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The Glass Jaw. The Presence of Incivility, Conflict, and Bullying in Disempowering Workplaces: A Study of Middle-Level Managers in HEIs

Maria Esther Caratini Prado
mec18a@acu.edu

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Nannette W. Glenn, Ph.D.

Dr. Nannette Glenn, Dean of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies

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Dissertation Committee:

Katherine Yeager

Dr. Katherine Yeager, Chair

Ana M. Gomez de Torres

Dr. Ana Maria Gomez de Torres

Colleen P.Ramos. Ph.D.

Dr. Colleen Ramos

Abilene Christian University

School of Educational Leadership

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by

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Dedication

I dedicate this manuscript to my father, Felix Caratini DeJesus. From heaven you watched over me every day, and I felt your spirit. Every lesson you ever taught me made it into this doctorate. You loved boxing and often shared that protecting ourselves came in many forms, thus the short phrase: The Glass Jaw. Bless you, forever.

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Last, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Galatians 6:9.

Abstract

Middle-level managers at HEIs experience stress-related conflicts that include incivility and bullying. There is a gap in the literature regarding middle-level managers' contributions to improving interpersonal relationships in the workplace and the type of conflict-management training most suited to middle-level managers in HEIs when incivility, conflict, and bullying are present. This qualitative design study sought to understand conflict management from the perspective of HEI middle-level managers within the manager-to-subordinate relationship. The study examined the lived experiences of 10 HEI middle-level managers with coded data revealing four overall themes: structural challenges, sources of conflict, conflict training, and managing conflict. The results of this study showed that middle-level managers did not utilize knowledge obtained in conflict-management training, instead preferring to create their conflict-management tactics and strategies. The study's results may help increase knowledge of conflict management for middle-level managers in HEIs and a greater understanding of the tools needed to work through incivility and bullying.

Keywords: bullying, conflict, conflict management, incivility, higher education, middle-level manager

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Conflict includes hostile exchanges impacting civil and working relationships with others (Angonga & Florah, 2019; Branson et al., 2016; Runde & Flanagan, 2013). In the workplace, conflict occurs daily as a natural part of human interaction and the natural flow of interdependent relationships (Folger et al., 2016; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). These relationships manifest conflict through tension, stress, and incivility (Van Gramberg et al., 2020; World Economic Forum, 2017). The research for this dissertation examined the basic tenets of conflict management and the interdependent interactions, incompatibility, and conflict management in the workplace, specifically within higher education institutions (HEIs) and the manager-to-subordinate relationship.

At the middle level of supervision, training in conflict management provides stability and productivity in the workplace (Branson et al., 2016). Managing incivility in the workplace requires managers to work through conflicts and emerge with resolutions. Since the managerial task may include individual and group conflict resolution (Runde & Flanagan, 2013), this dissertation research focused on individual conflict resolution practices used by HEI middle-level managers during manager-to-subordinate or subordinate-to-subordinate conflict resolution. Group conflict practice is similar to middle-level manager-to-subordinate conflict management yet encompasses multiple participants. According to Maidaniuc-Chirila (2019), Nel and Coetzee (2020), and Northouse (2018), middle-level managers who cannot solve one-on-one interpersonal conflicts with subordinates are at a disadvantage as compared to middle-level managers who work through interpersonal conflicts within groups.

To correct workplace conflict, managers worldwide spend $359 billion per year in paid work hours and additional costs on various workplace issues, such as civil disputes, hiring and

rehiring talent, preventing the exodus of employees, and retraining currently employed team members (World Economic Forum, 2017). As a result, the absence of conflict management resolution in the workplace impacts expenditures for colleges and HEIs.

In the corporate arena, conflict management training has been a part of the human resources professional development framework curriculum since the inception of human capital theory in the early 60s (Senge, 2006; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). In the United States and at the higher education level, limited conflict management training is primarily introduced to HEIs through federal government programs for teacher education training or federal mandates designed to improve the overall well-being of employees and students (Crete, 2018; Kruger et al., 2018). Personality issues, overwhelming stress, and excessive workloads negatively impact managers' and employees' interactions, making it imperative to establish conflict training to normalize workplace relationships (World Economic Forum, 2017). Thus, middle-level managers should receive training to manage conflict and ensure workplace stability in colleges and universities.

College and university middle-level managers work with workplace conflict and incivility daily as part of their managerial responsibilities (Gonzales, 2019). Leadership philosophies, core beliefs, and performance measurements influence conflict management tendencies, which profoundly affect accreditation, internal infrastructure, and employee relations (Gonzales, 2019). As middle-level managers' decisions disperse through the organizational structure, there is a dependency on the manager's ability to work through manager-to-subordinate conflicts (Estes & Wang, 2008; Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2019). Therefore, managers with minimal conflict management training may make decisions that can negatively impact work, increasing employee resignations (Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2019; Nel & Coetzee, 2020).

Bullying has a long-lasting, negative emotional and psychological effect and disbands employee teams diminishing optimal work performance (Bradley et al., 2015). For employees, incivility may escalate; consequently, managers bear the burden of working through harsher conflict issues, such as bullying and civil litigation, which raise the cost of legal intervention in the workplace (Van Gramberg et al., 2020). An exodus of employees implies a need for constant rehiring and retraining to fill vacant positions; practical conflict management training decreases the impact of incivility on turnover in the workplace (Nel & Coetzee, 2020). Bartlett and Bartlett (2011) state that intimidation, unjust treatment, inequities, and incivility impact employees and productivity negatively while unintentionally segregating employees exacerbated by these issues. As conflict management issues go unresolved, HEIs must invest in costly civil litigation to bring about resolution (World Economic Forum, 2017).

Higher Education Managerial Positions

Administrative leaders within colleges and HEIs are a part of a hierarchy of institutional academic and nonacademic positions (Thornton et al., 2018). These managers may come from the private and business sector. Positions at these levels include the institution's president, vice-presidents, and executive administrators, sometimes known as the C-suite executive leadership. Individuals hold these positions with mature leadership skills acquired through exemplary education and extensive on-the-job training (Arvaja, 2018).

The middle-management level of supervision is an impactful level within HEIs. At the middle-management level, the positions are academic deans and nonacademic department chairs, who provide stability for colleges and universities' infrastructure (Gonzales, 2019). In these positions, deans and department chairs may attend leadership institutes for organizational development, which permits their promotions through the ranks of academia (Angonga & Florah,

2019). Middle-level managers acquire management skills that permit them to work through the challenges of middle management and be the gatekeepers of good human relations among employees (Seale & Cross, 2018).

Conflict Resolution in Middle Management

Middle-level managers within colleges and HEIs must deal with conflict management, especially at the dean and department chair level, where disparities between faculty and administrators exacerbate differences in opinion (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Shabbir et al., 2014). Also, middle-level managers react to daily decision making regarding problematic manager-to-subordinate workplace relationships that affect performance (Arvaja, 2018; Petrova et al., 2020). These behaviors are a part of the larger context of incivility in the workplace and are at the core of conflict management, impacting effectiveness and performance negatively (Holzweiss & Walker, 2018).

Managers must confront arguments, bullying, incivility, and crises with conflict management skills that diminish challenging encounters, whether the outcome is positive or negative (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Bradley et al., 2015). Thus, a formidable understanding of applying the skills required to manage manager-to-subordinate behavioral problems is desirable to work through incivility in the workplace. A middle-level manager's background should include conflict resolution training and management skills in conflict centered on content and training (Petrova et al., 2020). Through training, middle-level managers can acquire the skills needed to work through difficult situations (Angonga & Florah, 2019; Estes & Wang, 2008)

Statement of the Problem

Effective managerial leadership includes conflict management training applicable to workplace issues that stem from tension and disputes (Holzweiss & Walker, 2018). Seale and

Cross (2018) postulated that C-suite leaders need to blend their experiential training with interpersonal relationships training because issues with administrators, faculty, and staff are a reality as part of the position. The absence of conflict management training and the ability to resolve workplace issues leads to increased tension within middle-level management (Seale & Cross, 2018). Without proper conflict management training, college and HEI middle-level managers lack the training to deescalate tension and conflicts (Fortunato et al., 2018; Martinez, 2019). Arvaja et al. (2018) acknowledged that newly hired, academicians arrive at their management-level positions and possess professional skills credited to their academic achievement and relational experiences. Nevertheless, personal achievement and experiences may not include readiness for conflict management skills (Seale & Cross, 2018). Thus, the absence of conflict training in middle-level management positions within HEIs hinders educational institutions' progress and poses internal workforce problems for HEIs across the United States (Fortunato et al., 2018; Holzweiss & Walker, 2018; Martinez, 2019).

Workplace conflicts are comprised of personality issues (49%), acute stress (34%), and demanding workloads (33%; World Economic Forum, 2017). According to the World Economic Forum (2017), employees invest three hours per week dealing with unnecessary conflict, which is $359 billion in paid hours. These paid hours spent on conflict management support the contention that conflict training for middle managers is a global issue that requires a solution (Holzweiss & Walker, 2018; Pham et al., 2019). At HEIs, personality and stress-related conflict appear through incivility, bullying, and civil litigation (Akella & Eid, 2020; Van Gramberg et al., 2020). These types of conflict increase the probability of an increase in attrition rate for faculty (Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2019; Nel & Coetzee, 2020). HEIs will spend millions of dollars in civil

restitution, hiring, and retraining employees without correcting these conflict management issues.

Purpose of the Study

Conflict exacerbates internal workforce problems for HEIs across the United States, creating workplace environments that are counterproductive to efficiency and congeniality (Fortunato et al., 2018; Holzweiss & Walker, 2018; Martinez, 2019). At HEIs, stress-related conflicts include incivility and bullying, which prove difficult for middle managers to resolve (Akella & Eid, 2020). Yet there is a gap in the literature regarding how well middle-level managers could improve the workplace with proper training in conflict management. In this qualitative design study, I describe conflict management from the perspective of HEI middle-level managers and manager-to-subordinate interpersonal relationships. I examined the experiences of HEI middle-level managers with conflict related to incivility and bullying. Specifically, I explored the common types of conflict experienced by college and HEI middle-level managers, how managers resolved conflict, and the training the managers received. The research should help the HEI community and current and future middle-level managers increase their knowledge of conflict management due to incivility and bullying.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do HEI managers perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

1a. How do conflicts manifest in the workplace?

RQ2. How do HEI managers resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

2a. What types of interventions are used to resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

RQ3. What are the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying at HEIs as told by middle-level managers?

RQ4. What are the HEI managers' experiences with conflict-management training?

Definition of Key Terms

Administrator. A senior-level officer in a college or university, such as a president, dean, or director (Thornton et al., 2018).

Andragogy. The art and science of adult learning (Kearsley, 2010).

Bullying. Taunting or chiding excessively through various means of communication (Akella & Eid, 2020).

Conflict. An interdependent interaction is impacted by incompatibility (Folger et al., 2016).

Conflict Management. A form of management that includes individual and group conflict resolution and mediation (Runde & Flanagan, 2013).

Incivility. The upheaval caused by extreme conflict may result in punishable civil litigation (Akella & Eid., 2020).

Interdependent. People or concepts connect and make them dependent on each other (Runde & Flanagan, 2013).

Manager. A person who oversees subordinates (Thornton et al., 2018).

Summary

This chapter introduced the topic of conflict management in the workplace. The chapter presented problematic workplace interrelational behaviors that include intimidation, unjust

treatment, inequities, incivility, and bullying present at any moment in middle-level management (Bartlett & Bartlett., 2011). The following section will describe the conceptual framework that guides the study and present a literature review related to conflict management in the workplace and its effect, specifically in colleges and HEIs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review examines conflict management at the HEI middle-management level and within the manager-to-subordinate relationship. The first part of the literature review focuses on the manager-to-subordinate relationship, the conceptual framework, the history of management leadership, and the types of middle-management conflict for HEI middle-level managers. The additional sections in the literature review examine conflict in middle-level HEI management and conflict training. The final sections include conflict styles applicable to conflict strategies.

Scholarly research included sources related to the manager-to-subordinate relationship, tension, stress, incivility, bullying, and civil disputes. The search also included peer-reviewed literature on conflict, conflict styles, new subordinate hiring, and workplace interpersonal relationships. Last, the literature included manager and subordinate workplace training and retraining. The sources included journals, articles, periodicals, government resources, and international affiliate writings. The search included scholarly work and articles on the impact of conflict in academia to collect information on the conflict in HEIs. The primary sources included peer-reviewed academic journals, online databases, and search engines, including but not limited to the Brown Library, EBSCO, ERIC Systems, Google Scholar, ProQuest, Jstor.org, SAGE Journals, and Advances in Developing Human Resources, and Academia.com. Keywords included in the search were *conflict training*, *conflict management*, *bullying*, *incivility*, *productivity*, *academia*, *community college*, and *higher education institutions* (*HEIs*).

Conceptual Framework

Managers require specific skill sets to work through incivility to bridge positive relationships and placate disturbing workplace behaviors (Albashiry et al., 2015; Blomberg &

Rosander). To assist middle-level managers, participation in training in conflict management bridges the deficiency in leadership and management skills that enable managers to assist with situations filled with tension, disruption, and incivility (Akella & Eid, 2020; Kok & McDonald, 2017). Middle-level managers can acquire conflict management skills through professional development to work through behavior problems, incivility, and bullying (Angonga & Florah, 2019; Miner et al., 2018). This basic qualitative study examines manager-to-subordinate conflict impacted by incivility and bullying negatively impacting middle-level managers' workplace performance. Second, the study also explores the common types of conflict experienced by HEI middle-level managers. Last, the study examines conflict management and training from the perspective of the HEI administrative managers at the middle management.

Three learning theories serve as the conceptual framework for this study: adult learning theory (Svein, 2018), human capital theory (Petrova et al., 2020), and Gagne's theory of instruction (Werner, 2017). As part of the conceptual framework, each theory posits that learning can occur at any age and is part of all managers' and subordinates' responsibilities for growth in the workplace. The conceptual framework will provide an overview of the learning theories used to strengthen the research and guide the development of the study and analysis of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Merriam, 2009; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Adult learning theory is an andragogical approach that supports the contention that adults can learn in a two-way communication process and within a flexible developmental framework (Merriam & Kee, 2014; Svein, 2018). Through this approach, adults can self-assess learning to understand if concepts and content have been mastered and if the learning can be regurgitated to show attainment. Adult subordinates and managers are capable of learning new skills and developing their best potential. The human capital theory proposes that adult learners are willing

to commit to performance improvement in the workplace (Branson et al., 2016; Petrova et al., 2020). Tan (2014) and Petrova et al. (2020) posited that human capital theory explains how correcting behaviors and recalling prior knowledge support understanding newly acquired concepts. Adult learning and human capital theory help explain adults learning and acquiring new skills, while disregarding an age concern (Angonga & Florah, 2019; Swanson & Holton III, 2009).

Gagne's instruction theory (Werner, 2017) is grounded in instructional design and creating opportunities for learning scaled to meet adult learners' specific learning needs and modalities (Loeng, 2020; Werner, 2017). Moreover, Gagne's instruction theory considers different factors in designing learning to produce better learning outcomes (Werner, 2017). According to Gagne's instruction theory, adults can learn through different techniques (Active Learning Theories, n.d.; Loeng, 2020). Also, while mental ability may decline with age, various learning methodologies enhance adult learners' skills to acquire skills through tactile learning or multimodal learning (Active Learning Theories, n.d.; Loeng, 2020). Learning through different techniques is essential because differentiated learning allows adults to correct their behaviors and work through conflict even at a mature age (Werner, 2017).

Adult learning and human capital theories help explain how middle-level managers acquire new managerial skills (Merriam & Kee, 2014; Svein, 2018). During their careers, middle-level managers have opportunities to engage and participate in conflict management training. All middle-level managers should be able to explore continuous learning and acquire training skills without limitation. A middle-level manager's background should include conflict resolution training, including the managers' skills in conflict management (Petrova et al., 2020).

Through training, middle-level managers can learn to work through challenging situations in the manager-to-subordinate relationship (Angonga & Florah, 2019; Estes & Wang, 2008).

Management Framework and History

Management and supervision have had a long trajectory in the United States, emphasizing the middle-management level. During World War II, the U.S. War Manpower Commission established the Training Within Industry service to train supervisors for armory and shipyard work (Swanson & Holton III., 2009). The Training Within Industry service was the first time management training that received targeted attention. In 1954, laboratory training emerged, emphasizing group processes and subordinate interactions (Swanson & Holton III, 2009). Behaviorists introduced training and development, and after the mid-1950s, management and leadership development became a staple in the workplace (Swanson & Holton III., 2009). Contemporary practices were grounded in pedagogy and andragogy (Swanson & Holton III., 2009). With these advancements in behavioral studies and a new emphasis on psychology, additional training for managers and subordinates in interdependent relationships in the workplace advanced.

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) guided management leadership training for K-12 and HEIs (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). The CDC provided conflict management guidelines within the nursing and health management sectors (Kruger et al., 2018). However, each state across the union adopts guidelines into the educational curriculum for management leadership as necessary. The responsibility for overseeing workplace interpersonal relationships and civility falls on middle-level management.

HEIs and K-12 districts adopt federal guidelines for conflict management within higher education coordinating boards and educational agencies to provide conflict management training

for managers (Kruger et al., 2018). In addition, human resources departments implement conflict management training at each school district and HEI system based on human resources' best practices. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the literature regarding how these practices assist middle-level managers in fulfilling the responsibility for working through workplace incivility (Akella & Eid, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2017).

Institutions that prefer arrangements for human resources practices to stem from the mission and vision of the institution rather than for it to be imposed by government entities resist federal and national health guidelines due to a lack of trust (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). The resistance to federal and national health guidelines impacts the separation of national mandates from implementing conflict training practices. The separation affects conflict in the workplace because middle-level managers may demote conflict management to ordinary management intervention (Nicholas, 2019; Swanson & Holton III, 2009).

The Conflict Management Experience

To perform at an optimal level as a middle manager within an HEI, the manager must possess the appropriate skill set in conflict training to work through dissension, tension, bullying, and incivility (Akella & Eid, 2020; Petrova et al., 2020). Formidably, middle managers, given the opportunity to enhance their conflict management skills, can participate in professional development training that includes managing behavioral problems, working through difficult situations, and partaking in conflict resolution (Clifton & Harter, 2021; Watson et al., 2019).

Managing Behavior Problems

Behavior is a person's, group's, or species' response to its environment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Managers and subordinates respond to stimuli created through internal and external forces (Kok & McDonald, 2017; Werner, 2017). Internal forces include knowledge,

attitudes, motivation, skills, and abilities, while external forces within the workplace include colleagues, managers, the organization, and performance outcomes (Werner, 2017). A behavior problem is a symptomatic reaction due to emotional or interpersonal maladjustment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the workplace, tension and stress impact interpersonal relationships, creating opportunities for behavior problems. Behavior problems manifest as arguments, insults, threats, and bullying resulting in incivility (Akella & Eid, 2020; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Petrova et al., 2020; Werner, 2017). Bullying is constant exposure to negative behavior from which a person cannot defend themselves (Blomberg & Rosander, 2020; Einarsen & Nielsen, 2014). Middle-level managers are confronted with a combination of incivility and bullying through various behavior problems in the workplace. The manifestation of behavior problems, if not attended to promptly and skillfully, increases the problem of incivility in the workplace (Blomberg & Rosander, 2020; Miner et al., 2018). Managers and subordinates must work through the dissonance between engagement and communication behavior problems (Kok et al., 2017).

