply their social judgment competency, they display a collaborative leadership style that can be both directive and coaching.

To be inclusive, one participant shared, "I like to get the group involved more with decisions, especially decisions that might impact their day-to-day functions, processes, and work lives." This engaging approach supports the concept of collaborative leadership. Another leader indicated that they enlist the strengths of everyone on the team, requesting their opinion, input, and feedback to understand the impact at an individual and group level. The process of soliciting input from the team highlights the leader's preference to collaborate instead of serving as the authority for all topics and decisions. Involving the team and encouraging them to participate in problem-solving actively was a vital attribute of the collaborative leadership style expressed by the participants. One participant commented, "I ask questions because I want them to develop solutions independently."

Other-Focused

Participants perceived high correlations between their collaborative leadership style and their approach to managing conflict. According to Chrislip (2002), collaborative leaders use a collaborative problem-solving and decision-making approach that engages their teams in defining potential outcomes instead of guiding the team to the leader's personal decision. Instead, collaborative leaders facilitate the process for the team, enabling the team to create solutions, resulting in a shared vision and goals. In order to achieve this collaborative approach, leaders are focused on their team members' needs, interests, and opinions. According to participants, this other-focused mindset stemming from their collaborative leadership style influences their methods for managing conflict.

During times of conflict, the participants indicated a priority on understanding the perspectives of all stakeholders involved. As one leader described it, they try first to understand the other person's agenda, desires, and their ideal outcome. Another leader stated, "You must understand the motivations of each employee and what is important to them." The participants connected their collaborative leadership style to a desire to hear their employees' voices and diverse perspectives during the conflict. By focusing on the employees' perspective, leaders expressed a keener ability to navigate the conflict. As one leader summarized, "I feel like it is just easier to talk it through by saying talk to me about your perspective, and then I will talk to you about my perspective and then come to a solution that works for both."

Safe and Engaging Environment

In the virtual workplace, the collaborative leadership style of participants led them to use strategies to foster a safe and engaging environment to help them manage conflict. However, leaders shared similarities in how they created a safe and engaging environment in person

compared to virtually and many shared adaptions they made in the virtual setting. For example, one leader shared that they have to allow time for employees to share comfortably during virtual conversations. By allowing time for employees to share professionally and personally, the participant indicated that employees are more apt to share concerns or areas of conflict. In addition, the participant stated that the amount of time needed to create a trusted environment was longer virtually than in person, and they needed to allow time for processing thoughts and reactions.

Consistent with Lawrence (2017), who defined mutual respect as a component of collaborative leadership, the participants asserted the importance of an open environment encouraging employees to share their opinions, even if they do not align with the leader. For example, one participant shared, "I encourage hearing different opinions. I might not agree with them, and everybody on the team might not agree with else's opinions, but I encourage sharing those opinions." This mutually respectful, safe environment enables leaders to navigate conflict to cultivate employee satisfaction, organizational performance, and productivity, as supported by McKibben (2017) and Khan et al. (2016).

Creating a safe and engaging environment was cultivated by inviting employees' voices into conversations and building trusting relationships. As one leader explained, having trust in place makes difficult conversations much more manageable and enables you to stop and listen to each other more effectively. This viewpoint is supported by the research of McKibben (2017), who found that poorly managed conflict can lead to employee turnover, stress, distrust, and reduced job satisfaction. Conversely, Abolo and Oguntoye (2016) found that leaders who manage conflict well can use it to energize teams and encourage new ideas and ways of thinking. One leader shared an example of how to invite their teams to contribute new ideas when they are

thinking about making a change. The leader seeks input that may be different from their own to broaden their perspective on a change. By creating an engaging virtual environment built on trust and safety, leaders can lean into their collaborative leadership style to manage conflict.

Potential to Enhance or Deteriorate

Participants described the polarizing impact of technology on leader and employee communications. Although technology has the potential to enhance communications by increasing the frequency, access, and communication method options as described by the leaders, it can also deteriorate communications. One leader described the polarizing impact by stating, "The beauty of technology is having many different avenues of communicating in many ways. That is also the downside."