Top-down leadership pressure creates issues between managers and subordinates, placing pressure on middle-level managers to work through subordinates' behavioral problems and conflicts (Folger et al., 2016). A Gallup research study noted that one source of problems and conflict was that only 22% of workers optimally agree that leaders provide a clear direction in the workplace (Clifton & Harter, 2019). Subordinates without a clear direction from their leaders experience discomfort and confusion in completing daily tasks and fulfilling expectations for management (Bazerman & Moore, 2013; Davis et al., 2016). Consequently, there is an increase in behavior problems when direction at work is not communicated effectively, leading to incivility and bullying in the workplace (Miner et al., 2018). Therefore, managers must develop

intervention strategies and tactics to successfully work through conflict in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011).

More research is necessary to learn which subset of leadership skills grounded in interpersonal relationships and conflict management may assist middle-level managers in working with conflict in the workplace (Estes & Wang, 2008; Folger et al., 2016; Gonzales, 2019). Training in conflict management may allow a middle-level manager to have a more significant opportunity to work through challenging situations such as arguments, insults, threats, and ostracizing (Werner, 2017). The knowledge obtained in conflict training benefits the leadership, the middle-level manager, and all subordinates (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017).

Conflict Management in HEI Middle-Level Management

Middle-level managers are responsible for jovial camaraderie and positive interpersonal relationships between faculty and administrators (Nicholas, 2019). In addition, there is a charge to ensure that productivity will support educational work within the middle-management level. The charge to ensure productivity supports educational endeavors includes the ability to work through tension, bullying, incivility, and other types of conflicting situations (Akella & Eid, 2020).

An example of a middle-level manager's job duties may include demonstrated collegial relationships with faculty, students, staff, and administrators. The responsibilities include providing integrated and high-quality campus services, building a cohesive and robust management team to serve the organization and students, maintaining excellent time-management skills, and prioritizing efficiently through solid organizational skills, according to the college's website. Moreover, managers must ensure that behaviors align with executive professionals' leadership (Kok & McDonald, 2017; Riggio, 2018). When managers function

optimally, subordinates function optimally; however, HEI managers face daily arguments, intimidation, and incivility (Akella & Eid, 2020; Bradley et al., 2015).

According to Porat et al. (2016), managers must demonstrate that they can work through emotions and personal preferences to allow good judgment to work through conflict. Emotions are an essential part of the reaction to any interaction in the workplace. Emotions range from demonstrating happiness to building anger. Managers must control their emotions when working with their subordinates to ensure that negative emotions do not further impact conflict when the problem is exacerbated and becomes unmanageable. However, incivility knows no barriers. When poor behavior escalates, it can occur at any time and place. The escalation of incivility demands that HEI middle-level managers solve problems (Davis et al., 2016; Thornton et al., 2018). Paired with the possibility of legal ramifications, managers must search deep within their skill set to confront and mediate incivility through sound practices (Albashiry et al., 2015). These sound practices translate into working with subordinates on solutions to help workplace relationships (Riggio, 2018; Senge, 2006).

Nicholas (2019) stated that HEIs provide work environments that allow managers to succeed. However, the literature is sparse regarding a manager's training and skills in conflict resolution techniques, including the skills and knowledge in conflict management regarding definition, content, knowledge, and training (Davis et al., 2016; Petrova et al., 2020). Through dynamic training, managers can gain the skills required to work through tense moments (Angonga & Florah, 2019; Estes & Wang, 2008). C-Suite managers must enable conflict-resolution strategies and training for managers that work within educational institutions (Davis et al., 2016).

According to Bradley et al. (2015), conflict can be beneficial as it challenges leaders to be creative and forward-thinking. Moreover, training in conflict management at the middle-management level helps the manager discern whether the conflict is beneficial and whether the conflict resolution skills required to mitigate the issues enable stability in the manager-to-subordinate relationship (Thornton et al., 2018). Middle-level managers must obtain leadership, governance, and management skills to work through tension, disruption, and incivility (Akella & Eid, 2020; Kok & McDonald, 2017).

Manager-to-Subordinate Relationship

The manager-to-subordinate relationship is foundational to institutions and organizations (Nicholas, 2019). HEIs hire managers to supervise and create long-lasting relationships with subordinates. Consequently, the manager and subordinate relationships are fundamental to the work environment, career pathways, and long-term employment (Nicholas, 2019; Thornton, 2018). Petrova et al. (2020) acknowledged that commitment to the workplace presents itself through longevity and tenure. A manager's long-standing employment commitment is a part of all managers' roles and responsibilities and includes gaining experience in decision making (Bazerman & Moore, 2013). In addition, HEI middle-level managers must also work on de-escalating intrusive behavior, tension, and abuse in the manager-to-subordinate relationship (Fortunato et al., 2018; Martinez, 2019).

In conflicting situations, managers depend on their job descriptions, strategic plans, and departmental mandates to know how to intervene in a manner that supports their job responsibilities. Middle-level managers understand the mission and vision of their organizations, add value to their place of employment, and develop and maintain their skills (Werner, 2017). Nevertheless, manager-to-subordinate relationships demand additional skill sets in conflict

management. In turn, middle-level managers must develop the skills of their subordinates to ensure that subordinates support and value the organization's mission and vision (Werner, 2017), which requires additional manager-to-subordinate interpersonal relationship skills.

Managers serve as coaches and advisors in the manager-to-subordinate relationship, using observation and consultation to guide subordinates at work (Davis et al., 2016). The manager's responsibilities toward subordinates are supportive and supervisory (Nicholas, 2019). Within the manager's responsibilities are opportunities for open dialogue with subordinates whenever necessary. Also, managers may fulfill a parental role and a collegiate role dispensing casual advice to subordinates to enhance daily engagement (Thornton et al., 2018). Interactions at work may be wholesome and positive; however, managers may also work with less than positive interactions (Watson et al., 2019).

As relationships between managers and subordinates grow, managers accept responsibility for the subordinate experience and the opportunity to develop, inspire, and lead subordinates (Davis et al., 2016). The ability to communicate well is an essential part of working through comfortable and uncomfortable workplace issues. The manager must communicate effectively, be an active listener, and possess exceptional communication skills (Nicholas, 2019; Werner, 2017).

An area of concern in the manager-to-subordinate relationship is conflict in the workplace. In cases where subordinates state discomfort at work due to tension and stress, managers depend on supervisory skills to identify conflict in the workplace (Rudhumbu, 2015). As subordinates report problems at work, managers assess conflicting situations to determine a course of action (Davis et al., 2016). Tension and stress can increase incivility and bullying. At HEIs, a manager-to-subordinate conflict appears through incivility, bullying, and destructive

behavior, escalating to civil disputes (Akella & Eid., 2020; Van Gramberg et al., 2020). Managers should possess the skills to manage conflict and must be able to access resources that enable solutions to tense and stress-filled situations (Werner, 2017). However, the literature is sparse in stating middle-level managers' specific skills in working with conflict management.

Leadership in the Manager-to-Subordinate Relationship

There have been decades of studies on leadership, yet there is sparse evidence of which leadership skills create the most exceptional managers at the middle-management level. Kok et al. (2017) researched effective leadership in HEIs at the department, and middle-management level finding that line management, communication, and a collegial department culture were a part of the most excellent HEI-performing departments. The research showed that lower-performing HEI department subordinates had less clarity about the behaviors attributed to the management level. Thornton et al. (2018) researched middle-level management in schools and universities and acknowledged that managers are responsible for maintaining civility under management's stewardship.

Nevertheless, there is no formula for working with the tension accompanying a middle level management position. Middle-level managers coach, create supportive networks, and resolve disputes (Angonga & Florah, 2019; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). Middle-level managers are responsible for tasks relayed by leaders above the management level and those requested by subordinates below. Opportunities exist to coach, network, and resolve disputes embedded within all management responsibilities (Rudhumbu, 2015; Thornton, 2018). Moreover, middle-level managers work through subordinates' poor behaviors that interrupt the flow of systems and processes (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011).

HEI middle-level managers work through subordinate and faculty interdependent interpersonal relationship grievances daily (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Kok & McDonald, 2017). This responsibility is a part of middle-level management and requires improving team relationships to curb resignations (Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2019; Nel & Coetzee, 2020). New faculty hiring, implementation, and roll-out impact the budget (World Economic Forum, 2017). Middle-level managers' responsibilities align with institutional workplace standards and expectations to ensure positive interpersonal relationships between subordinates and the institutions' communities (Nicholas, 2019; Watson et al., 2019).

If middle-level managers are to survive conflict in the workplace, a better understanding of conflict is necessary. Conflict disrupts communication through incompatible relationships due to poor interpersonal interaction (Folger et al., 2016). These incompatible relationships sometimes create resentment, competition, conflict, escalating tension, stress, incivility, and bullying (Miner et al., 2018; Van Gramberg et al., 2020). The underlying behaviors need to be adapted and changed to connect lived experiences to training to make advances and improvements in conflict management for all middle-level managers within HEIs (Nicholas, 2019; Tan, 2014).

Behavioral problems and conflict at work are daily occurrences. Managers who lack the skills to mediate and repair ineffective workplace relationships will be disadvantaged. Incivility affects all subordinate work levels and performance stages, impacting focus, effort, and tasks (Ghosh et al., 2011). Furthermore, Scroggins et al. (2015) asserted that managers' effectiveness decreases without understanding how behaviors impact others. Understanding emotions and behaviors is a significant part of conflict management; managers and subordinates should know how to work through the simplest discord and arrive at sensible solutions (Van Gramberg et al.,

2020). The management of perception, conflicting words, actions, and the friction brought on by incivility in the workplace is at the center of resolving workplace discord (Ghosh et al., 2011).

Management Conflict Skills

Clifton and Harter (2019) and Swanson and Holton III (2009) posit that four skills in middle-level management are a part of middle-level management's essential leadership skills: leading, standardizing, informing, and communicating.

Leading

Managers should use their leadership skills to build trustworthy relationships with their subordinates (Branson et al., 2016; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). The manager should lead with transparency and stewardship to ensure that subordinates follow the mission and vision created for the institution (Branson et al., 2016). In HEIs, all managers and subordinates should follow the mission, vision, and quality performance indicators at the cornerstone of accreditation (Kok & McDonald, 2017). Therefore, middle-level management leadership skills are necessary for leading subordinates if the managers desire to support the mission and vision of their institution while maintaining trustworthy interpersonal relationships with subordinates (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Swanson & Holton III, 2009).

Standardizing

Standardizing processes and tasks ensure that subordinates experience consistency throughout the tasks and projects in the organization (Thornton et al., 2018). Consequently, the managers' leadership style and the standardization of processes and procedures are assets to the HEI because managers can contribute consistently to their subordinates' productivity and performance (Rudhumbu, 2015; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). Subordinates provided with

consistency have greater trust in their managers and fewer instances of incivility (Davis et al., 2016).

Informing

Middle managers inform and open a line of one-way communication that provides expectations to subordinates in a constant, deliberate, and systematical method (Kok & McDonald, 2017; Thornton et al., 2018). Subordinates informed of their tasks and processes are more likely to work congenially, decreasing the potential for work stressors that may result in interrelational conflicts (Davis et al., 2016).

Communicating

Different from informing, whereby a middle-level manager provides the content and structure of what is most likely a one-way communication, communicating is the more general notion of providing oral and written messages in all facets of a workday (Davis et al., 2016; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Thornton et al., 2018). A middle-level manager's ability to communicate accurately, openly, and transparently is essential to communicating well with subordinates and lessening tension and stress from misconstrued communication (Thornton et al., 2018).

Types of Conflict in the Workplace

Interpersonal dynamics between middle managers and subordinates include trust, honesty, and transparency at the highest administrative leadership level in HEIs (Kok & McDonald, 2017). The value of trust and the characteristic of transparency is a part of HEIs operations (Branson et al., 2016). Educational institutions that do not operate with trustworthiness and transparency experience disruptive conflicts that damage manager-to-subordinate relationships and impact budgets (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Common conflicts, such as bullying, ghosting, polarization, and miscommunication, contribute

to 58% of subordinates leaving the workplace or considering leaving because of adverse workplace environments (Akella & Eid, 2020; Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2019; Nel & Coetzee, 2020; Van Gramberg et al., 2020; Your best employees, n.d.). These four types of conflict indicate incivility in the workplace and place greater responsibility on the middle-level manager to discern types of conflict and apply tactful skills to improve disruptive conflict situations (Bradley et al., 2015).

Folger et al. (2016) identified other conflicts related to poor interpersonal relationships, difficulties within groups or teams, and organizational issues. Bazerman and Moore (2013) and Bradley et al. (2016) proposed that middle-level management is concerned with working through conflict as part of the overall leadership responsibilities. Middle-level managers desiring to work through conflict management must know how to work with individual and group conflict resolution (Runde & Flanagan, 2013). Conflict management training is recommended within HEIs to curb subordinate attrition and improve rehiring (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017). Retraining and rehiring are costly; therefore, conflict management training in HEIs would affect college management's opportunity to satisfy subordinate grievances regarding incivility and bullying (Akella & Eid, 2020; Davis et al., 2016; Thornton et al., 2018).

The repetition of such abusive behaviors creates systemic bullying, which occurs in the workplace and disrupts interpersonal relationships (Van Gramberg et al., 2020). This disruption has significant negative consequences. For instance, Clifton and Harter (2019) reported that 50% of managers are not engaged on the job, and only 15% of subordinates are engaged in the workplace, with an additional 85% having worker apathy (Clifton & Harter, 2019). In 2018, 60% of subordinates left the workplace or considered exiting because they did not have a good relationship with their direct managers (Your best employees, n.d.). Middle-level managers and

subordinates do not engage in the workplace when incivility and bullying are present. The lack of engagement requires resolution to improve future interaction between managers and subordinates (Branson et al., 2016). Managers need on-the-job experience and training to make good decisions regarding conflict in the workplace, especially in dealing with conflict and negotiation (Angonga & Florah, 2019; Bazerman & Moore, 2013).

Conflict With Individuals and Teams

Conflicts occur in the workplace amongst individual and team members in the form of tension, stress, incivility, and bullying (Akella & Eid, 2020; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). A conflict requires managers to seek potential solutions. However, managers may not have the skills to recognize the potential for conflict or resolve conflicts (Folger et al., 2016). The managers' approach to resolving conflict may be part of a leadership philosophy or core belief grounded in academics, infrastructure, and management, not conflict training (Gonzales, 2019).

Within HEIs, conflict management training is recommended for managers to improve subordinates' hiring and retention practices (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017). Subordinate resignations and turnover are costly due to the demand for constant hiring and training to fill vacancies (Nel & Coetzee, 2020). Bartlett and Bartlett (2011) stated that intimidation, unjust treatment, inequities, and incivility negatively impact subordinates and productivity.

Nevertheless, middle-level managers and subordinates are well-intended workers. Worldwide, 20% of managers and subordinates highly agree that they like the job they do daily (Clifton & Harter, 2021). However, the stress in the workplace contributes to 120,000 deaths every year and increases healthcare requests by 5% to 8% (Ghosh et al., 2011). With tension, stress, incivility, and bullying contributing to workplace conflict, the cumulative effect may have an even more significant effect on the manager-to-subordinate relationship (Estes & Wang,

2008; Folger et al., 2016; Gonzales, 2019). Therefore, a lack of conflict management training to defuse bullying, ghosting, polarization, and miscommunication in the workplace profoundly impacts HEIs' middle-level managers' ability to effectively work with their subordinates (Estes & Wang, 2008).

External Training Resources and Budget Impact

To add interpersonal training skills at the middle-management level, HEIs' leadership and talent management departments purchase and adopt commercially produced workshops and tools for assessing managers' and subordinates' personalities (Speer et al., 2021). One such product is Gallup Clifton Strengths, in which the client takes an assessment that classifies talents and strengths into 34 distinctive themes (Gallup, 2021). The 34 Gallup Themes describe the personality traits most often related to working with others and productivity. Another commercially produced product is the DiSC assessment, which classifies a client into four personality traits: dominance, inducement, submission, and compliance (DiSC Profile, n.d.). The DISC four personality traits describe emotional behavior traits and of performance indicators.

In addition to personality assessments, HEI leadership contracts independent, private consultants who offer workshops and personality assessments to determine personality traits for managers and leaders working with subordinates (Speer et al., 2021). While these products and partnerships provide insight into personality styles, personality assessments are insufficient to address workplace conflict (Speer et al., 2021). In addition, the products and partnerships can be costly, impacting HEI budgets and straining training dollars (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Last, these products often do not contain the information and content desired to work through conflict in the workplace (Otocki & Turner, 2020).

Using personality and assessment tools and private, independent consultants may benefit managers and subordinates in daily work and productivity; however, the assessments and consultation may not benefit middle-level managers in their quest to resolve conflict. In addition to the tools and consultants, middle-level managers require specific training in conflict management that improves workplace interpersonal relationships. More appropriate conflict training would better prepare middle-level managers to resolve conflict within HEIs.

Conflict Styles, Strategies, and Tactics

Daily, conflict emerges in the middle-level manager-to-subordinate relationship, becoming a natural part of human interaction when managers and subordinates disagree about perceived workplace differences (Kok & McDonald, 2017). Consequently, middle-level managers should understand conflict styles, strategies, and tactics for conflict management.

Conflict Styles

Understanding conflict styles permits managers to assess and classify workplace incivility and develop intervention strategies to improve relationships among subordinates (Estes & Wang, 2008). Blake and Mouton (1964) and Hall (1969) developed a conflict styles grid to model an individual's behavior towards conflict based on two conflict behavior classifications: assertiveness and cooperation. The first behavior classification, assertiveness, is a behavior that satisfies individual needs, while the second behavior classification, cooperation, is a behavior that satisfies others' individual needs (Folger et al., 2016).

Based on this managerial conflict behavior grid, a manager's conflict behavior additionally falls into one of five types of conflict styles: conflict competing, problem solving, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. A competing style is a dominating style, while an accommodating style is an appeasement style (Folger et al., 2016). A compromising or problem-

solving style seeks collaboration, while an avoiding style is withdrawing from the conflict. Knowledge of these conflict styles permits the middle-level manager to develop strategies and tactics to work through conflict management (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011).

Strategies

Middle-level managers develop intervention strategies to improve interpersonal strife in the manager-to-subordinate relationship (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Estes & Wang, 2008). Strategies are a set of tools that involve planning and implementation to improve and transform conflicting situations in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). A middle-level manager needs strategies that combine various work styles and personality traits (Miner et al., 2018). Additionally, managers must develop interest-based conflict management systems (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011) to improve communication, procedures, and interpersonal relationships. Middle-level managers must navigate tense situations and perceptions of conflict to reach conciliatory outcomes (Branson et al., 2016; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Petrova et al., 2020).

Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) posit that knowledge of critical steps provides conflict resolution that middle-level managers may learn to include as strategies when creating effective conflict management solutions:

- implementing an analysis of the conflict via an audit or assessment,
- identifying the type of conflict and designing support,
- expanding resolution alternatives for the conflict,
- seeking options for improvement and cost-effective measures,
- encouraging participation in intervention sessions, and
- providing training and support to help with continuous improvement.