The myriad of technology-based communication tools can confuse leaders and employees by making it challenging to discern which tool to use. As a result, some leaders in the study collaborated with their teams to establish operating agreements to clarify which tools to use for various communication needs. After developing the operating agreements, the leaders cited enhancements to leader and employee communications. According to one leader, "All the technology sets have pros and cons…. And knowing which one to use and when is essential."

Technology can deteriorate communications between leaders and employees if there is no established relationship, making communications more complex as described by one leader. Conversely, significant benefits are identified by leaders. The ability to use collaborative technology tools enables leaders to hear the voices of all employees and observe employee interactions to determine where support may be needed. In our fast-paced and global workplace, technology allows leaders to connect quickly with employees, expediting communications.

The polarizing experience of leaders concerning technology and communication with employees is consistent with the mixed results of research studies. Thiemann et al. (2019) found that technology-based, real-time communication between leaders and employees enhanced communications and negotiations. Turnage and Goodboy (2016) determined that employees were more comfortable using technology-based communications to convey dissenting views to leaders, depending on the relationship with the leader. These positive results contrast with research suggesting that technology may be less effective in communications. Riordan and Trichtinger (2017) found that senders of emails were overly confident in their readers' ability to interpret their emails accurately compared to the actual interpretations. Shin et al. (2017) found that increased social cues could make it more challenging for conflicting views to be shared.

This research study sheds light on why there are mixed results regarding the impact of technology on leader and employee communications. Several factors influence the impact of technology, such as the leader and employee relationship, the communication tool selected, and how the leader uses the tool. As a result, technology can enhance or deteriorate leader and employee communications.

Projection of Humanistic Behaviors

For leaders to build rapport with employees in a virtual environment, participants in the study applied practices that enabled them to project humanistic behaviors commonly associated with in-person interactions. The ability to cultivate an environment that focused on employees' professional and personal lives fostered trust and openness. As a result, employees felt a sense of safety in raising concerns. In a Gallup (2015) research study that included over 2.5 million manager-led teams in 195 countries, researchers noted that

> Employees are people first, and they have an intrinsic need for bonding that does not
>
> automatically turn itself off between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. The best
>
> managers can understand and relate to their team members' inherent human motivations.
>
> (p. 20)

The Gallup (2015) research study found that employees want to be able to talk with their

managers about nonwork-related topics and comfortably approach their managers; however, the

percentage of employees who strongly felt they could do that was low, 27-37%. The leaders in

this study maintained a consistent view with the Gallup research, validating the importance of

talking with employees about nonwork-related topics and being approachable.

To project humanistic behaviors in virtual environments, leaders found that they needed

to create time and space for conversations. They also needed to be intentional with strategies to

prompt conversations. For example, one leader explained that the water cooler talk is gone, so

they have to allocate time in meetings for casual conversation. "It is about asking them how they

are, not just about knowing their workload or how they did a task." Another leader shared that

the face-to-face transition time between meetings allowed for personal connections. In the virtual

environment, they moved swiftly into the meeting content and realized the importance of

allowing space and time for the connection time.

Leaders shared many techniques to build rapport in team meetings, such as sharing

personal photos and backgrounds and asking team members to share favorite movies, food, or

books. In some cases, teams coordinated events such as virtual pottery classes and virtual

cooking classes. In other cases, leaders coordinated no-agenda virtual coffee chats. In each

scenario, leaders found that building rapport required heightened attention to the humanistic

behaviors. By establishing rapport in the virtual workplace, leaders create an environment where

conflict can be used to contribute to organizational performance, productivity, and employee job satisfaction (Khan et al., 2016; McKibben, 2017).

Standard, Ongoing, and Authentic

Promoting communications in the workplace is essential to creating an environment where conflict can be used to affect the organization positively. Participants in the research study shared recommendations for promoting communication in the workplace with three critical success factors: (1) standard agreements regarding which communication tools and methods should be used to deliver various types of messages, (2) ongoing communications to ensure visibility with different stakeholder groups, and (3) authenticity to demonstrate transparency and trust.