Tactics

Managers may use tactics to improve interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Estes & Wang, 2008). Tactics are specific behaviors that do not require planning and that a manager or subordinate may engage in to work through conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Folger et al., 2016). Tactics evolve from personal experience dealing with conflict and testing the tactic over time in different situations (Folger et al., 2016). In most scenarios, tactics emerge through the use of power in manager-to-subordinate relationships, and the tactics are not dependent on strategies or styles of conflict.

Summary

Chapter 2, the literature review, contains the summary of the problem and purpose of this study. The research questions allow data collection regarding managerial experiences with conflict management at the community college and HEI levels. The chapter includes management, types of conflict, and three learning theories that support the contention that adult learners, including middle-level managers, can acquire knowledge and skills to work through conflict. Managerial leadership and conflict management training provide tactics to work through bullying, polarization, and incivility. The chapter includes a review of conflict management in the U.S. education system and its implications for middle-level managers in college and HEIs. Conflict management, training, and performance also play a part in middle-level managers' training in academia in the United States and this study in North Texas.

Chapter 3 presents an overview of the research method utilized in this phenomenological study. The research design and method include participants' descriptions, materials, instruments, data collection, and analysis. Also, the chapter contains the ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the concluding summary.

Chapter 3: Research Method and Design

Middle-level managers apply conflict management skills to deescalate tension and conflicts that arise due to increased tension, stress, and personality problems among employees (Fortunato et al., 2018; Martinez, 2019). Within HEIs, persistent conflicts lead to incivility and bullying (Akella & Eid, 2020). Unfortunately, incivility and bullying may increase the possibility of managers leaving their jobs (Maidaniuc-Chirila, 2019; Nel & Coetzee, 2020). The lived experiences of middle-level managers provide insight into conflict training in the workplace in middle-level manager-subordinate inter-relationships.

In this qualitative research study I examined conflict management from the perspective of middle-level managers within HEI institutional districts and systems in North Texas. I specifically designed the study to collect the middle-level managers' perceptions of conflict resolutions for conflict and the ability to work through complex behavioral and interpersonal issues in HEIs. For this study, middle-managers included deans, associate deans, academic directors, directors, and department heads. In this chapter I discuss the research design and method, the participants, materials and instruments, data collection, and analysis procedures. It also includes the ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations and concludes with a summary.

The research questions are the following:

RQ1. How do HEI managers perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

1a. How do conflicts manifest in the workplace?

RQ2. How do HEI managers resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

2a. What types of interventions are used to resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

RQ3. What are the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying at HEIs as told by middle-level managers?

RQ4. What are the HEI managers' experiences with conflict-management training?

Research Design and Method

The study utilized a basic qualitative study approach to explore conflict management training in middle-level management in HEIs regarding incivility and bullying in the workplace. This basic qualitative study approach, supported by constructivism, was integral to the scope and investigation of the problem of the study (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). I obtained views and insights into the participants' lived experiences in this study through a basic qualitative study approach. I accomplished this by collecting data from lived experiences, selecting a purposive sample of middle-level managers through the HEI academic districts and systems in North Texas.

Population and Participants

The study population consisted of middle-level managers at HEIs in North Texas. Initial recruitment occurred through multiple HEI districts and systems by sending the invitation to participate in the study via email to identify potential participants (Appendix A). These potential participants were contacted using email addresses from HEI institutional portals that listed employees and identified middle managers. Respondents to this first email who agreed to participate in this study received a second email with the hyperlink to the consent form and the interview questions. I shared the interview questions with potential participants before conducting interviews (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Once the participants signed the informed

consent form, I contacted the participants to establish a time for the interview. Due to COVID-19 and the CDC's critical health and social distancing requirements, I collected data from middle-level managers within HEI systems through virtual interviews via internet-based online platforms.

As recommended by Merriam (2009) and Saldaña and Omasta (2018), the consent form included the nature of the study, the goal of the research, and the planned use of the data collected. The consent form identified the researcher, the educational institution, the selection of the participants, the manner of participation, and the participants' involvement, as recommended by Maxwell (2012; Appendix B). Participants electronically signed consent forms approved by ACU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to collect their lived experiences in workplace conflict, as recommended by Merriam (2009).

Recruiting participants from an initial larger grouping allowed the identification of managers to narrow the sample through a purposive selection process (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The purposive sample included managers in academia who met the following criteria: having at least two years of management experience managing faculty and staff (e.g., as a dean or director), having one or more subordinates, and 18 years of age or older. From the larger selection pool, the sample included the first 10 participants who responded. I then contacted the 10 participants via email to obtain consent and request their availability to participate in the interviews conducted via the online platform. The 10-participant sample size was acceptable as there were repeated lived experiences among the deans and directors participating in the study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Saturation was possible for this research data due to the nature of the themes of incivility and bullying; therefore, themes and notes were checked for duplication in the

recitation of events to decide whether the study had reached its conclusion (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Interview Protocol

As the primary source for the data collection, the interviews were semistructured. Semistructured interviews are flexibly structured interviews that allow the researcher to adjust as the interview unfolds (Merriam, 2009). The subsequent adjustments allowed me to concentrate on voice and nonverbal communication and the participants' responses (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The interview process allowed for open and honest feedback and participants detailed lived experiences based on the conflict in the workplace.

A subject matter expert screened all interview questions to ensure that the interview questions supported the research questions. For the interview, the first questions gathered demographic information to verify and record employment, job title, and management experience (questions 1–8); subsequent questions were qualitative questions regarding the conflict in the workplace (questions 9–22; Appendix C).

I recorded each interview via a video conferencing online application, and the data were transcribed using a dictation application in Microsoft Word. I saved the transcribed data to a file on a laptop. Data were then stored within cloud storage as a backup to the repository file on the laptop. My laptop was secured at my home office. Confidentiality was secured through the removal of personal identifiers.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The interview questions were designed to extract common academic conflict management trends. I analyzed responses using an inductive approach to identify themes related to conflict management, incivility, and bullying. I expected these answers to contain trends in the

workplace related to incivility and bullying; however, new trends not identified previously in the literature may have also surfaced through the interviews. These new data may have fallen outside the scope of the studym yet I welcomed, collected, and added these new categories during the analysis.

For the interviews, participants participated in hour-long, recorded sessions. Once I compiled the interviews, the information was transcribed and coded question-by-question by transposing the data into NVivo, a qualitative database organizing tool, and through constant comparative analysis. According to DePoy and Gitlin (2016) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), data are summarized into separate units coded into categories in constant comparative analysis. These categories can be matched to themes identified within the study, such as conflict, incivility, and bullying. Thus, the analysis included a line-by-line review of the participant's responses. I extracted statements from all of the interview transcriptions. I then coded the statements using descriptive codes in a Microsoft Word document and grouped into themes (DePoy & Gitlin, 2016; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018; Suter, 2012). NVivo allowed the collection of the vocabulary used by the participants. The data analysis involved transcription of the recordings and subsequent reviews and revisions. Last, I secured the data in data drives.

Ethical Considerations

I offered participants information regarding my role as researcher, the study's purpose, a clear understanding of the research problem, and confidentiality with the online interview process. IRB approval was obtained, and I provided the participants with the approval number. Participants' information remained confidential within the data collection process. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any moment.

Assumptions

There were several assumptions for this research study. One assumption was that all middle-level managers at HEIs had workplace conflict management experience. Another assumption was that each participant would honestly respond in the interviews. Biases may have risen from my prior experience working with managers in conflict issues or with participants who had opinions on how conflict management should occur. I visited and noted these biases within the data analysis (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Next, middle-level managers from various academic positions and areas reflected the variety of academic fields in the pool of participants. Beyond the requirement of 18 or older and two years of management supervision experience, there were no limitations for participants responding to the interviews. Last, participants provided insight and examples related to the absence of conflict management training in middle-level managers.

Limitations

This study included the responses of 10 middle-level managers who supervise subordinates in their academic positions in HEIs. As I am a former senior manager for organizational development with the responsibility of subordinates, I considered the possibility of researcher bias. The sample for this study was purposive and not a random sample. A purposive sampling provided the data necessary to understand the experiences of HEIs middle-level managers. In purposive sampling, participants are chosen because they may provide insight into the research questions and the purpose of the study (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Delimitations

This research study consisted only of middle-level managers in HEIs in academia in various management roles and with more than one subordinate. The scope of the research was also delimited to North Texas. A delimitation of this study is that it only included manager-to-subordinate tension, stress, incivility, and bullying, even though other factors can bring forth workplace conflict. Based on existing research, conflict management training is often found in the discussion of responsible HEI management and HEI middle-management leadership roles (Nicholas, 2019; Thornton et al., 2018).

Trustworthiness

In a qualitative research study, trustworthiness is bound by truth-value, credibility, professionalism, and rigor (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018); how the research is conducted stems from a qualitative work ethic, dedication, and determination (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). All components of the research design, scholarly citations, data collection, and data analysis conformed to rigorous practices (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Last, I incorporated four strategies for qualitative studies to demonstrate trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility

According to Maxwell (2012), credibility links the participants' responses and the researcher's summation of those responses. The data need to be consistent throughout the collection process for the study. Each participant had identical interview protocols, practices, and procedures. This process ensured that the data were similar and consistent throughout the research study. A standardized interview manuscript was a protocol for all interview questions

before presenting the information to participants. Each participant interviewed received identical forms and interview questions.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability is the generalizability of inquisitive research for external validity and the transferability to other settings or groups (Maxwell, 2012). To make transferability possible, the participants in the study were a group of HEI middle-level managers represented through various management positions, such as deans and department heads. The middle-management positions were similar between HEI systems and participants. This purposive sample protocol allowed data triangulation for middle-level managers in similar HEI positions. There was a data source triangulation in the saturation of data, depending on the repetition of data regarding the themes of incivility and bullying and thick description, which included observations of the participants, comments, environmental aspects, and participants' body language

Triangulation included multiple data sources through observation methods, various data collection methods, and multiple investigations (Ellis, 2021; Merriam, 2009). Triangulation in this study appeared through participants' observations of lived experiences as participants had different perspectives. Therefore, it was necessary to cross-check and use emergent design stemming from the confluence in the coding of information (Merriam, 2009). The emergent design for coding and triangulation was a part of the critical and creative aspect of triangulation methods (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2001).

Dependability

Dependability is achieved in qualitative research when the research process is based on logic and documentation (Gentles et al., 2015; Maxwell, 2012). The primary manner for

procuring dependability was using video conferencing, an online application, and transcribing the data using the dictation application in Microsoft Word. Transcription supported the video recording process. Partipants' identities were kept confidential.

Confirmability

Several steps were taken to promote confirmability, which was essential because, according to Maxwell (2012), confirmability establishes the researcher's final analysis and interpretations, requiring the researcher to show how the data contains conclusions and interpretations. I disclosed my former title of senior manager for organizational development for each participant to ensure confirmability, as there is a potential for bias. Participants had an opportunity to member check and review/revise their transcripts and the data collected. Participants read their transcripts reviewing each line of their responses. A peer debriefer reviewed the interviewees' transcripts, checked data interpretation and analysis, and assisted with thick descriptions, which included observations of the participants, comments, environmental aspects, and body language (DePoy & Gitlin, 2016; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Summary

This chapter presented the research design, method, population, and study sample. It also included the data collection, materials, instruments, and analysis procedures. In summary, this basic qualitative approach for this research study examined the HEI's middle managers' perceptions of conflict management in light of incivility and bullying.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this research study was to understand how college and university middle-level managers worked through workplace incivility and bullying with a focus on research on the individual conflict resolution practices used by HEI middle-level managers during manager-to-subordinate or subordinate-to-subordinate conflicts. The research study's 10 participant interviews were summarized into 10 vignettes. The vignettes included the responses to the four research questions and the responses to additional follow-up questions.

I summarized each of the 10 vignettes using four general categories: experiences with conflict, managing during the pandemic, coping mechanisms, and conflict-management training. Because HEI middle-level managers work with workplace conflict and incivility daily as a part of their managerial responsibilities, each participant responded to the research questions using their current and former middle-management positions and experiences. Moreover, the participants' responses included their descriptions regarding reporting structures in an academic setting, how they identified conflict, how they worked through conflict, and descriptions of conflict training they might have received or participated in throughout their careers. Thus Chapter 4 includes the 10 vignettes, the results and analysis, and the overarching themes and subthemes (see Appendix E).

Azary's Story

Azary was a middle-level manager in a North Texas community college system. In her office manager position, Azary was instrumental in communicating with all levels of management within her college and with key administrators within the more extensive college system. Her responsibilities included working with administrators, staff, and work-study

students. The position reported to a manager with responsibilities through a dotted-line reporting structure within academics, nonacademics, and institutional effectiveness.

Azary shared that it was a priority to earn her managers' and subordinates' trust from the beginning of her job. Due to the dotted-line reporting structure to various managers, many instances of miscommunication led to mistakes in handling orders and following through on instructions, which brought on much conflict. Because Azary had little experience working with conflicts, she depended heavily on her communication skills and sustaining good rapport with colleagues, subordinates, and managers. She relied on her communication skills to work through the friction, tension, and incivility that would erupt in the workplace.

Experiences With Conflict

When I asked Azary about her experiences with conflict, she shared incidents that, for her, exemplified incivility in the workplace. The first incident she disclosed involved poor judgment. Azary narrated that, while conducting the logistics for a conference and conference attendees, "a subordinate entered a conference room to verify table placement and checked attendees by calling out their country of origin and ethnicity." She also narrated an incident that demonstrated that subordinates were less than respectful to each other. Azary said, "An employee was furious that the meal they had collected to eat at their office was mistaken for collecting it to be taken to their family because the food was chicken." Azary had to meet with the subordinates to discuss these incidents and the uncivil behaviors. She engaged the subordinates in a conversation regarding their words. Azary said she wanted the subordinates to follow her example: "I needed to respect everyone regardless of race or ethnicity."

In another office incident, Azary was undermined in an institutional effectiveness data report when a subordinate concealed the collection of data samples. In this instance, the

subordinate could not be identified, which created conflict between Azary and her manager. The conflict required dialogue between Azary, the manager, and the research team members, yet the team could not identify a culprit. Azary felt that her office manager position was in jeopardy and that members of the research team could not be trusted. Azary noted, "I do not know how they did it, and I do not want to say they did it on purpose to put a deadline on me because I felt that some people were jealous that I had gotten that position." Azary created a new project process to ensure accurate and timely data reports.

Bullying in Azary's workplace manifested in hurtful and demeaning remarks from team members and other managers. For instance, while the college system did not have a professional dress code, in Azary's department, clothing garments were expected to cover the employee's body and extremities. Azary's managers criticized subordinates' garments nonverbally with stares and gestures and also in writing via email. This was problematic for Azary because a professional dress code could not be enforced without an institutional written policy for appropriate professional office attire. While Azary encouraged subordinates to report bullying incidents, subordinates would not visit HR. As a consequence, the bullying could not be stopped. In addition, Azary lacked support from HR and explained, "My supervisor did not have an approved job title or a range level within HR that would have him be acknowledged within the [organizational] reporting structure."

When I asked Azary her feelings about these bullying incidents, she responded that she wondered about the subordinates because Azary was being bullied as well. Azary perceived that she didn't belong to the team; subordinates felt that she did not represent them. Azary shared that perhaps this could be attributed to the fact that Azary declined leadership representation in an employee resource group (ERG). Azary accepted many responsibilities as a manager, yet she

explained that she was cautious of accepting other duties, such as the ERG leadership, because she felt that that assignment would displace tasks related to her daily responsibilities.

In addition to the bullying, Azary observed inequities in hiring for new positions in her department. She watched as managers favored candidates during the hiring process. When I asked her about an example of this type of inequity, Azary explained that she served as a liaison to the interview process and hosted candidates as they waited for their interviews. The protocol for the host was to greet the new candidate in the lobby and offer them seating and bottled water. However, Azary noticed how managers treated individuals of different marginalized groups inequitably:

> All other candidates were hosted within the protocol. I was waiting for a potential new hire, and I did not even know the candidate was already there. I remember looking for the candidate to provide the welcoming, but a manager had already set up the candidate in one of the empty office cubicles. I hadn't seen that special treatment before, but I saw it.

Azary perceived that there was a similar issue regarding inequity with two newly hired subordinates. Azary was responsible for ordering technology for all members of the institutional effectiveness team, and she noticed that a recent technology ordered for two newly hired subordinates was dissimilar. However, the two subordinates held the same position. One candidate was Latinx and received a refurbished tablet. She said, "I ordered two identical Surface tablets. One for each candidate."

Nevertheless, a manager had equipped the newly hired subordinates differently to perform the same tasks. She added, "I saw that as being discrimination against a minority individual." The purchase order and distribution discrepancy created a conflict between Azary,

her manager, peer managers, and subordinates. Azary intervened by requesting that the purchasing manager revise the technology order, yet the order was not corrected.

Managing During the Pandemic

Unfortunately, the pandemic would make the inequitable distribution of technology equipment an even more difficult situation for newly hired subordinates. At the onset of the pandemic, the college system sent all employees to work from home. With one new subordinate having new technology equipment and the other new subordinate having refurbished technology, the two could not perform the same tasks in the same manner. Again, Azary had to bring the inequity to the manager's attention, but the situation became a more significant conflict. Upon learning about the inequity situation, the general population of subordinates was divided into two groups, with each group supporting one of the newly hired subordinates. This meant that the two groups disbanded along racial lines.

Azary established rapport with the subordinate who received the refurbished tablet to improve interpersonal relationships within the department. Further along, Azary worked with the other new subordinate as well. Azary shared that to resolve the conflicts, "I brought solutions to the table, and I would review each one mentally. I was trying to find the one [solution] that they would like best, but I would always have a plan b and plan c."

Despite these shortcomings, Azary continued working within the college system in her role as office manager. The pandemic had taught Azary that working through conflict without in-person visits was even more challenging due to the lack of face-to-face opportunities to share concerns in a wholesome exchange. She shared that solely relying on her communication skills and emotional intelligence training was insufficient for working through conflict in the

workplace. Azary perceived that her lack of conflict-management training was keeping her from resolving issues of inequity, racial discrimination, stereotypes, jealousy, and favoritism.

The dotted-line reporting structure was another issue that impacted Azary. It stifled her opportunity to establish a leadership management role early in her career. Nevertheless, with managers leaving for new job opportunities, Azary grew into her leadership role and established autonomy in the department. This autonomy allowed Azary to be assertive when speaking to subordinates whenever tension and incivility created turmoil and the subordinates received that assertiveness well. Azary did not believe in taking sides with subordinates or managers. She shared her reason for not favoring a particular group by saying, "I needed to support everyone."

Coping Mechanisms

Azary explained that it was harsh to accept that her work was in a college with a lack of recognition and "credit where credit is due." She perceived bullying at work to be masked as "pressure" and acknowledged that "disparities and discrimination were rampant." She expressed how individuals at work came across as "difficult rather than assertive no matter the circumstance."

When I asked Azary how she coped during her years as a manager, she noted that managing people is what she loved to do despite all the challenges. She reported that she traveled for self-care and enjoyed removing herself from work and the incivility. "Lots of things were going on, and you took advantage of the good stuff [travel]. You never saw the bad stuff/behavior [there]."

Conflict Management Training

Azary strived to improve her conflict management skills by learning through on-the-job situations, scrutinizing interpersonal office conflicts, and collecting experiences that would

become a toolkit for working with subordinates through tension, incivility, and bullying. She obtained institutional emotional intelligence training and external training in speech and communication.

When I asked about effective strategies for conflict management, Azary responded that she depended on her communication skills. She depended on concepts geared to clarity and preciseness to document incivility and workplace bullying. She explained that "clear communication verbally and written, . . . because I knew that verbally, they add words to your comments or twist it around. Not in writing."

Charlie's Story

Charlie was a middle-level workforce development manager at a community college system. As a result of her many years in supervisory positions in the United States and in Europe, Charlie had vast experience with negotiating and incivility. Her background in corporate sales allowed her to build her management skills in working with partners to create consensus.

Regarding incivility, Charlie developed a definition. Charlie explained that "incivility would be if I did a real low blow calling somebody out by their name, using derogatory terms, or wording." She added that her interests in customer relations and customer service helped her apply particular verbal and nonverbal skills to curb the presence of behavioral issues that could emerge when dealing with corporate and college partnerships.

Experiences With Conflict

When I asked Charlie how conflict manifested in the workplace, she responded that it was "mostly through misunderstandings." In working with internal and external college and corporate partners, Charlie noted that those misunderstandings would stem from differences in the formation of teams, workload, and job responsibilities. She further explained, "conflicts also

show up in the form of just unrealistic expectations from other teams, because a team will only know what they may have requested of a person, but they do not know all of the other teams."

Charlie provided an example of subordinate incivility in which a subordinate perceived that a team member was not doing their job because they were typically not at their desk. Charlie explained the larger picture regarding the subordinate's position and duties: they were a community liaison employee. She presented the scenario as follows:

> The person they are complaining about is a person who has many community events in the workplace, and they have an office, a desk, and a computer, but their role is not to sit at that desk and do data entry.

Charlie received reports from additional team members who did not report to work in defiance. Charlie collected information from the community liaison to resolve the situation, who said, "I have to move into another location because we have so many organizations (having events), and so we have to change things last minute." Charlie acknowledged a valid reason for the liaison to be away from their desk. Charlie expressed to the subordinate who complained, "You know, you made all of these claims; help me understand what was it that you needed and why did you not come to me and request services or something?" Charlie settled the matter with the liaison, the subordinate, and the team amicably and rallied everyone to a positive resolution.

When I asked Charlie about the severe consequences of conflict, she shared an incident with a negative financial impact. Charlie worked on contracts with substantial profit or loss margins. In this scenario, Charlie's inquiries regarding accountability caused friction with a manager. The two were conflicted over an internal contract that included a sizeable instructional payout and an external contract for a client in an undesignated, rural service area. Charlie wanted to make sure that there would not be monetary losses for the college system. After the inquiry,

the manager filed a grievance against Charlie in human resources for the forceful manner Charlie had questioned the contracts. Charlie requested a visit with her manager with minimal results and shared how the conflict impacted her:

> So the end of the story was that none of the write-up resulted in anything and my supervisor said, "OK well, let's forget about this" and I said, "No, let's not forget about this because this is a very aggressive form and I felt bullied." I felt bullied, so addressing this early to me was very important because it showed a pattern of operations that was not going to stop. Is bullying available and possible in those scenarios? Yes. You can become a target. Why? I cannot say, but you become a target.

On another occasion, a manager perceived Charlie as a bully. Charlie narrated that in this scenario, she had discovered that tuition-related content on the college's system-wide website was incorrect:

> It falsely advertised that students without any experience and without a college degree can start $36 to $46 an hour and there are very few professions or occupations where that can happen and it was clearly . . . misinformation compared to what was on our own website.

Charlie raised the question regarding the tuition-rate amounts to the manager and their department media team. However, the manager felt the inquiry was disrespectful and challenged Charlie's assertion vehemently. Charlie said, "There was a partnership involved, so having me questioning this information came across as questioning accuracy." While Charlie was confident that the information was incorrect, she apologized to the manager. She recalled, "I had to go back and apologize and check with this person. Did I violate that professional respect? The

person gave me grace and accepted the apology. So that means that, in a roundabout way, they felt attacked."

For Charlie, the differences between Europe to Texas in having a forceful tone of voice and firm conviction impacted her colleagues. She said, "That changed their perception of me." Charlie did not know what identity struggles were present in the United States nor how other managers perceived her management style:

> I was not as privy [to marginalization]. I was oblivious, maybe, to some of the inequities, but when you look at me and you perceive me one way and that's how I look, that's my complexion. I associate that with maybe my upbringing in a certain environment.

Charlie clarified that others perceived her tone of voice as harsh when she intended to be direct. Charlie was aware of negative productivity and engagement measures within the college system. She explained that losing one employee was detrimental to the college system. She said, "Not only is it costly to rehire, from a financial standpoint, it takes so much time finding the right person and then training them up to what the skill level was that you just made walk away."

Managing During the Pandemic

Charlie provided anecdotes about virtual engagement with subordinates regarding workplace conflict involving subordinate interaction. She was concerned that most homes in the United States included an open-floor-plan concept. Her concern was the lack of privacy and the unfortunate visibility of children in the background.

> There was an understanding that cameras needed to stay off for meetings and for the safety of children because the child's presence was kind of unpredictable. But the co-manager we have to work with perceived a camera off with disengagement, disinterest, and insubordination. So it took quite a bit of conversations with that person on the

> manager-to-manager level to explain that we cannot put our perception and make that the reality. Some people may indeed use this camera-turned-off as a form to disengage, but we cannot make that a perception or make that assumption on every interaction when we had had other experiences [with subordinates].

This type of conflict would emerge during COVID-19 as managers and subordinates transitioned from working in an office to working from home.

Charlie explained that she worked with a manager who perceived a virtual camera turned off as a case of insubordination. “Some people like myself who first went online . . . my strongest internet signal came out of the bedroom because that’s where the server was installed.” Therefore, there was justification to have the camera off if one was in a bedroom; nonetheless, being off-camera increased incivility incidents. Consequently, this meant looking for options other than having cameras on to learn how productivity could be quantified. It also meant tracking work-related activity on websites and online portals.

Charlie recalled, “Many conversations occurred online, manager-to-manager, to learn different ways of measuring engagement.” There was an urgency to ensure that collaborative work would meet the standards for external corporate partnerships. Visibility online brought forth other tangibles that could lead to misinterpretations or stereotypes: tone of voice, inflection, and ageism. “For me, there is also an age gap, so it can also be perceived as if I may not respect that person because of the age gap. So I try to listen first, listen a lot, be willing to admit that I’ve made a mistake, and until I die, I will still make mistakes.”

Coping Mechanisms

I asked Charlie about coping mechanisms for dealing with all of the conflicts at work. She replied, “I think the pandemic has increased the level of grace.” Working with managers,

staff, and training faculty in online teaching technologies had increased Charlie's awareness of the lack of information and context that can lead to misunderstandings. Charlie said, "You don't know what you don't know."

Charlie explained that working through the difficulties of managing subordinates and contractual obligations "brought about a new level of patience and creativity, the level of patience, the amount of patience, duration, and the different situations." Her purpose in her management position was to ensure that she contained the damage to interpersonal relationships because working in offices became working virtually.

Conflict Management Training

Charlie shared that she participated in training while she was in Europe and included management leadership training with content related to conflict management. In the United States, she obtained a certificate in conflict mediation. Charlie participated in various short-term workshops in her college system, including Crucial Conversations, a workshop for correcting miscommunication.

Charlie's effectiveness in working through incivility and bullying came from techniques learned in the Crucial Conversations' workshops. Nevertheless, when responding to the question regarding conflict training, Charlie affirmed that most of her conflict training had been through "daily trial and error." Her preferred manner of working through conflict was storytelling and listening. Charlie expanded that "the use of storytelling, paraphrasing, or checking our own stories . . . basing it on the fact takes out emotions, takes away the need to bully, be aggressive."

Dakota's Story

Dakota was a university-system, middle-level manager in North Texas overseeing science and athletics. Her job included supervision of curriculum, instruction, and programming.

The department's structure included many middle-level managers reporting to a dean, including Dakota, who reported to a dean in an environment where managers respected each other.

When I asked Dakota about conflict in the workplace, she reported that most incidents involving incivility were amongst the faculty: these were subordinate-to-subordinate conflicts. These faculty incidents had a range of minor conflicts that included concerns regarding personality to significant conflicts that included formal grievances. Dakota handled the minor conflicts independently. For significant conflicts, the Human Resources team provided support.

Experiences With Conflict

Regarding experiences with conflict, Dakota shared that she diffused subordinate-to-subordinate conflict by hosting conversations in her office. She allowed each subordinate to narrate the events, listening carefully to time, place, and condition. She allowed each subordinate to respond and reflect on the situation. Dakota infused "repetition of the narration to acknowledge understanding." In most instances, according to Dakota, the conflict was minor: it was the case of someone "just wanting to vent." Nevertheless, not all conflicts unfolded in the same way.

Within the STEAM department, subordinates complained to Dakota about work hours and pay. Moreover, the faculty viewed pay and instructional scheduling as inequity and engaged in explosive incivility. When I asked Dakota for an example of this incivility, she narrated that a faculty member demanded that she explain changes in course scheduling. Dakota recalled that she had not changed the schedule, yet that did not appease the faculty member, nor did it keep the faculty member from throwing a verbal tirade in Dakota's office. Dakota did not want to be the bully in this situation; however, her only recourse was to demand silence and dismiss the faculty member. She did not make changes to the schedule.

Dakota described the end to the incident in this manner:

> As his [manager], as his superior, I needed to stop that conversation, and then [the faculty member] finally left my office. But it was very upsetting to me to have someone so combative and not taking the cue of your boss just telling you not to continue talking, yet [the faculty member] continued to talk. So that was the only time that I really experienced something that was so blatantly disrespectful—blatant disrespect for another.

In the incident mentioned above, faculty members then filed grievances against their peers through HR. The grievance process bridged into a mediation process within the university system. Dakota accepted the grievance process as a conduit to remedy a conflict. She had an opportunity to demonstrate skills in channeling peer-to-peer conflict during the inquiry and information-gathering process.

Dakota perceived incivility as "grounded in the pressure of being an outstanding faculty member and the responsibilities of a middle-level manager." According to Dakota, "pressure can be viewed as bullying; however, pressure is a normal part of daily work in academia." She explained that both managers and subordinates understood how to decompress to ensure that manager-to-subordinate and subordinate-to-subordinate conflict would not become bullying.

When incivility surfaced, it had a typical structure that had the potential of becoming a university-wide affair when not halted. Dakota offered the example of a faculty member who would be a part of a minor conflict in which they perceived incivility. The faculty member would choose to shelter from the issue by not speaking to a peer. The issue would continue and then evolve into a communal issue with faculty members creating a clique. In turn, the faculty would ignore the complaining faculty member. Finally, faculty members would share the details of the issue with the university community, thus making the conflict a system-wide dilemma. Dakota

explained this, stating that “it was a continual conflict; what I would see is that they would become less and less civil with one another.”

Managing During the Pandemic

When I asked Dakota about managing conflict, she noted that “not all conflicts occurred face-to-face.” Conflict emerged through email with Dakota’s employees working virtually during the pandemic. Dakota shared an instance where a faculty member reported perceiving a peer accosting them through virtual meetings in Zoom and several email exchanges. The faculty member claimed that the peer was obsessed with them and conveyed the obsession through their interaction via Zoom meetings and in the wording of emails. When Dakota contacted the faculty member accused of being obsessive, the faculty member reported to Dakota that they were not aware of their obsessive behavior. The faculty member reported that had they been made aware of their obsessive behavior, they would have changed how they composed their email.

Dakota did not have an opportunity to converse with the two faculty members involved regarding this situation. The faculty member who received what they perceived as obsessive behavior felt bullied and quickly filed a formal grievance. Dakota received notification of the grievance process and agreed that the faculty members needed to meet with a mediator. During mediation, each faculty member had an opportunity to tell their story about the Zoom and email incidents. The mediator asked the two faculty members to participate in conflict-management training via LinkedIn.

Dakota’s conflict style included practical strategies: one-on-one conversation to listen to the grieved faculty member, retelling facts while listening attentively, and seeking common ground. Dakota uses a prescriptive intervention style because, in her experience, “no two faculty peer-to-peer issues were the same.” Consequently, Dakota isolated the issues and learned how to

individualize and resolve situations for her subordinates. Dakota also accepted the intervention of a mediator and used that intervention as part of a "self-made triangular method to work through peer-to-peer issues."

Dakota acknowledged that there were many consequences to faculty-on-faculty issues. These issues manifested in the department expanded to other departments and ultimately rippled through buildings, creating small support cells amongst other subordinates. Many of these incidents negatively impacted the department because they would affect faculty, staff, and administrative assistants and lower their morale. The longer a peer-to-peer issue would go unresolved, the more significant the negative impact within the department. Dakota recalled the effect on the workplace environment:

> I saw that the conflict between those people who are still, even though it was resolved, however it was resolved, maybe you know, they came to some agreement to end the conflict, I still saw very soured relationships—avoidance. You know that the fight was over, but there were still clouds around, and they just didn't like each other. And that perpetuated a poor working environment.

Coping Mechanisms

Dakota did not have proper training in conflict management. She reminisced about her prior knowledge of resolving conflicts. Her experiences in STEAM, working with coaches training, and K12 teaching all played a role in how she handled the management responsibilities and conflict with faculty. She explained how she was able to cope:

> Having been a K12 teacher and resolving conflict between students a lot of times or conflict between the student and me, especially with grades, this wasn't graded incorrectly or, you know, whatever case, I have a conflict with you and the way you

> created my assignment. And again, I never received formal training as an up-and-coming teacher in conflict management, but I had done it for so long and probably, I could think back to my early days of teaching, I probably asked a lot of my colleagues and veteran teachers, "How are you doing it?" I then emulated from them how to resolve conflict between students or students and me and then just translated that to faculty.

Conflict Management Training

Dakota did not participate in conflict training at either university where she had earned her degrees or through any of the institutions she worked. Her conflict-management training at the higher-education level was essentially through trial and error with a few LinkedIn courses. In K12, teacher preparation includes working with teacher-to-student and student-to-student interrelationships, and Dakota depended on that skill set. The K-12 experiences allowed Dakota to obtain skills in conflict management that later became advantageous to have and use in higher education. Dakota's trial-by-error strategies emerged from her K12 experiences.

Emerson's Story

Emerson worked in a large department at a four-year university in North Texas. She was responsible for supervising and training the office of student and faculty advisors. Also, she supervised the student-centric recruitment and intake processes. Her responsibilities included oversight of online portals used to track data on student inquiries, first-year acceptance to the institution, and academic advisement.

In her position, Emerson was privy to the student advisors' workload, scheduling, and subordinate-to-subordinate engagement both virtually and in the office. Emerson noted that this was a "female-dominated department, and there was a lot of toxicity regarding the workplace

office culture." Her tenure in the position began with many negative experiences in manager-to-manager, manager-to-subordinate, and subordinate-to-subordinate conflict.

Experiences With Conflict

I asked Emerson how conflict emerged within student advisement, and she stated that it emerged because it was a department where "everyone was in everyone's business." She perceived conflict as "a part of a gossip train that goes amongst the subordinates and would reach a manager level more quickly. " She provided an example in which advisors used a computer application program that showed how many students visited in a day. With this computer application program, advisors could compare each other's student loads and make negative assumptions about advising workloads. Emerson explained:

> Regardless of reporting line, regardless of structures or anything of the sort, [conflicts] could be something as small as that [advisors checking each other's workload]. It could also be something as big as directly making someone feel small, tiny things that had to do with the workplace to other things, . . . personality, environment, and culture issues.

There was also an incident regarding discrimination. A subordinate called out the toxic subordinate for "taking control in an area that she perceived to be hers." The friction led to the other subordinate feeling attacked. "So the toxic employee lashed out at the team member in a meeting and blamed this person for being discriminatory, just as retaliation." However, she learned that there was no evidence of discrimination. Emerson found a consistent pattern of conflicts created "out of very small issues that grew into issues, including incivility and bullying."

The university system had an Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) through which employees could report any behavioral issues via a manager. Nevertheless, Emerson found

managers conducting “a lot of gatekeeping,” such as not sharing information about conflicts with leadership or steering grievances away from the OEO office. In response to these conflicts, Emerson found a pattern of “I am feeling attacked, so I’m now attacking you in front of your support and your colleagues as a way to make you feel small.” As much as Emerson tried, she was unsuccessful at resolving these confrontations.

Emerson’s experience with conflict included bullying directed at her. Bullying included taunting, name-calling, and verbal accusations. Emerson had a personal experience that made her gain much weight, and employees taunted her about her weight gain. When I asked Emerson about being the recipient of bullying, she stated that a combination of accusations and inquiries regarding race had once again made her the victim of bullying. Emerson told of a supervisor who had spoken to an employee about being a candidate in a job search. The supervisor told the employee they would “not be getting the position for race-related reasons.” Understanding that this was an illegal practice, Emerson had to approach the supervisor and then report the incident to OEO. Amid the investigation, the candidate felt that Emerson bullied her because she forced her to tell what had happened: “I felt like I was bullying her almost to accuse somebody else.”

Emerson understood that toxic office situations centered on the interpretation of incivility. For Emerson, incivility “can be a perception versus a reality, a lack of tact and professionalism, and a lack of kindness.” Emerson also commented that the practice of bullying primarily emerged out of hierarchies, because “it is harder to feel bullied by somebody who is on your level than someone who is at an extra added level of authority.” Subordinates typically received directives from those with higher-level leadership and reported “being bullied by higher administration.” The OEO received reports of many of these issues so that OEO could solve the conflicts.

Managing During the Pandemic

The change from office work to virtual work during the pandemic provided an opportunity for another layer of incivility within the department. Emerson recalled how managing during the pandemic became harder because virtual platforms meant that all meeting participants needed to work harder to understand the tone. So she made sure to use the word *trust* as much as possible by saying, "I trust you are getting your job done." It was important for Emerson to transition to pick up on subtle inferences of accusations that, this time, were originating via Zoom.

Emerson recalled an issue in which a manager from another department made remarks about an advisor in her department, noting that the advisor was not "doing a good job of managing and that the advisor was incompetent." The situation created a struggle between Emerson and the manager because the person in question was Emerson's subordinate. However, the manager felt that they were assisting in an issue of not being able to tell virtually how this person was being productive on the job. Emerson noted that part of the problem in this scenario was the absence of professional boundaries from manager to manager and an abusive stance on making claims about employees in a virtual setting. Nevertheless, after conversations with the other manager, Emerson conceded that that advisor struggled with time management and getting their work done without "oversight of being in an office and being surrounded by colleagues." Emerson acknowledged that it was tough to manage subordinates during the pandemic.