Creating standard operating agreements for communications evolved to address the influx of virtual communication tools used by organizations during COVID-19. Articles such as the one published by Colorado State University (2022) offered recommendations regarding the development of agreements. The recommendations for standard operating agreements were consistent with the participants' experiences who identified the need in their organizations. There were parallels between the participant responses and the Center for Creative Leadership (2022) article regarding why communication is vital to the role of a leader. The Center for Creative Leadership (2022) cited the importance of communicating relentlessly and using multiple communication channels, consistent with the participants' views on communicating ongoing. The Center for Creative Leadership (2022) also highlighted the importance of leader authenticity, suggesting that employees will struggle to follow leaders who do not appear transparent and authentic.

Participants found that standard operating agreements helped create clarity for their teams regarding communication norms. One leader said, "Leaders need to create communication charters with their teams and be clear around how communications will happen, what channels they use, and even the norms around that communication channel." Another leader shared that the standard operating agreements help their employees understand when to escalate issues and seek counsel. At a time when leaders and employees have access to many communication options, clarifying which options to use when helps reduce confusion.

The leaders consistently recommended ongoing communications as standard practice in promoting communications in the workplace. In addition to formal and informal one-on-ones with their direct reports, leaders recommended weekly team meetings and more extensive organizational calls to celebrate accomplishments and align on continuing goals. One leader shared that they have weekly check-ins with their direct reports to ensure they are connected personally to their team to build and maintain relationships.

Authenticity in communications was critical to building and maintaining trust. A participant explained that "You must think about how you get to the audience in several different ways to ensure that they see the transparent you and your authentic leadership style." Leading employees and creating an environment where they can share openly requires authenticity. As one leader stated, "If we make it a safe space, I think people are more open to communicating. People are more open to being themselves. So, you have to let others know you are safe by being yourself and by being authentic."

Being Attentive, Actively Listening

Smiley (2022) suggested that "Effective leaders know how to bring conflict situations out into the open so that all parties involved can begin to work towards a resolution that will benefit

everyone." When the participants in the study were asked about the foundational skills needed to resolve conflict in a virtual environment, two critical skills surfaced in the responses: (1) be fully attentive and (2) actively listen. Guttman (2004) outlined eight leadership skills for resolving conflict: (1) be candid by openly surfacing the conflict, (2) be receptive by inviting different perspectives, (3) depersonalize the issue by keeping it in the context of a business issue, (4) be clear about how the decision will be made about the resolution, (5) do not allow individuals to triangulate by taking sides against another person, (6) learn to listen, paying attention to the messaging, (7) place ownership where it is appropriate and accept accountability where needed, and (8) acknowledge successful conflict management. Although Guttman's research was not focused on leader conflict resolution skills in the virtual workspace, it offered insights into the skills needed to resolve conflict.

Schulze et al. (2017) found that leaders' capabilities to communicate effectively in person did not translate to effectiveness in the virtual environment. When comparing the core skills that Guttman (2004) defined as effective leader conflict resolution skills to the skills identified by participants in the study, active listening was a common component. Given the potential for distractions in the virtual environment, being fully attentive was an essential skill defined by the participants who were not referenced in Guttman's list of skills. Since distractions in the virtual environment present a great concern for leaders, according to participants in the study, it is understandable why this would surface as an essential skill when managing conflict in the virtual environment.

A leader in the study commented on the importance of being fully attentive and actively listening by sharing,

You need to ensure no distractions for both the employee and the leader. From a leader's

perspective, you must be attentive. You must listen to their concerns and create a safe

environment to make sure that they feel safe and comfortable talking with you.

This sentiment was shared by the leaders in the study and demonstrated the significance of

removing distractions when virtual and actively listening. Some leaders shared how their ability

to be fully present has evolved as they continued to work in the virtual environment. One leader

shared that they now have a standard practice of turning off their second monitor when

discussing with their employees to eliminate distractions. They model the behavior for their

teams, and as the leader stated,

I try to be present now and not be distracted. Furthermore, I am listening, and that has

been an incredible piece. I think it is a friendly reminder for my team to just shut

everything else out at that moment and get that time. The distractions can be inherent in a

virtual environment.