In response to the consequences of incivility and bullying, Emerson responded that a middle-level manager's daily stress and guilt are exhausting:

> I think that does not necessarily follow chain-of-command consequences, just consequences of how you like or do not like your own job, your ability to do your job, if

> you are dealing with people in personnel issues, and that, and how people feel all the time, the job or responsibilities you have that do not always get done. It is an emotional black hole.

Coping Mechanisms

Despite working in an office with such a high level of toxic relationships, Emerson provided positive and negative feedback to subordinates. She strived for "direct communication." She often would leave the office for organic conversations outside of her office. She preferred to "walk and talk" or sit side-by-side on a bench. These practices allowed Emerson to reflect and "try to get an honest appraisal of what was happening, and then figure out, does this need to go formally to HR or formally to OEO, or my boss."

There were many consequences to conflict, and Emerson consistently strived to report and transfer the cases to where they needed to go. As a woman and a person of color, Emerson would not tolerate suggestions or accusations regarding discrimination and strived to make the office culture work for everyone. Despite that, one of the consequences of conflict was turnover. "The office had had a turnover of 150% for two years." The turnover was due to low salaries, dotted-line multilevel management, and miscommunication amongst team members in a small, mostly female environment.

Conflict Management Training

Emerson attended supervisory training hosted by HR within her university system and acknowledged that, in her experience, "HR is protecting the institution as a whole." Thus, the content of the workshops favored HR rather than supervisors. She had not received training in handling bullying, which was the most common form of incivility in her workplace. Most of her

training came from everyday interactions or what she called “trial by fire.” She used experiences from other managers to build a portfolio of successful and unsuccessful practices.

Emerson was protected at work because she reported to a high-level administrator. She used a discovery process, finding evidence to support discrimination claims and identifying different levels of personal ammunition to learn to work through incivility and bullying. Emerson worked on establishing “perception versus reality” to create an environment where individuals felt they could trust her and provide her with all the details of the incivility they were experiencing at work and virtually. While workplace mentorship was somewhat lacking for Emerson, she consistently attempted to find those in management and human resources who could provide her with advice on managing conflict.

Finley’s Story

Finley was a manager at a college system in North Texas, overseeing faculty hiring, academic instruction, and student engagement. She was also responsible for academic load and student-related policies and procedures. Within the reporting structure of the university system, Finley’s position existed between the college system’s higher-level administration and instructional departments. Her work was vital to the institution’s overall academic performance.

As a middle-level manager, Finley experienced conflict with and amongst her subordinates. When I asked her how conflict manifested, she stated that “conflicts manifest when people don’t understand why other people do things or perceive things.” She also added that conflict is “an opportunity to fix something.” In her position, Finley looked at conflict as positive friction for which she was willing to work to bring forth “healthy conversations.”

Experiences With Conflict

Finley's first experience with conflict was with two administrative assistants who disagreed regularly. For Finley, this meant building an awareness of a conflict that may include racial connotations or a generational issue. Finley stated, "Understand that the younger employee had two kids, so her responsibility is vastly different from a woman in her 60s and doesn't have that responsibility." In this case, with the two administrative assistants, a meeting with a good conversation enabled setting up boundaries so that the two could work collaboratively and respectfully. "Conflict only comes when something is broken, so that is always an opportunity to try harder and do better. Especially with people." However, not all workplace conflicts were this small or easy to mediate for Finley.

Finley began talking about experiences with conflict with an issue—a fragrance—that became a long-term distraction at work. Finley explained that a subordinate wore a strong-scented fragrance to the office, and that fragrance became a nuisance due to its strong odor. The subordinate wearing the strong-scented fragrance was an extrovert, and for Finley, the use of the fragrance was a manner "to make others feel weaker." The fragrance was a distraction in a small office of few employees: The more robust the fragrance, the more unbearable it became to be at work.

The subordinate was made aware that the fragrance was quite strong and produced adverse reactions in other employees in the office. Nevertheless, the subordinate continued to wear the fragrance. The odor became a weapon to bully other subordinates away from the open-concept office area. In an open-concept floor plan, managers and subordinates sit in cubicles without enclosed offices. Consequently, Finley noticed that other employees would have to leave the area to complete their work or that some would be out of the office because they would

become ill. Such was the case that one subordinate “had to go to the hospital because of the noxious odor.”

Finley had to meet with the subordinates impacted and then meet with the subordinate wearing the fragrance to work through this situation. The subordinate who wore the fragrance did not feel anything wrong with the scent. Furthermore, the subordinate did not feel that it was a distraction at work or that it was making others ill. To resolve the issue, Finley had to make the office an “area for people with allergies or sensitivities to smell.” She also transferred the subordinate to a different department. Finley recalled, “I just moved her to another place with many people who were just a lot more gregarious.”

Soon after Finley relayed the conflict example mentioned above, she expressed being baffled by the subordinate’s decision to continue wearing the strong-scented fragrance, knowing that the odor had harmed at least one subordinate badly. She could not understand “why you would willingly want to hurt people?” However, Finley’s answer to her question was how ineffectively the institution worked through conflict. When managers or subordinates relayed conflicts to the attention of HR, in most instances, the HR directors would not take action. If HR decided to take action, it would take several years to resolve the issue. Finley completed the conflict narration, noting that the subordinate resigned and left the university system with time.

In another situation, Finley narrated how a middle-level manager for over three years did not present data to support decisions regarding academic course activation and academic course cancellations. The lead manager created an employee improvement plan for the manager in question and documented many poor decisions. The lead manager submitted the information to HR. However, HR did not respond to the lack of data or the performance improvement plan. The manager continued employment with the university. Finley felt that this type of inaction on

behalf of HR supported the negative behavior of employees who had little regard for accuracy and productivity.

When I asked Finley about bullying, she responded that she did not think of herself as a person who could intentionally bully a subordinate. Yet, she had an incident in which she, unfortunately, complimented someone's attire by remarking that they had purchased an item at a secondhand store. The subordinate felt belittled even though previously, this subordinate had a good relationship with Finley and often joked with her. Finley apologized promptly for the comment. She understood the misinterpretation of her words and the power dynamic between herself and the subordinate. She explained that when there is an issue between a subordinate and a manager, the power dynamic will create an additional layer of friction no matter how minor the issue.

Managing During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, Finley focused on working and maintaining good relationships with her subordinates. As a taskmaster, Finley recalled that she would check in virtually on her subordinates spending intentional time, at least 10 minutes in conversation with each one, primarily looking to celebrate tasks. She was committed to a virtual presence, which helped create a supportive environment during the pandemic lockdown.

Finley reminisced how the virtual aspect of work during the pandemic helped staff members no longer feel that they were intruding in each other's physical spaces. She noted a greater camaraderie even though no one was at the office. Finley commented that the situation between the two administrative assistants with generational differences calmed down and that the virtual conversations unified team members. Her favorite tune was the song "Tell Me Something Good," and she encouraged subordinates to report positive accomplishments. She was glad that

being away from the office minimized many of the issues of subordinates not tolerating each other.

Coping Mechanisms

While working through conflict, Finley would think of a mentor she had had during her career. As part of her conflict strategy, she learned to ask subordinates to tell her in "broad strokes" what they were going through and allow them to provide their perspective to navigate through the truth. Finley stated that "the truth is somewhere between everybody's perspective." This statement resonated with Finley because she understood that we would always see things from just a bit of a different place than how other individuals see things. She said, "My truth is not everyone else's truth, which holds for everyone."

Conflict Management Training

When I asked Finley about participating in conflict-management training, she noted that she participated in training within the university system. Nevertheless, Finley shared that "the training offered by the university system was more of a distraction from our work and from completing essential tasks." Moreover, she commented that the nursing department focused on incivility and was in charge of managing conflict. She explained that the nursing department offered training and workshops on Fridays in which attendees could learn how to work through conflict in the workplace. Consequently, Finley felt that the nursing department was the best team to work on solving conflicts in the workplace and that the responsibility for conflict resolution did not have to reside with middle-level managers.

Finley created a unique conflict-management style filled with robust strategies. The initial step in her strategy was to talk to subordinates and ask questions in "broad strokes." She reported using questions and statements, such as "What is going on? Tell me," and "I understand

where you are coming from." As Finley collected information from subordinates, she channeled her observations and stories into conversations filled with perspectives. She said the reason was that "because I always want to hear what my team is saying and get perspective from everyone before really making next steps."

Halen's Story

Halen was a middle-level manager in employee empowerment and engagement within a college system in North Texas. In this position, Halen used data-driven information obtained through various sources to determine employees' exceptional capacity and proven track records. The employees received acknowledgment for outstanding achievement in various areas, projects, and leadership roles.

Halen was an expert in communication with vast experience in supervising subordinates in academic and nonacademic programs through employee program development and talent management. Her experience supervising employees included working through various uncivil situations in the workplace and building a skill set for practical skills related to interpersonal relationships.

Experiences With Conflict

According to Halen, two critical components that impact conflict are poor communication and lack of confidence. Halen shared that when she thought of the conflicts that emerged in her workplace, she could attribute most incivility and dissension to "lack of proper communication." She mentioned that when "subordinates were in conflict if the conflict was not shared with the manager, there was little the manager could do." Therefore, for Halen, the first course of action as a manager was to make sure that she knew what issues created incivility and bullying amongst her subordinates.

When I asked Halen about her workplace conflict experiences, she noted that uncivil behavior and bullying were impacted by a subordinate's "insecurity with their role, lack of confidence, and lack of confidence in the level they were performing." She noted that this lack of confidence would impact communication and create friction and misunderstandings when subordinates interacted with team members. Halen learned to be a "listener, observer, and conciliatory coach" using her communication skills as the core of her positive interrelationship strategies.

Halen narrated how subordinates trusted her and sought her for her conversational skills. She was someone they trusted and felt comfortable sharing their work problems. If subordinates mentioned not having a good day, Halen talked to them to learn how things "manifested, especially in communication." She would acknowledge subordinates' issues and dedicate time to praising them both personally and virtually. This personal and candid communication style allowed Halen to work through conflict gracefully.

In one scenario, subordinates were concerned about a manager mistreating them. The subordinates reported that the manager was bullying them and that the bullying included jealousy and a power dynamic. Halen had been in her position for a year and noticed that her manager seemed insecure and did not appear to be confident in their position. Halen felt the manager was bullying her, too, but being a neophyte in her role as manager, she decided to wait and see how the behaviors affected others. Subordinates reported the problem to HR, but Halen decided not to. Instead, she observed the jealousy and power dynamic and continued to take note of the bullying.

Halen had a high tolerance for incivility and bullying, which allowed her to be patient about resolving conflict. Consequently, and related to the scenario mentioned above, she listened

to colleagues and subordinates who noticed the manager's bullying behavior and waited to see how the matter progressed. She soon became aware that the higher-level administration knew this manager was bullying subordinates and that it was time to act on the matter. She shared her observations and concerns with HR. Over the next few months, HR released the manager.

In response to her emphasis on communication, Halen provided an example in which she used a phrase that displeased a manager. Halen used the phrase *professional cat herder* to describe her general duties. When she said the phrase to the manager, the manager's tone changed, and Halen noted that they had become agitated. Halen then realized that the phrase out of context was a rude phrase. As was typical of Halen, she relied on her communication skills and rephrased her statement, not saying *professional cat herder*. She apologized to the manager, saying, "I am sorry. It was just a term that I used in my previous role. You know if you are planning, program planning, you know that is basically what you are doing: herding a group of folks together." The manager accepted her apology.

Managing During the Pandemic

When I asked Halen to provide an example of conflict in the workplace during the pandemic, she narrated a situation she had had with a supervisor in which she was being mistreated and bullied. Halen felt "due to workplace consolidation and reorganization, there was a lot of pulling people in different directions, a lot of instability, and just general incivility." The general incivility included arguing, tantrums, and verbal accusations. In addition, subordinates had noted that the supervisor was ignoring the talents and contributions of female employees. Halen recalled that the supervisor impacted the team with what she could perceive was "gender polarity and a preference for working with male employees while dismissing the talents of

female employees." Halen reminisced about the situation and explained what she perceived was occurring:

> I guess during the pandemic, I couldn't figure out if the supervisor respected my position and so when that situation took place during the pandemic, I actually utilized another colleague to communicate with my boss because at the time my boss wasn't listening to me and he did not sound like . . . he did not care. So for me, it was I have to have another plan of action.

Halen guarded herself against incivility in the workplace and used a different technique with the bullying supervisor. While others in the same situation with the bullying supervisor had visited HR about their problem and had done so individually, Halen used a network of colleagues to form a group to work through the bullying. She used the group as a united front to challenge the supervisor who was doing the bullying, a technique that proved successful. By creating the network of impacted colleagues and subordinates, Halen presented the situation to HR and contributed to the solution: the supervisor's transfer to another department.

For Halen, incivility was managed best by monitoring the situation from afar and studying the interactions and communication of those involved. She explained that when confronted by incivility, she would become more aware of understanding the circumstances and added that she "waited for the manifestation to see if I needed to take a different level of action." As a middle-level manager, Halen had learned to give herself time to analyze the incivility and the bullying, so that she could then go through a sequence of steps to handle the situation.

Halen had amassed sufficient uncivil experiences to create resolution-driven steps that she could rely on for working through conflict. Similar to the conflict resolution steps in the work of Hocker and Wilmot (2018), Halen learned to listen attentively to others, have a

conversation, and even have subordinates exchange apology letters. She explained that these steps were necessary before taking action by writing a performance improvement plan or turning a conflict over to HR.

Coping Mechanisms

Halen was a great listener dedicated to helping others. She understood that to work with individuals through their issues at work, "you had to be a good listener. You also had to ask questions." A signature part of Halen's communication strategy was engaging in small talk and asking managers and subordinates about their well-being. She shared how she connected with managers and subordinates in person and virtually in a cheerful and uplifting manner.

Halen would also go into "research mode" to look for information on conflict strategies and how to coach individuals out of incivility. Halen was a certified Gallup Clifton Strengths coach who used her coaching skills as a foundation for working through critical situations that involved incivility and bullying. Through coaching, she provided a pathway to understanding where miscommunication led to friction and incivility.

Conflict Management Training

While Halen completed most of her conflict training independently, she took advantage of learning tools such as LinkedIn and TEDx talks. Through LinkedIn, she completed training in conflict management and then a series of additional pieces of training recommended by the site. She listened to various international speakers with expertise in conflict management through TEDx. Halen attributed partaking in these pieces of training early in her career in human resources, allowing her to build her style for conflict management.

As a Gallup Clifton Strengths coach, Halen used her coaching background as a foundation for talking through situations that involved incivility and bullying. Through various

positions, Halen had accumulated a body of work in conflict management that she could blend into her coaching. When subordinates expressed "having a bad day," Halen would respond based on her experience with how they could best handle their situation. She could listen, inquire, research, and act upon the conflict. She looked for ways in which communication between subordinates and managers and subordinates to subordinates had failed so that she could better understand "what type of conflict was manifesting."

Lynden's Story

Lynden was a middle-level manager in a university system in North Texas that included supervision within academic and student affairs related to mental health, wellness, and student-related food insecurity. In this position, Lynden managed students' and staff's complex personal and interpersonal relationship issues. The role also included planning and executing various university-wide events and workshops.

Through various management positions, Lynden gained experience working with faculty, students, and staff to improve interpersonal relationships within her department and the university community. The work of improving interpersonal relationships included service-area resources and research to support student event programming. Her experience and background also extended to working on intervention, self-management, general camaraderie, wholesomeness, and civility issues.

Experiences With Conflict

When I asked Lynden how a conflict manifested in the workplace, she explained that it was typically because individuals "had different goals, purposes, and perhaps even different names to what was happening to them." She commented that in her experience, conflict was most often a part of miscommunication. Most of her conflicts were with subordinates, and she

could see how subordinates had different expectations. Consequently, Lynden considered that her subordinates were “just not seeing eye-to-eye in conflicts” with each other.

Lynden was mindful of the “power differential” and how different sources of power and hierarchies influenced an individual’s perception of bullying. She added that conflict often included a positional power type that would worry supervisors and subordinates. Positional power and hierarchies could be very harmful, resulting in job loss, especially since Texas is an at-will state. In her view, “the power dynamic was the biggest struggle with conflict in higher education.”

Lynden narrated situations in which the power dynamic favored two bullies: a subordinate and a supervisor. First, Lynden had an issue with a subordinate whose attitude towards her was “I do what I wanna do when I wanna do it.” Lynden explained the subordinate’s behavior and began to suspect that something was compounding the bullying. She later learned that the subordinate was having an inappropriate relationship with a coworker. In the second situation, a supervisor also bullied Lynden and many subordinates in another department. The supervisor was “dismissive and presented himself to be intimidating.” In addition, he was a male in a “predominantly female institution, was taller, was larger, so all of the unwritten rules of power were in his favor.” Lynden shared that this was a humbling situation, because she did not have the experience to work through bullying or this kind of conflict. It marked her learning curve as a supervisor. She also considered the bullying a learning moment because she had “to recognize positional power and the effect that it had” on her.

When Lynden discussed power differential, she acknowledged that her management style was aggressive. Lynden characterized herself as a supervisor with an “A-type personality who would work on a linear plan, A-B-C and D, and it is work-related.” She acknowledged that her

management style, title, and degree all played a part in her characterization as a powerful manager within the institution. At best, Lynden wanted her subordinates to see her as "just another person" to "build trust so that she could communicate and get to know everyone personally." When the power dynamic came into play, Lynden would catch herself and apologize. Lynden was committed to rising above the assumptions of power differential to establish trust with her team members.

Managing During the Pandemic

When I asked Lynden about managing during the pandemic, she recalled the isolation and pain present in the nation because of the COVID-19 lockdown and the circumstances surrounding the death of George Floyd and how that impacted her subordinates and student assistants. She recalled, "Subordinates and student assistants were disappointed, frustrated, and upset for many reasons, and a particular group of students was deeply troubled by what had happened to George Floyd." Lynden felt her responsibility and her department's responsibility to help the subordinates and students work through this period. She remembered the impact of having virtual meetings that were "stifling building connections because virtually you could not feel or readily read the facial expressions of those you were working with" to bring them out of conflict and pain.

Lynden expressed that the pandemic filled many of the subordinates and students with differing levels of anxiety that they did not quite know what to do about while still functioning for the department in an attempt to move forward with their work. She also recalled how "the pandemic reduced the capacity to communicate with one another because it was harder to keep in touch." The issue of cameras not being on or screens not being available created assumptions about not wanting to be present, not caring, or even being angry. Therefore for Lynden,

"COVID-19 raised the anxiety, worry, stress, and tension while reducing the methods for effective communication."

Coping Mechanisms

With so many years of experience with health and wellness, Lynden explained that she had to learn to find an appropriate way to derail or stop conversations and exchanges before they became impossible to contain. There were many instances where she had subordinates and students in distress who would swear and yell at her. Lynden would stop the conversation and say, "If we cannot continue this without some level of respectability, then the conversation is over." Using a statement such as this one allowed Lynden to take control of the uncivil situation.

Lynden would not fall into the trap of writing emails or communicating in a manner that would trigger an individual's emotions. She understood that to deal with incivility effectively, she had to separate herself from the situation mentally and emotionally. Her experience was that in her department, customers, students, parents, and sometimes faculty would use their abusive language or body presence to force a decision in their favor for whatever situation they were bringing to Lynden. Lynden found herself saying, "If we cannot proceed in a certain way, if we cannot agree to what the rules are, we're done for this conversation, then we're all done right here."

Conflict Management Training

Lynden described most of the training she participated in as not being relative to her role. She did not receive supervisor training when she became a middle-level manager. Instead, she recalled that training opportunities arose where she knew it would benefit from learning content in conflict management, so she participated in Title IX and mediation training. Therefore, Title IX and mediation training were "supplemental in nature." Title IX included sexual assault and

violence training; the mediation training included conflict resolution. Lynden was seeking training for supervisors that included elements of university-level professional experiences in academic roles.

Lynden participated in a 40-hour mediation course for the state of Texas in which she learned "to lay the philosophy behind conflict management and how to become an information gatherer and communication bridge." Lynden explained that the workshop included "learning the structure of conflict, what a mediation consists of, and how people agree even when it's small things." She spent additional time participating and practicing conflict management through various scenarios.

Lynden understood that her role in resolving conflict through mediation consisted of ensuring that two or more parties in disagreement could come together, allowing her to guide subordinates through well-thought-out communication practices. During her resolution steps, Lynden had created questions developed through kinesiology and additional mediation training. Lynden's mediation style ensured that she could "detect triggers, types of underlying emotional reasons for incivility, and realize that conflicts can include feeling disrespected." She was keen on identifying unresolved and underlying emotional factors and created work and student-centered environments conducive to dialogue to improve relationships with subordinates.

Tory's Story

Tory was a middle-level manager in an academic department at a North Texas community college. His responsibilities included overseeing faculty, instructional assignments, and academic loads. The department's structure included middle-level managers reporting to associate deans, deans, and the higher-level administrators overseeing academic affairs.

Because of the interconnectedness of faculty affairs and student engagement, many of the responsibilities of this position included ensuring civility amongst faculty, students, and staff. Tory experienced a lot of interrelationship volatility with manager-to-faculty, faculty-to-faculty, faculty-to-subordinate, and subordinate-to-subordinates conflicts. Incivility appeared through personnel issues and student-related issues.

Experiences With Conflict

When I asked Tory to share his experience with handling conflicts, he explained that "conflicts manifest in three ways: (1) Because there is a disagreement on principle, or (2) there is a disagreement in policy, or (3) sometimes gossip gets in the way of the direction of the department being lead." In his experience, individuals that were a part of incivility and bullying could come from multiple entities within the college system. He explained that this was the case because the conflicts could be between administrators, faculty, subordinates, and student workers at any department level and within any position at the college.

Tory shared a conflict with a faculty member who challenged him about salary. The faculty member confronted Tory about the instructional hourly pay rate while confronting Tory about his years of experience and contractual longevity with ageism. The confrontation occurred in a hallway where "the faculty member was yelling that I was the person at fault." Tory resolved the conflict by listening carefully, acknowledging the problem, and explaining that documentation such as pay stubs could help identify discrepancies regarding pay. However, that did not stop the issue of ageism. So after, Tory found himself in another conflict with two long-term female faculty members who undermined his authority, specifically voicing in a departmental meeting that they had more experience and better perspectives on how to lead the

department. Tory again had to listen carefully, acknowledge the problem, and learn to work with the two female faculty members, albeit from a male perspective.

When Tory described bullying, he stated that "employees can use their title or positional authority or their longevity at the institution to bully and manipulate certain systems or outcomes." Furthermore, Tory found that a subordinate could be ill-fitted in their job or position within the department because they did not fit the position. He shared that "conflicts can result because you're either in opposition and you show that verbally or you give some cues nonverbally in public meetings to show that you just do not align."

Tory's experience with bullying included one issue involving assessment cheating in a particular department. Addressing a group of peers, Tory raised his voice and said, "This has got to stop. This is not right. What are we going to do about it because we've been sitting here talking for 30 minutes and no one has come up with the solution?" His peers perceived his tone of voice as aggressive. Tory explained that he was speaking up because no one wanted to suggest how to curb the cheating that was taking place. Tory acknowledged that his communication and tone of voice were not ideal. He shared, "It could have been described as incivility because of my tone—my language was very loud. I was talking at individuals rather than talking with them."

Managing During the Pandemic

Tory shared that the pandemic had brought on many challenges in higher education regarding incivility. He found that incivility permeated because individuals were hard-pressed for time, or people had become accustomed to either a semi-work-from-home model or an online-office-hour model, leading to a gap in communication. He explained that incivility is the following:

> (a) not going to be solved by email, (b) the response time is not always ideal because there's so many moving parts to where an individual can find themselves whether it's an administrator in all-day meetings and they don't get to an email until two days later and employees frustrated because you didn't answer my email within 24 hours.

He expressed how a lapse in communication could cause incivility because the perception may have been that one did not value a concern to address it immediately. He added that the pandemic also showed that individuals would use the slightest trigger and create a more significant conflict. Tory offered as examples the verbiage of actual scenarios that initiated conflict:

- You refused to meet with me . . .,
- my timeline was not your timeline . . .,
- the response you gave was not accurate because it took you so long without considering a variety of factors . . .,
- I could have had COVID for five days and have been off by the institutional protocol . . .,
- if you're on leave from COVID, you can't check emails because you're getting your own sick time, so you can't work.

Tory explained that the pandemic showed that employees, supervisors, and administrators needed to find new mechanisms to communicate gracefully with peers so incivility would not occur.

Coping Mechanisms

Tory provided an example of his best strategy for working through conflict. He expressed how he had learned that directing conversations to the subordinate at the center of a conflict

created opportunities to construct questions and statements that would help appease and the subordinate involved in the conflict conversations. He explained that he could resolve incivility and bullying if he did so with gracefulness and tolerance. Providing the person in conflict all of his attention helped bring resolution.

Tory added how he wanted to be fair to the mediation process with both he and the employee involved walking away with what they both heard. He added that they both tried to work towards a solution in this manner. He shared the importance of being "intentional about using meaningful words to say: *Yes, we can disagree,* but I will have five bullet points in my response to demonstrate to the other side that I have thought this through"

Conflict Management Training

Tory explained that his conflict-management training and strategies were primarily self-taught. He learned to manage conflicts through "trial and error." He attributed creating strategies to his many dialogues with his mentors and how that allowed him to "recalibrate my own thoughts of here's how you work through a situation." He shared that he had attended helpful professional development seminars as he navigated conflict management through trial and error.

Tory shared how he had participated in a particular workshop in which participants shared the many reasons individuals fall into conflict. In this particular workshop, he and other participants examined case studies with members of HR. These case studies used in the workshop had occurred within the institution and demonstrated the many ways the conflict could be resolved. There was a sharing of manager-to-manager dilemmas and various ways of handling incivility and bullying. Tori explained how working through scenarios allowed for a comprehensive approach to applying a good solution because institutionally, conflict could emerge from any area or department of the college system. He stated:

> Having multiple examples of where bullying and instability can come from, hopefully, as a manager you can kind of cue yourself into *I really need to pay more attention to and be more intentional about my responses* when these issues bubble up or when I hear about them.

Having participated in this type of scenario training with human resources, Tori built an intervention strategy suitable for his needs and his faculty, students, and staff. He would begin his strategy by allowing the individual with a conflict to speak first, then giving his response using keywords that the person used, and then summarizing his response.

> I can say OK I agree with you, I agree to disagree with you, or I need some more time to really digest what you said and we need to schedule a follow-up meeting because I wanna be fair not only to the process, but I want us both to walk away with what we both heard and we both tried to work towards a solution.

Tory summed up his strategy by recalling how he closed the conflict-related conversations where it was satisfactory for all employees and the college system.

Skyler's Story

Skyler was a middle-level finance department manager in a university system in North Texas that included supervision within the bursar's office and students' academic affairs. Skyler and her team managed all duties related to the on-site and virtual visits, application processes, acceptance to the institution, and related payment for incoming students. The daily academic and financial operations included all tasks occurring prior to the first day of class and bridging services to the first-semester experience. The finance department team members worked with academic and student support managers to accomplish daily operational goals.

As a middle-level manager with many years of leadership experience and many higher-level administrators as mentors, Skyler knew how to establish good rapport with department managers and supervisors from all areas of the university system. For her subordinates, Skyler was a trainer, a role model, and a daily facilitator ready to teach a process to create a pleasant and equitable environment. She created opportunities to recognize and resolve conflict to allow for exemplary interrelationships.

Experiences With Conflict

Skyler accomplished a personal goal as a manager—assessing her strengths and weaknesses to know her leadership capacity. Her perspective on conflict was that conflict had two ways of emerging: conflicts manifested internally in the department and externally through other departments. She explained that through her department and the "interdependence between offices," she had on-site and remote subordinates. Both groups had issues with miscommunication, especially in light of the subordinates' differences in personality and ego.

As part of Skyler's daily responsibilities, she would assess her subordinates' temperaments. She understood that they became frustrated and had questions about decisions she would make, such as "Why is she doing this? I don't understand her decisions." Skyler confronted employees regarding these questions and reported being lucky that inquiring about their frustrations would not escalate into conflict:

> There might be talk amongst other employees, but I only have one instance where I've had to confront an employee. But in terms of strong aggressive confrontation, maybe once every now and then. I'll get to that point and say "Hey?" [to the subordinate to ask what is going on]. But for the most part, when there's just different egos and personalities, a manager has to manage that too.

However fortunate Skyler felt about knowing herself and her subordinates' temperaments, her focus on working with conflict with her subordinates took away from her happiness and satisfaction at work. On one occasion, she relayed the following to her supervisor:

> I come to work and I feel like I don't have a purpose because I just feel like I'm managing people. I don't feel like I'm helping my students because I'm approving time here, considering time off over here, this person wants to go do this, whatever. It just becomes a lot.

An example of a conflict is Skyler's issue with a subordinate, an advisor, who had made a mistake with a student's transcript. After a brief conversation with the student, Skyler understood the terrible predicament the student was in was due to an error in courses and the student would not be able to graduate. After reviewing the student's transcript, Skyler spotted the error and noticed the financial aid issue impacting re-enrollment alongside the advisor's mistake. Since Skyler had excellent relationships with her department chairs and higher-level supervisors, she very quickly received approval to add the student to an approved course and negotiate completion towards graduation.

When Skyler met with the advisor in charge of the student's transcript, she reproved the advisor for not asking her and other subordinates about processes and procedures. Having permission to override and correct clerical errors was one of the perks of Skyler's strong relationship with her superiors, yet she did not take it for granted. She recalled, "I have permission from the chair to clear this mess." Moreover, Skyler took time after the conflict to teach the advisor what to do in that situation to be prepared to make good decisions.

In another scenario, Skyler had to work carefully with a subordinate advisor's personality, ego, and ageism. The advisor habitually arrived to work unannounced, pulled the

curtains and closed the door. She perceived Skyler as young for a manager and would not report to her regarding office issues nor personal issues. This advisor had received poor task reviews from students, so Skyler looked for an opportunity to address the poor reviews with her hoping that at the same time she could mitigate the issue of the advisor operating alone in a silo. In an office visit, Skyler advised the subordinate, "You don't have to change yourself; we're here; and if you wanna talk or share, you can come out and do that, you know."

To work through this conflict effectively, Skyler created two more instances for intervention. When students had their advising appointments with the advisor, Skyler would approach the advisor and say, "Hey, how was your appointment?" Last, approximately six weeks after the second visit, for validation of job performance, Skyler visited and talked with the advisor:

> OK, We talked about this, but I need you to work on this a little bit. These are the areas where I really want you to strengthen or work on, but look at all these things that you accomplished or that you find better . . . I'm just really proud of you!

Skyler consistently contributed to the development of her subordinates through teachable moments regardless of their perception of her age or management experience. She was never the bully, nor was she bullied.

Managing During the Pandemic

In describing her management style, Skyler shared that there was no difference between managing during the pandemic and managing prior to the pandemic. Skyler was an "advocate of working remotely" because she appreciated the flexibility. During the pandemic, Skyler had to hire an administrative assistant. Soon after, she had conflict with the administrative assistant regarding responding on time to incoming emails and messages. Skyler had a benchmark of how

many emails subordinates could respond to in an 8-hour work day, and Skyler could see that the new admin was not fulfilling the task. She promptly called the admin to address the issue, yet she used the confrontation as a teaching moment. She expressed to the admin, “You don’t have to answer all of the emails, but I sure can’t see your responses. What are you doing?” The admin responded that she did not know how to answer them. So Skyler said to her:

> Well, if you don’t know how to answer them, why don’t you just say that? That you don’t know how to answer them? Because I can Zoom with you and tell you how to answer them and we can answer them together. We can look at different scenarios and then when you tell me that you’re OK, that you can do these by yourself, you can respond to them by yourself. If you don’t know, then just truly tell me that you don’t know, call me again, and we’ll continue working on them.

Skyler explained how she cared, especially to avoid coming across as bullying; she was firm yet guided the admin through the task, making herself available even after the fact.

Coping Mechanisms

When I asked Skyler about her coping mechanisms, she responded that she swayed between personal experience and good interpersonal relationships. She explained that she could be “fluffy, in the middle, or super aggressive.” She added, “No matter how I presented myself, I knew that my subordinates came first, even before the students [I advised] and who were my favorite.” She liked being a role model and a facilitator providing teachable moments. Treating her employees gently and congenially meant that subordinates would treat each other the same way.

Skyler had breakfast meetings with her team to discuss goals and outcomes and provide everyone with an opportunity to share their opinions on how processes and procedures in the

department could be improved. Her subordinates appreciated Skyler's ability to manage in a friendly and supportive manner. She had no qualms in telling her subordinates that they could move to management, and she supported those who wanted to move on in their careers.

Conflict Management Training

Throughout her years as a middle-level manager, Skyler benefited from supervisors who quickly became mentors and were willing to help her navigate the world of academic leadership. Skyler commented that she was fortunate that she benefited whenever a mentor learned about a trending management workshop, such as unity as management training. She described how mentors taught her management skills because she "met 33 supervisors in three years who were able to provide the university's history from their perspective, the intricate work of a new academic middle-level manager, and how universities work as private, legislative institutions."

The techniques that Skyler applied at work for conflict management emerged from all of the mentors' teachings and Skyler's experiences in working with others. Skyler drew parallels between the experience of raising her daughter and working with subordinates for the first time. She mentioned how she would give subordinates "a long leash" to allow them to be themselves and then learn from them how to work with them. Her nonverbal communication, specifically her facial gestures, which she explained were pretty dominant in her communication, allowed her subordinates to know what she was thinking and what she was feeling. Skyler defined her conflict-management style as being open to communication and negotiations rather than "putting her foot down."

Wrigley's Story

Wrigley was a middle-level manager at a North Texas higher education system. The responsibilities of student services included counseling, student leadership, student experience

accountability, health services, wellness, active life, and community service through learning projects. Wrigley was a manager with a wealth of experience and training in interrelationships as a mentor, role model, and bivocational minister.

Wrigley worked diligently with all of the cohort departments, ensuring that his subordinates and staff had good relationships so that, as a team, they could provide the best and highest quality performance of any student service department. His primary goal as a manager was to be a great role model for students and a great leader for subordinates to emulate. He used his communication style and demeanor as assets alongside his conflict skills for working through incivility and bullying.

Experiences With Conflict

Wrigley confided that he had rarely conflicted with colleagues in his many years of management. Most of the conflicts he had experienced were student-related or manager-to-subordinate. In his experience, the size of the team determined the level of conflict. He mentioned that "generally smaller teams have less conflict or larger teams that have a little bit more conflict. I think that just deals with the number of personalities there." Personality issues emerged with a faculty member who disparaged Wrigley's leadership of volunteer students.

When I asked Wrigley how the student-faculty issue unfolded, he narrated that nicely dressed student volunteers were assembled in an open-seating area when an irate faculty member approached them. The faculty member arrogantly asked why they were assembled in an open-seating area. Wrigley addressed the faculty member saying, "Hey, these are our student leaders getting here for the event and we're waiting for instructions. May I ask who you are?" and explained the students' task. The faculty member stormed away and returned to berate a few students, stating that they could not assemble in the open-seating area because they were " of a

certain position or place." Wrigley attempted to address the faculty member, but the faculty member replied, "I don't even talk to you. I have a job to do" and walked away. Wrigley perceived a discriminatory undertone in the response. He understood the faculty member's words had to do with him being a Black male and the students, for the most part, being minority students.

Wrigley explained that his interpretation of the faculty member's statement and response to his question and his realization of the discriminatory undertone was the reason that he remained calm and addressed the faculty member politely. Wrigley wanted the student volunteers to see him as "an adult role model." He wanted to model for the students how to respond to a difficult person and discrimination. While the conflict did not resolve itself, the students observed appropriate civility toward an uncivil faculty member.

Wrigley recalled another issue with a subordinate who had alleged intimidation and how that issue also had discriminatory undertones. Wrigley recalled how he understood that "as a tall, large African American male with a strong voice, I was aware of my presence." He took the subordinate aside for a more private conversation to discuss how or why the subordinate felt intimidated. Wrigley recalled saying, "Let's talk a little bit more about that, you know, the interpretation piece." He asked another subordinate to join the conversation so it would be three members participating in mediation. The subordinate who felt intimidated was a White female. Wrigley recalled that she said, "I haven't been around enough African American gentlemen, and so I'm just intimidated in general when I was around them."

Wrigley asked the subordinate to share what intimidated her, to which he recalled her saying, "You're a little bit louder; you're a little bit more direct." Looking for a way to steer the conversation to a positive point, Wrigley encouraged the subordinate to share information by

stating: “Well, give an example of how I was louder, direct with you. I wanna know so I can correct my behavior.” Nonetheless, Wrigley clarified that he and the other subordinate “were never able to get a concrete answer in this scenario.” Wrigley concluded the story:

> So when the person mentioned that I was intimidating, you know, it was like, OK, let’s talk a little bit more about that, and intimidating, your intimidation, my bullying or pushing you or doing something to you. That it feels that way or is it an implicit bias, a stereotyping that person is having towards me?

Wrigley managed to stay calm during the mediation, which is how he led most of his behavior and conversations. He had few if any instances of bullying or consequences of incivility during his tenure. He reiterated that “I’m not trained as a counselor or conflict mediator or anything like that. I just know if I was in a situation I would want somebody to talk to me and talk to me directly, honestly and with respect.”

Managing During the Pandemic

The lockdown during the pandemic was unfavorable for Wrigley and his college community because it led to a position not being filled that directly impacted students and civility. Wrigley explained that a vacancy for the director of student conduct and prevention education could not be filled. Consequently, he and another colleague had to take on the responsibilities for the position. These responsibilities added to the vast scope of responsibilities that Wrigley already had and added new responsibilities due to the pandemic. Wrigley described what managing during the pandemic was like:

> We’re seeing reports . . . a student is sick with COVID, mom and dad are sick with COVID, dad died last month. I would say we make it five or four so weeks with about 7,000 students on campus and now we’re getting 15 to 20 cases a week. Some of it is

> students just asleep. It's not good. Also students who are housing insecure. Then some of the underlying issues under that is the incivility. That they are in a pattern of incivility around them, so there's room for rude speech and other things—hatred, low self-esteem, everything's there. So these things are happening. It may lead towards bullying.