The participants' preferences to have cameras on when resolving conflict with employees

affirmed their need to have synchronous communications that enabled them to focus attentively

and listen actively, closely mirroring in-person interactions.

Conclusion

The participants in this research study shared similar perceptions of technology and

conflict resolution in the workplace. Leaders preferred on-camera communication tools when

managing conflict with employees to provide verbal and nonverbal input into the interaction. The

collaborative leadership style of the leaders underscored their desire to actively engage their

employees in decision-making and problem-solving. Consequently, the leaders led with a focus

on understanding the perspectives of their employees. They sought to leverage technology to

complement their leadership style by using synchronous tools during a conflict that allowed for two-way, real-time dialogue.

As leaders experienced increases in the available technology options to communicate with employees, deciding which technology to use became a critical step in leader communication effectiveness. When resolving conflict, leaders select the technology by assessing the purpose of the communication and the need to interpret body language. For example, email would be included as a communication tool if a documentation trail were needed, though it was typically not used in isolation to resolve conflict. Participants found on-camera technology solutions to be the most effective in providing the verbal and nonverbal feedback needed to connect to and understand their employees.

The leaders explained that their collaborative leadership style influenced their approach to conflict resolution by using an approach that engaged employees, operated with mutual respect, and shared responsibility in problem-solving. The leaders in the study were other-focused, expressing a high need to understand the perspectives of their employees as an initial step in resolving conflict. The leaders sought to coach their employees by resolving conflict instead of solving the conflict for the employees. Creating an open environment where employees felt comfortable asserting dissenting views was a common characteristic of the collaborative leadership style held by leaders. As a result, the leaders valued and promoted a safe and engaging environment.

The leaders' perspectives on the impact of technology on communications when resolving conflict revealed a tension in how the technology is used. Whether leaders are using technology for ongoing communications or as a tool when resolving conflict, it was evident that the more significant concern was not about the actual technology but how the leader chose to use the

technology. As a result, leaders saw positives and negatives to technology and its impact on the leader and employee communication. According to the leaders, technology can enhance communications with employees when it is used as an ongoing means of interacting using a standard set of agreements. However, when greater emphasis is placed on the technology instead of the person, it can deteriorate communications. On the other hand, technology can be a powerful tool to engage employees when leaders use it to demonstrate their authenticity and concern for the individual by being attentive and listening to the needs of their employees.

Whether resolving conflict or managing daily interactions, leaders have the opportunity to leverage many tools, including technology. However, a leader's ability to leverage tools effectively is based on intentional choices when interacting with employees. In addition, since conflict occurs naturally as a unique expression of the differences in humans, leaders must consider how they will use available tools to facilitate the process best.

Implications for Change

As technology continues to evolve and leaders have access to different tools to communicate with employees, leaders must be intentional about leveraging tools to support their communication strategies. By making intentional choices, leaders can embrace new technology in a way that encourages and fosters communications with employees. When resolving conflict, technology-based communication tools can enhance leader and employee communications or deteriorate communications when not used effectively. I recommend the following implications for change based on the findings in the research study: (a) be other-focused, (b) encourage and welcome diverse perspectives, and (c) establish team communication agreements.

The leaders in this research study presented with a collaborative and coaching leadership style that was other-focused. While there are various leadership styles, focusing on the employee

is a behavioral choice that can enhance communications, especially during times of conflict. In addition, soliciting feedback using formal and informal methods such as culture surveys can be used as a technique to help organizations understand the experiences and needs of their employees.

For employees to feel comfortable sharing diverse perspectives, leaders have to cultivate an environment where diverse perspectives are welcomed and encouraged. The response leaders have to diverse perspectives often creates a culture that invites or discourages different opinions. I recommend leader and team coaching and training on using conflict to drive change and improve organizational performance positively.

Finally, I recommend team communication agreements. Whether formally or informally, the leaders in the study established norms within their teams on which communication channels would be used for various communication needs. During times of conflict, for example, leaders established the norm of on-camera communications. As leaders explore the continually expanding landscape of technology-based communication tools, leaders need to define the purpose of the message and align the tool to meet the message's needs best. Organizations can help leaders by creating templates for team communication agreements and establishing forums for leaders to share communication best practices across technology platforms.