Wrigley added that the incivility surfacing was due to the confusion and circumstances under the pandemic impacting faculty and subordinates. Students were confiding to their faculty that they were not doing well in class, and not having a supportive family circle made them lean into doubting their ability to obtain a degree. Faculty and subordinates did not have the tools to provide counseling during the pandemic leaving Wrigley and his colleague responsible for dealing with the bullying that had surfaced at home because the nuclear family members wanted the student to stop attending college. With "15 to 20 cases a week" of student concerns, Wrigley, his colleague, the faculty, and his subordinates were overwhelmed and undertrained.

Coping Mechanisms

When I asked Wrigley about coping mechanisms, he provided a picture of his everyday interactions with subordinates and students. He told how he would use his office as a comfort zone and strategically placed the furniture in his office so that once you were seated across from him, there were no electronics, such as a computer between speaker and listener. Most of his conversations were hosted by moving away behind the desk to provide even closer yet appropriate engagement.

On many occasions, Wrigley felt that the best place to conduct a conversation regarding incivility or bullying was the campus coffee shop, benches outside in the courtyard, or anywhere that was a bit more casual. Wrigley wanted to make sure to create the effect that what mattered was the person conversing with him and not the department title on the door or the celebratory

plaques on his walls. He captured the exchange of a typical conversation stating, “Where can we go where you’re comfortable? Not necessarily work uncomfortable, but so that we can have the best conversation possible.”

Conflict-Management Training

Wrigley shared having participated in many pieces of training for conflict and interpersonal stewardship. He participated in conflict-management workshops, conflict-resolution training, faith-based pastoral training, supervisor training, and college system training for conflict management. He stated that his most memorable training was at various conferences such as the National Council of Black and African American Affairs (NCBAAA; a division of the American Association of Community Colleges), and the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASS; formerly NASPA). Conferences offered the opportunity to “work with aspiring directors and your level narrows the focus. We can talk about situations with those groups and things that may be a little bit more of what you may or may not encounter [in incivility].”

Two additional pieces of training that offered Wrigley specific techniques in conflict management were training through the Texas A&M Hiring Practices Conflict Institute and training through the Gehring Institute, a student conduct institute for student conduct officers of which he had vivid recollections. Through these pieces of training, Wrigley acquired “hiring practices, student affairs history, and other topics, which saved my life [as a manager].”

In as much as Wrigley had participated extensively in training, one area he reminisced that he could have benefited from had it been in training was listening—specifically, “listening more than talking.” As a consequence, Wrigley created a model:

> They may speak for five minutes, they may speak for 50 minutes, give them the space to get their concerns out—active listening, so can I repeat back some of the things. Modeling the conversation to say "What I hear you saying is you didn't appreciate when this person did 1, 2, 3, or What I'm understanding is you feel this way. OK. Got it. Cool."

Wrigley expressed that he was not a licensed professional counselor. However, he could provide resources and places with support networks to assist in learning more about personal perspectives and how to diffuse incivility and bullying.

Emerging Themes Analysis

This qualitative study examined middle-level managers' experiences within HEIs in North Texas regarding different types of conflict and to understand the impact of conflict on manager-to-manager and manager-to-subordinate relationships. The first 10 respondents interviewed for the study responded to the email request to participate. It is important to note that middle-level managers included responses in their interviews that reflect the period of lockdown due to COVID-19 in the years 2020 to 2022.

The data collection method was in vivo hand-coding and the NVivo online technology platform's auto coding. The data collected from the 10 participants stemmed from answering the study's research questions:

RQ1. How do HEI managers perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

1a. How do conflicts manifest in the workplace?

RQ2. How do HEI managers resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

2a. What types of interventions are used to resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

RQ3. What are the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying at HEIs as told by middle level managers?

RQ4. What are the HEI managers' experiences with conflict management training?

Each participant was assigned an alias and a unique numerical identifier. Table 1 includes the participants aliases and the type of higher education institution.

Table 1

Summary of Participants and Type of HEI Where They Worked

Aliases	Type of HEI where they work
Azary	College District
Charlie	College District
Dakota	University System
Emerson	University System
Finley	College District
Halen	College District
Lynden	University System
Tory	College District
Skyler	University System
Wrigley	College District

Overarching Themes and Subthemes

Through the stories of 10 participants and the data collected from their interviews, four central themes emerged that provided a view of the complexities of conflict management at the HEI middle-management level. The 10 participants in this study were at similar points in their management work history. Each had served as a middle-level manager within an HEI for more than two years, with most participants surpassing six years of HEI manager experience. Participants shared similar workplace experiences with interpersonal relationships, including

tension, stress, incivility, and bullying. They also shared how they managed incivility with unique approaches to managing conflict.

The following section includes an analysis of the four overarching themes and two to four subthemes per theme that emerged from the data collected in the study (see Table 2). The section also describes how participants worked through various conflicts with different degrees of conflict training skills.

Table 2

Overarching Themes and Subthemes

Structural challenges	Sources of conflict	Conflict training	Managing conflict
Reporting Structures	Poor Communication	Informal learning	Coping Mechanisms
Organizational Realignment	Power Differential	Institutional (HE) Training	Grievance Processes
Management in Academic Settings	Work Environment	Workshops	Creative Solutions
		Conferences (CEUs)	

Theme 1: Structural Challenges

NVivo-coded data revealed that participants experienced a variety of management experiences within a framework of reporting structures impacted by a disruption. Various structural challenges impacted the middle-level management positions that the participants obtained. These structural challenges included dotted-line management responsibilities, new reporting structures due to reorganization, and job descriptions compounded by unfilled vacancies.

Each of the 10 participants described their employment in middle-level management in an HEI and shared their experiences with structural challenges during their interviews. The importance of this data is that instability in the HEI reporting structure added stress at the middle-management level during the post-hiring period and commencement in the position. The

coding showed concern regarding workplace stability that impacted tension and stress when a manager needed their focus on their job and how to work through conflict.

In the 10 participants' vignettes, the absence of job titles and places of employment ensured anonymity. However, participants shared descriptions of the starting point of their middle-management level journey and their overall responsibilities. They offered views of their difficulties in their new, current management positions. Of the years of experience in middle-level management, the participants referenced their latest and most current management positions in this section on structural challenges.

Subtheme 1: Reporting Structures. Middle-level management positions in HEIs can have reporting structures that are dotted-lined. An HEI middle-level manager may report to an academic department while at the same time reporting unofficially to a nonacademic department, a community-based workforce department, or to C-Suite administrators. Participants shared their departmental reporting structures and illustrated how the dotted-line configurations added tension and stress. Seven of the 10 participants stated the negative impact of dotted-line responsibilities.

Azary and Charlie shared how dotted-line responsibilities to other managers and departments made it challenging to establish rank and order immediately with their subordinates. Azary's and Charlie's responsibilities extended to campus buildings and external partnerships through customer-service relations and institutional data. Azary shared how the interwoven middle-management reporting structure impacted her opportunity to "establish a leadership management role early in her career." Azary also stated that the "dotted-line reporting structure to various managers allowed for miscommunication and mistakes." Similarly, Charlie shared that in her experience, there was much tension arising from "inquiries regarding external corporate

partnership contracts" and questions regarding "accountability" and that those inquiries caused friction with other managers.

Participants Skyler and Wrigley had reporting structures that reached the C-Suite level. For Skyler, the concern was that the C-suite leaders required reports of her work and the responsibility of ensuring her subordinates lead students to their most significant potential. Hence, she needed to show cohesion within the dotted-line reporting structure:

> I would say that outside of my unit, I'm sure it happens all over higher ed, but in the graduate world, there's some interdependence between offices, so I rely heavily on admissions, my faculty members, the chairs of the departments, and while we're on that one, I have to build strong relationships.

Wrigley understood his management responsibilities within the dotted-line alignment for reporting productivity. He offered advice he was given by a former manager so that he could be the best manager:

> One of my old mentors told me years ago, "You know, when you move into a position, then you start to manage and supervise people, the most difficult part of managing and supervising people is people." I was just like I don't know what that means! As I started to manage and supervise people, I understood exactly what he meant: people are the wildcards! Sometimes we don't know what's going on in someone's head.

Participants noted that structural challenges and the ensuing dotted-line reporting structures created stress that took away from the immediate need to work through conflict with subordinates. Moreover, each structural challenge presented a deflection of intellect and energy that Wrigley needed to begin his job as a middle level manager.

Subtheme 2: Organizational Realignment. Participants in the study described the

initial days in the middle-management position and how subordinates viewed them as neophyte managers. For example, when I asked Charlie the first research question (How do conflicts manifest in the workplace?), she described her experience as a new manager in her current role and within a new organizational structure::

> Conflict can also be directly between supervisor and employee depending on, you know . . . we are in a completely new structure, so we just recently completely restructured. My department is brand new, my direct supervisor is very new, and very new to leading a team. So . . . very different styles.

Halen had a similar experience in her most recent middle-level manager position, which was a part of a system-wide restructuring process. She shared the strife in beginning a job in an unsteady organizational structure:

> I believe that my supervisor was overworked during the pandemic. I think that he and the transition, because not only did we have the pandemic but our college district went through a transition, it overworked him. So I think, in that situation, because he was overworked dealing with our team, all of us, [were impacted].

Similarly, Dakota shared that while she was new in her current middle-level manager position, there were conflicts in the department that she inherited and for which she was responsible:

> Sometimes the conflicts . . . that I was involved with that were between two faculty members were kind of things that came to me that had been harboring for a while, and they just kind of came to a head where you know. I guess I inherited them.

Tory also inherited past issues with subordinates yet used the occurrence to create new ways of looking at existing problems:

> Before I assumed the role . . . there was previous history, so the language that was used with that employee previously was "Well, that's just how it is. You're going to have to deal with it." So, in some instances one employee can be the recipient of past bullying experience to where the incivility is the direct result of some previous interdepartmental history.

Subtheme 3: Management in Academic Settings. Participants in the study had a minimum of two years of experience as middle-level managers in HEIs in academic and nonacademic departments within their institutions. During the interview, they recalled how they had begun their careers in middle-level management in HEIs and the initial positive and negative experiences. Participants shared being perceived as neophytes even though they had management experience from previous positions in HEIs. They explained how they accessed other managers for their middle-level management experiences. Azary, for example, shared that she had "little experience working with conflicts" stemming from her new and current position, so she relied on having "good rapport with colleagues" in addition to "relying on strong communication skills."

Dakota shared that prior experience in K-12 was her springboard to middle-level management in an HEI:

> Having been a K-12 teacher and resolving conflict between students a lot of times or conflict between the student and me, especially with grades, you know, this wasn't graded incorrectly or you know whatever case, I have a conflict with you and the way you graded my assignment . . . and again I never received formal training as an up-and-coming teacher in conflict management, but I had done it for so long and probably, I could think back to my early days of teaching, I probably asked a lot of my colleagues and veteran teachers, how are you doing it? I then emulated from them how to resolve

> conflict between students or students and me and then just translated that to working with faculty [in the HEI middle-management position].

Emerson described her time as a middle-level manager in an HEI as one with many negative experiences within every workplace interrelationship model: manager-to-manager, manager-to-subordinate, and subordinate-to-subordinate.

> Here [at my university system] we had a pretty pervasive issue of bullying. I was warned about it as soon as I joined by my boss—actually, before I even started, who said, "We do have this issue here." I don't think he told me the extent of that; he said there's an issue with employees. Then in my first couple of weeks of work, you know, I started listening and you get to know people, taking them out for coffee or whatever,
>
> and it was very, very evident that there had been ongoing [bullying] situations.

Lynden shared how the new position and her personality had her struggling at the beginning of her HEI management experience:

> I would think that most of the time, in my interrelationship examples, that it was a real learning curve for me as a supervisor to just be, like I said, I'm sorry that I keep going back to it, but just recognizing positional power because I think that I tend to be a type A personality, really direct.

Lynden also sought to understand her encounters with subordinates and how her position, title, and role affected subordinates when she ensured that they understood her expectations. She added that

> My expectations were just like A-B-C and D and it's work related, let's get it done. Then I kind of walk away and I think I have had a learning curve and I'm still learning; that part of that relationship is about building that relationship, building that trust,

> communicating, getting to know someone on a personal level. I think that I make these assumptions sometimes that, of course, they're going to see me as just a person, but I think that what I have come to realize, especially for younger professionals, is that they see that title, or they see the role.

When they began their management jobs in HEI, Azary and Halen struggled in their new positions as middle-level managers. Despite having experience in management through other positions, the experience in an academic setting presented new challenges. Within these new challenges, participants of the study told how the vulnerabilities of a new position juxtaposed with the expectation of immediately working through conflict management with managers and subordinates. Azary explained that it was through observation that she collected management experiences that she could later use as a middle-level manager with her subordinates.

> I kind of felt that some people were kind of jealous I had gotten that position, OK yeah, it kind of felt that way because every time a position opened some people always apply trying to move up the career ladder.

Halen created an internal and external network of managers so that she could regularly consult them regarding management issues in the workplace. This manager network gave her sound advice on working through complex interpersonal relationships:

> I have colleagues that I keep in my back pocket because I might wanna listen to what they had to handle, in the past, any of their situations—what they would be willing to share of course or to just take advice.

Charlie, who had relocated from Europe with management experience, was unsure of the ethnic identity struggles in the United States. Charlie was also concerned about how other managers perceived her management style:

> I carry a lot of knowledge from the prior role that I held for over six years and people do wanna tap into it, but that's not necessarily aligned with my current [work situation]. Probably, many years ago, there was not that much conversation [about discrimination]. I was not privy to. I was oblivious maybe to some of the inequities, how I look, my complexion, that I associate that with maybe my upbringing in a certain environment.

Moreover, Charlie shared that she used her former background in corporate sales to build her management skills. Charlie recalled, "Every job in every country I have known, I have had some management leadership training." Consequently, she used her leadership skills in working with partners to create consensus. This transition of formerly obtained skills to newly acquired position provided an altruistic way to overcome the shortcomings in management skills in an academic setting at the inception of obtaining the position.

Theme 2: Sources of Conflict

Participants provided rich descriptions of the complexities of people management in the theme of sources of conflict. Data coded for this theme revealed participants' perceptions of conflict in their work setting. Restating Wrigley, who offered advice from a former manager, "When you move into a [management] position, you start to manage and supervise people; the most challenging part of managing and supervising people is people." Moreover, Skyler's perspective on people and conflict was that institutionally there is a bifurcated pathway for conflict: conflict may manifest "internally [within a department] or can emerge externally through other departments." She also noted that conflict emerged through "personality and ego differences." While Wrigley and Skyler mentioned people, pathways, personality, and ego as sources of conflict, Tory shared what he perceived to be the three ways in which conflict

manifests: “(1) Because there is a disagreement on principle, (2) there is a disagreement in policy, or (3) gossip.”

Subtheme 1: Poor Communication. Participants shared their views of discourse and how verbal and written communication are essential tools. Managers and subordinates exhibited a variety of behaviors that had an adverse reaction in workplace interrelationships. These nonverbal and verbal behaviors were part of conflict manifested at all stages of incivility and bullying: beginning, middle, and end. The behaviors were exhibited by managers and subordinates alike and contributed to the workplace stress, tension, incivility, and bullying. Team members exhibiting these behaviors became a central part of the conflict in the workplace, exacerbating the normalcy that should prevail in an office environment. The behaviors negatively impacted engagement and conversations and caused much distress to managers attempting to do their jobs. Participants disclosed that conflict in HEIs manifested from manager to manager, manager to subordinate, and subordinate to subordinate. Figure 1 summarizes codes used by participants to describe behaviors that led to conflict encountered in the workplace.

Figure 1

Behaviors Manifested During Conflicts

Disrespect	Poor boundaries
Incompetence	Poor judgment
Insensitivity	Poor communication
Mistakes	Pressure
Misunderstandings	Sheltering information
Nonverbal gestures	Unrealistic expectations

Azary felt that subordinates are essential team members who deserve to receive information communicated to them in the most error-free and understandable manner no matter who provides the information or where the information exchange occurs within the work setting. Charlie contributed that the moment individuals accept the middle-level management position, they are responsible for ensuring that the communication process conveys clear, correct, and comprehensible messages. Data collected from all of the participant's responses in the study revealed their perception of poor communication as a source of conflict.

Azary acknowledged that "miscommunication and mistakes" brought on many conflicts in her department. She shared that despite having little experience dealing with conflict, she supplemented her daily exchanges with "practical communication skills and good rapport with managers and subordinates." She relied on clarity and preciseness in her communication to document incivility and workplace bullying and strongly advocated "clear communication, verbal or written."

Charlie noted that misunderstandings that impacted communication came from how teams formed, the discrepancies in their workload, and the differences in their jobs and responsibilities. She added that "conflicts also show up in a form of just unrealistic expectations from other teams because a team will only know what they may have requested of a person, but they don't know all of the other teams."

Emerson recalled how the proximity and closeness in her department contributed to disorder because "everyone was in everyone's business," creating a chaotic environment precipitated by poor communication. She perceived conflict as stemming from a very informal part of discourse: gossip. She recalled how communication in her department was "a part of a gossip train that went amongst the subordinates and quickly reached a manager level." She

expressed empathy and concern for instances in which subordinates exhibited gossipy behavior that contributed to a lack of focus. Similarly, Finley expressed how disorder and chaos impacted conflict with and amongst her subordinates. She recalled how conflict manifested amongst her subordinates, stating that it occurred "when people didn't understand why other people did things or when people didn't understand how they perceived things."

Halen perceived poor communication as being impacted by an individual's view of their preparedness in their position. She expressed those two critical components impacted conflict: "poor communication and lack of confidence." She also alluded to verbal exchanges and the impact of words and phrases. She provided examples of vocabulary words that could add negative synergy to the communication process and create conflict. Such was the case of her using an endearing term: *cat herder*. In a conversation with a fellow manager, the term cat herder was perceived as inappropriate wording to describe subordinates. Due to her peer's negative perception of the term, Halen redirected her statement, eliminating it. Her correction appeased the individual, yet Halen admitted that this instance taught her the issue of poor communication and misunderstandings and the impact of conflict in interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

Social unrest in the nation also created opportunities for poor communication. Lynden explained that the tragic death of George Floyd during lockdown impacted her subordinates and student assistants. She remembered how her subordinates and student assistants were "disappointed, frustrated, deeply troubled by what had happened." She recalled the impact of virtual meetings and noted that "virtually you could not feel or readily read the facial expressions of those you were working with to bring them out of pain."

Poor Communication During the Pandemic. Several participants referred to the impact of the pandemic and contrived virtual communication during the lockdown period. Charlie

recalled how meetings began to take place and how managers had to find new ways to monitor productivity. She stated, “many conversations occurred online, manager to manager, to learn different ways of measuring engagement.” She also recalled the toll visual communication took on various aspects of verbal communication. She shared that “visibility online brought forth other tangibles that could lead to misinterpretations or stereotypes: “tone of voice” and “inflection.”

Dakota shared an example of the power of virtual communication and the implications of perceptions created through facial gestures and tone of voice. She shared the idiosyncrasies of a virtual meeting in which a faculty member perceived that a peer faculty member was accosting them. The faculty member claimed their peer showed obsessive behavior through Zoom meetings and email. When Dakota reached out to the faculty member accused of being obsessive, the faculty member replied that they were unaware of obsessive behavior.