Recommendations for Future Research

The research was limited to leaders in for-profit businesses. To further understand the implications of technology and leader experiences with conflict resolution, the study could be replicated in the academic setting focusing on leaders in higher education. The findings would provide insights into whether leaders in higher education have similar or different experiences from leaders in for-profit businesses. This research focused on leaders' experiences; however,

future studies could be performed to obtain the employee perspective of their leader's conflict resolution approaches in a virtual environment. The participants in the study had an average of 11 or more years of management experience. The study could be repeated with leaders with less management experience to obtain a younger age group, providing the opportunity to consider age as a variable in the research. Furthermore, this study focused on leader experiences in managing employees in a virtual workspace. The opportunity exists to study leader experiences in managing teams where some employees are virtual and some work in-person with the leader. This would provide insights into differences in leader experiences with employees working in two different settings. Finally, a qualitative study was conducted using semistructured interviews. The study could be redesigned using a quantitative methodology by collecting data using an online survey. As technology expands, significant opportunities exist to understand the experiences of leaders and employees in the workplace.

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    Education.

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

November 8, 2021

Sherry Hamilton Latten
Department of Education
Abilene Christian University

Dear Sherry,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled
"For-Profit Business Leaders' Perceptions on Technology and
Conflict Resolution in the Workplace",

(IRB# 21-150   )is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Appendix B: Participant Request to Participate in Research Study

Dear (Insert Name),

I am excited to share an opportunity for you to join me in exploring the impact of technology when communicating with employees to resolve conflict. In our fast paced, virtual world, ensuring we understand the implications of technology on key leadership skills is essential. Conflict resolution is a critical skill that I've been researching as a part of my doctoral program and I would like to personally invite you to be a part of my dissertation research. The time commitment is minimal but the impact on my research is invaluable.

Research Description
I am conducting one-on-one interviews with a few select leaders to understand their experience with conflict resolution using technology such as email, instant-messaging, texting, and videoconferencing. With the events surrounding COVID-19, many leaders shifted from managing teams in-person to managing them in an online environment. I would like to gain insights into the leader experience with conflict resolution in an on-line environment given the shifts that are occurring in the virtual workplace.

My Ask
I would like to invite you to be a part of my research. If you agree to participate in the research study, there are two short steps:

- Complete a short demographics data survey to confirm selection criteria.
- Meet with me via a conference call for a 1-hour one-on-one interview. The session will be recorded to enable me to transcribe the recording; however, your name and identifying information will be kept anonymous in my dissertation to ensure confidentiality. You will receive a copy of the transcription for review as well.

Timeline
I would like to schedule the interview to occur in the next four weeks (insert date) to ensure all research is conducted within the same time period.

Confirmation Needed
Please confirm your interest and voluntary agreement to participate in the research study by signing and emailing back a copy of the attached consent form. Once your consent form is received, I will email you a link to complete the demographic survey along with the interview questions and available dates for the interview.

I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Warmly,
Sherry H. Latten

Appendix C: Demographic Survey Questions

1. What is your job title?

2. Please provide a brief description of your professional leadership/management training.

3. How many years have you managed employees?

4. Do you have employees who report directly to you that also manage other people?

5. How long have you managed employees in a virtual environment during the COVID pandemic (March, 2020 - current)?

6. Which of the following describes your company? (For-Profit Business, Non-Profit Business, Other)

7. What is the approximate size of your company?

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

1. Discuss why you prefer certain forms of technology when communicating with employees?

2. Describe your leadership style?

3. Discuss how your leadership style influences your approach to managing conflict?

4. Discuss how your leadership style influences how you manage conflict in a virtual environment?

5. Discuss the communication channel you select when resolving conflict with employees in a virtual environment?

6. What impact do you think technology has on leader and employee communications?

7. Discuss how you build rapport with your employees in a virtual environment?

8. What strategies do you recommend to promote communication in the workplace?

9. What strategies do you recommend for resolving conflict in a virtual environment?