Like Dakota, Lynden expressed similar issues with poor communication during the pandemic. She recalled how “the pandemic reduced the capacity to communicate with one another because it was harder [for managers and subordinates] to keep in touch.” Lynden also noted that the absence of individuals on virtual cameras created the perception that others did not want to be present, did not care, or were angry. Lynden concluded that “COVID-19 raised the anxiety, worry, stress, and tension, while reducing the methods for effective communication.”

Similar to Dakota and Lynden, Tory explained his perception of the lapses in communication during the pandemic. He shared that during the pandemic, conflict was not going to correct itself “by email, nor by response time.” Tory noted that a lapse in communication could induce incivility because there could be the perception that no manager valued a concern or addressed it immediately. In addition, he noted that the pandemic showed that the combination

of conflict behaviors and triggers would create a more significant conflict. Tory offered examples of the verbiage of actual scenarios that initiated conflict, such as "the response you gave was not accurate because it took you so long without considering a variety of factors. I could have had COVID for five days and have been off [work] by the institutional protocol [and was unable to respond]." Tory summarized his experience with poor communication and explained that the pandemic created the need for managers and subordinates to seek new ways to communicate with peers to curb incivility and its negative impact on interpersonal relationships.

Similar to Charlie, Skyler looked for ways to quantify productivity through virtual communication only to learn that it was nearly an impossible task due to the newness of virtual work during the pandemic. For example, Skyler created a benchmark of 150 emails that subordinates could answer in an 8-hour workday. From Skyler's email application, she could see the number of emails responded to in a workday. Consequently, Skyler could tell if an office administrator was not fulfilling their quota. She offered the example of a new office administrator and how she handled the situation. She contacted the admin to address the situation and told the admin, "You don't have to answer all of the emails, but I sure can't see your responses. What are you doing?" The admin had not responded to the emails because they needed training in communicating in a virtual setting. Skyler offered assistance:

> I can Zoom with you and tell you how to answer [the emails] and we can answer them together. We can look at different scenarios and then when you tell me that you're OK, that you can do these by yourself, you can respond to them by yourself. If you don't know, then just truly tell me that you don't know, call me again, and we'll continue working on them.

Poor Communication Amidst Structural Challenges. Other participants noted that the issue of poor communication also stemmed from structural challenges. Wrigley shared how a vacant position for a director of student conduct and prevention education impacted him and the strategies he could count on for communication. He and another colleague took on the responsibility for the vacant position. The responsibilities impacted Wrigley's capacity to communicate effectively during the pandemic. Wrigley described managing during the pandemic:

> Receiving 15 to 20 [Covid-related] cases a week. Some [incidents] of students just asleep. It was not good. Also, students who were housing insecure. Then some of the underlying issues under that was incivility. That [the students] were in a pattern of incivility around them, so there was rude speech and other things—hatred, low self-esteem—everything was there. So, these things were happening. It led towards bullying.

Wrigley noted that the incivility among students was due to confusion and consternation during the pandemic and that these circumstances impacted faculty and subordinates. Rather than requesting services through counseling or conduct and prevention, students were confiding in their faculty about not doing well in class and not having a supportive family circle. Wrigley explained that faculty and subordinates did not possess the tools to provide counseling during the pandemic. The lack of counseling staff and counseling resources left Wrigley and his colleague responsible for working through the structural challenge to intercede in the bullying that students were experiencing with faculty and at home. Wrigley shared that his communication style and verbal strategies were vital to working through the incivility students and subordinates were experiencing.

Two participants, Charlie and Finley, shared that their perception of poor communication amidst structural challenges and how conflict stemmed from the managers' or subordinates' job descriptions or responsibilities and not understanding what the role demanded of them. Charlie shared how conflict could "just be in the workload because it's coming from so many places, and then there is the confusion at times between prior roles and current roles." Finley had a similar explanation to Charlie.:

> "People don't understand why other people do things or why they perceive things. So, a lot of times it's just because they make assumptions about how other people are acting or feeling and they don't actually take time to, maybe, check in and see how somebody's doing. So, they just kind of run with those generalizations."

Subtheme 2: Power Differential. Participants in the study referenced power differential as a form of disparity between managers and subordinates that morphed into incivility in the workplace. Power differential took the form of minor differences that would unnerve subordinates to significant differences that would impact an entire institution's operational structures and productivity. Power differential went beyond gender and societal norms.

Three participants, Azary, Emerson, and Tory, reflected on how supervisors caused conflicts due to power differential. Azary shared that she perceived managers as stewards of poor attitudes who had control over the demise of manager's and subordinate's career potential. She shared that "sometimes their attitudes do affect our way of seeing the world. You know the supervisors like I said, the worst ones came and mostly ended your career." Emerson explained that regardless of supervisors or reporting line that

> [conflicts] could besomething as big as directly making someone feel small, be condescending towards somebody or talking/making them feel stupid for asking a

> question in front of other people, in a meeting. Tiny things that had to do with workplace to other things, personality, environment and culture issues.

Tory's perception regarding supervisors was that one had to look at how the manager fit into the institution's organizational structure and whether or not that manager was taking advantage of their position or title and using it against other managers or subordinates:

> Employees can use their title or their positional authority or their longevity at the institution to bully and manipulate certain systems or outcomes. There could also be some underlying factors to where you don't fit within the organization. You're not meaningfully aligned in the direction of the institution and that's how the conflict can result because you're either in opposition and you show that verbally or you give some cues nonverbally in public meetings to show that you just do not align. So that's how that conflict can develop.

Halen identified power differential in the relationship between a manager and subordinates. Subordinates were concerned that a manager was mistreating them. They reported that the manager was bullying them and that the bullying included a power dynamic. Being a neophyte in her role as manager, she waited to see how the behavior affected others. Noting her inaction, subordinates reported the problem to HR. Halen observed the jealousy and power dynamic and took note of the bullying.

Finley added to the concept of the power differential. She explained that during an issue between a subordinate and a manager, the power dynamic creates an additional layer of friction no matter how minor the issue. She shared how she complimented a subordinate's outfit by remarking that they may have purchased it at a secondhand shop. This subordinate, who initially had had a good relationship with Finley, now entered into a different, negative dynamic: the

subordinate was now in conflict with Finley. Finley apologized, recognizing that the power dynamic influenced the misinterpretation of her words.

Like Haden and Finley, Lynden was mindful of the "power differential" and had "to recognize positional power and the effect it had" on her as a manager. She understood the different power sources and hierarchies and how they influenced an individual's bullying. She added an example of a subordinate whose attitude was "I do what I wanna do when I wanna do it." Lynden suspected something was compounding the situation and learned that the subordinate was in an inappropriate relationship at work. She also recalled that conflict often included a positional power that impacted managers. She described a supervisor who was "dismissive and intimidating, was taller, was larger, so all of the unwritten rules of power were in his favor." She shared that positional power and hierarchies were harmful, resulting in job loss, especially in Texas, an at-will state. Lynden perceived that "the power dynamic was the biggest struggle in higher education."

Two additional study participants suggested power differential as an issue in HEIs: Tory and Wrigley. Tory referenced years of service as an example of when two long-standing faculty members undermined his authority, acknowledging that "they had more experience and better perspectives on how to lead the department." Tory understood that "employees can use their title or positional authority or their longevity at the institution to bully and manipulate certain systems or outcomes."

Wrigley referred to height and size as a form of power differential. He had a subordinate who perceived that he intimidated her. He understood that "as a tall, large African American male with a strong voice, he was aware of his presence." Wrigley recalled saying to the subordinate, "Let's talk a little bit more about that, you know, the interpretation piece." Wrigley

recalled that she said, “I haven’t been around enough African American gentlemen, and so I’m just intimidated in general when I was around them.”

Power Differential and Communication. Wrigley identified an additional type of power differential: communication. This form of power differential included a perception of power based on vocal tone and conversational strategies. For example, when Wrigley asked the subordinate to share what intimidated her about him, she added, “You’re a little bit louder; you’re a little bit more direct,” to which Wrigley encouraged “an example of how I was louder, direct with you.” However, Wrigley “was never able to get a concrete answer.” Wrigley concluded the story by retelling that he told the subordinate, “Let’s talk a little bit more about that, and you know intimidating, my bullying or pushing you or doing something to you.” He also commented on how he reflected on the incident adding, “That it feels that way, or is it an implicit bias, a stereotyping that person is having towards me?”

Subtheme 3: Work Environment. Participants in the study referenced the architecture, workspace, floor plan, and other items related to the work environment as supplemental to conflict. The environment could mean the square footage of the office space, the office enclosure with windows and doors, and the proximity between cubicles and desks as spaces that allow managers and subordinates to trigger each other’s behaviors.

Charlie provided an example of how the work environment was a source of conflict with a subordinate who perceived that a team member was not performing on the job because they were not at their desk. Charlie explained the situation, “The person they are complaining about, they have an office, a desk, and a computer, but their role is not to sit at that desk and do data entry.” However, that subordinate was “a community liaison employee.” The subordinate was

not expected to be at their desk as they had a roaming position and worked from any college area.

During the pandemic, Charlie worked with a manager who perceived a computer, laptop, or technical device with the camera turned off as insubordination. A potential issue with a subordinate turning a camera off may have had to do with the location the subordinate was working from: if the subordinate was working from a bedroom, there was justification for the subordinate to have the camera off. Regardless, not being on camera increased conflicts between managers and subordinates who would argue over visibility and presence. The issue meant that managers had to find other options besides having cameras on to learn how productivity could be quantified. The managers had to use other tracking portals to view work-related activity online.

Dakota acknowledged that the proximity of other departments or offices in other buildings with staff mired in conflict impacted her department because conflicts migrated. The rippled effect of gossip or the creation of click groups grew through buildings allowing small support networks to grow amongst subordinates. These incidents negatively impacted the department as they filtered to faculty, staff, and administrative assistants. Dakota recalled the effect on the workplace environment:

> I saw that the conflict between those people who are still, even though it was resolved, however, it was resolved, maybe you know, they came to some agreement to end the conflict, I still saw very soured relationships—avoidance. You know that the fight was over, but there were still clouds around, and they just didn't like each other. And that perpetuated a poor working environment.

Dakota also shared the opposite of gossiping was ghosting. She described it as "avoidance. You know, I'm mad at you so I'm just going to avoid you, and then the other person wondering, 'I don't know why you're mad at me.'"

Skyler had similar experiences to Dakota. Her perspective was that conflict emerged internally within the department and externally through other departments. She described her work environment as plagued with conflict due to the "interdependence between offices." She had an in-office subordinate who had issues with miscommunication due to subordinates' personalities and egos. She had an advisor who arrived to work and would not greet others. She pulled the curtains and closed the door, using her enclosed office as a shield to intentionally not communicate with others physically: no one could visit the subordinate.

Lynden attributed conflict at work as a byproduct of competition in the workplace. She shared "parties are going into a situation and are wanting to get [ahead]. They have different goals, different purposes, so they have different names and especially if those are competing names, then there is the potential for conflict there."

Emerson shared how office space, proximity, and virtual connections presented many opportunities for conflict due to the work environment. As a middle-level manager, Emerson had access virtually and in the office to the student advisors' workloads, schedules, and subordinate-to-subordinate communication. She described the work environment as "a female-dominated department, and there was much toxicity regarding the workplace office culture." Consequently, advisors using a computer application program that detailed the number of students visited in a day could view and compare each other's student loads and completion rates. The subordinates made negative assumptions about advisement workloads causing conflict in the workplace. Emerson explained the following:

> Regardless of reporting line, structures or anything of the sort, [conflicts] could be something as small as that [advisors checking each other's workload]. It could also be tiny things that had to do with the workplace to other things, you know, personality, environment, and culture issues.

Emerson also shared how subordinates used office space as a form of control of the workplace. She discerned that a consistent pattern of conflicts created "out of very small issues that grew into issues including incivility and bullying. She described an incident in which a toxic subordinate created a conflict when "taking control in an area that she perceived to be hers." The friction between the subordinates led to a subordinate feeling attacked. Emerson recalled that "the toxic employee lashed out at the team member in a meeting and blamed this person for being discriminatory, just as retaliation." Emerson concluded that there was no evidence of discriminatory practices in the work environment; however, there was a pattern of retaliation. She shared that the subordinate stated, "I am feeling attacked, so I'm now attacking you in front of your support and your colleagues as a way to make you feel small."

Emerson's university system had an Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) through which managers and subordinates could report conflict; however, Emerson noted that managers were conducting "a lot of gatekeeping" steering grievances away from the OEO office. Therefore, Emerson, a woman and a person of color, did not tolerate discrimination and strived to make the office culture work for everyone. However, at the center of conflict in the workplace was a "turnover of 150% for two years" due to low salaries, dotted-line multilevel management, and miscommunication amongst team members in a small, mostly female environment.

Finley had a unique work environment experience as a source of conflict. Finley had a subordinate who used a strong-scented fragrance, which became a workplace distraction. Finley

described how the subordinate wore the fragrance to the office and how the fragrance became a nuisance and source of conflict. Proximity to the subordinate meant that others in the workplace could smell the strong-scented fragrance. Finley perceived that the subordinate, who was very outgoing, used the fragrance "to make others feel weaker." Finley understood that the aroma was a manner to bully subordinates and keep them away from the open-concept work environment. The robustness of the fragrance made it unbearable for subordinates to be at work and sickened others to the point that they had to receive medical care. Even though the subordinate was made aware that the fragrance produced adverse reactions, the subordinate continued wearing the fragrance. Finley had to meet with the subordinates impacted and designate their area an "area for people with allergies or sensitivities to smell." She transferred the subordinate who wore the strong-scented fragrance to another place with many people who were just a lot more gregarious.

Theme 3: Conflict Training

Participants in the study shared that they had begun their middle-level management experience by participating in general supervisor skill development training. They had received management training as HEI middle-level managers at some point in their careers. However, no training addressed their immediate management needs or related specifically to conflict-management training. For example, Emerson's management position was in student services (admissions, advisement, transcripts, and graduation), and the position presented daily challenges for her and her subordinates. She described her supervisor training experience, stating, "I did attend a handful of sessions and HR usually hosted those. In some cases, I feel like those trainings were helpful, not necessarily conflict resolution specifically, but just how to handle different types of supervisor situations."

Similar to Emerson, Skyler participated in supervisor training. She alluded to a supervisor letting her know to take advantage of available training. The training was "unity as management training." Skyler stated, "This unity as management could work here [be applied to middle management] as a new supervisor just going through some of that content."

Wrigley shared that he had also participated in a variety of training for new managers and that a few pieces of training did include some of the content related to skills that a new manager needed to have in an academic setting, which would be beneficial:

> I feel when I worked in [name of college], interpersonal relationships and their ensuing personal problems were some of the types of training required; you're in a position of leadership authority or title or whatever. These are things you need to have under your belt.

The coded data for the theme of conflict training revealed four subthemes regarding how participants had obtained conflict training: informal learning, institutional (HEI) training, workshops, and conferences in which the participant received continuing education units (CEUs). Participants' attendance in workshops, courses, and lessons were reported using single digits for each iteration. The type of conflict management training participants had accessed or participated in, and the iterations for each training are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants' Conflict Management Training

Aliases	Conflict-mgmt training, # of workshops	Online training, # of courses	Conference workshops CEUs, # of workshops	Informal learning, # of lessons
Azary	0	0	0	2
Charlie	1	0	0	1
Dakota	0	2	0	2
Emerson	0	0	0	0
Finley	1	0	0	1
Halen	0	2	0	3
Lynden	3	0	2	0
Tory	1	0	0	2
Skyler	0	0	0	3
Wrigley	3	0	4	0

Subtheme 1: Informal Learning. The data also revealed numerous instances when the participants use the words "trial and error," "trial by fire," and synonymous words equal to "trial and error" to describe the informal way in which they obtained conflict-management training. Three participants said "trial and error," while one said "trial by fire." In addition, two participants spoke phrases synonymous with "trial and error." Overall, seven participants said or alluded to the phrase "trial and error" when they described how they had learned to work through conflict in the workplace, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of NVivo Code: "Trial and Error" and "Trial by Fire"

Alias	Trial and error	Trial by fire	Synonymous words
Charlie	"trial and error"		
Dakota	"trial and error"		
Tory	"trial and error"		
Emerson		"trial by fire"	
Azary			Situational
Halen			Testing
Skyler			Assessing

Azary shared that she had not received training in conflict management nor training in effective strategies for conflict management. Instead, she studied conflict management through

various situations at work provided through informal learning opportunities. She obtained institutional emotional intelligence training and participated in external training in speech and communication. Throughout her interview, Azary noted that those types of training were insufficient for her needs and was keen on learning through observation.

Azary participated in emotional intelligence training provided by the HR department. She shared that the emotional intelligence training included communication strategies and felt this type of training was necessary to communicate with managers and subordinates. Her other training in communication was external to her institution and also provided supplemental training that she could cross-check with her emotional intelligence training. Azary added that this informal learning helped her: "They [managers] gave me good reviews because they saw me as a lifelong learner."

When I asked Dakota about her conflict management training, she shared that her K-12 teaching experience was the foundation on which she built her tools for managing conflict in the workplace. She added the following explanation to put her informal learning into context:

> There was no formal [conflict-management] training, and I never received any formal administrative training in conflict management. It was either trial and error, asking veteran administrators, directors of HR, or even LinkedIn learning sessions. You know those kinds of online trainings. All times it was either after the act or within the fact, during the conflict. I was, like, I'm on the rope on this. What do I do here? So online training but that was after the fact. That's how I worked; I kind of learned on the fly.

In her interview, Charlie acknowledged that her training occurred through "daily trial and error." Charlie had numerous experiences that required her to use her instincts to determine what was the best course of action to work through the conflict.

Like Azary and Dakota, Emerson used an incidental discovery process through which she identified strategies to work through incivility and bullying. Emerson collected experiences from previous jobs, previous managers, and external experiences to work through conflict management. She explained her informal learning in the following way:

> Trial by fire. In lots of ways. I feel like most of my higher education jobs leading up to this one, that I've used several examples from, were great because I could learn from the outside how a particular manager who handled something in a particular way that was either successful or not successful. So, I could witness that; I could learn to ask questions because I kind of witnessed what happened, how things were handled and figured out what people responded to, and what people didn't respond to. So, I think that learning by experience was helpful.

Emerson also acknowledged that institutional training hosted by human resources had the distinction of being favorable to the institution and wasteful to the manager. She explained that participating in supervisory training was not required. She shared the following:

> I did attend a handful of sessions and those were usually hosted by HR, human resources. In some cases, I feel like those trainings were helpful not necessarily conflict resolution specifically, but just how to handle different types of supervisor situations. I think one of the harder parts when you have HR hosting something like that in my experience is that HR is protecting the institution as a whole and not necessarily in your personal issues.

Emerson completed her response by acknowledging that having the institution as a priority was counterproductive to what she was attempting to do for managers and subordinates as a middle-level manager. She concluded her response by saying that

> some of the advice that I received [was when] trying to consult with HR. It's tough because it wasn't always about solving this situation or how you handled the bullying. It was about how do we make sure that we are protected as an institution when an accusation like this is made. And that could be tough sometimes.

Finley thought of her experience with training and reflected on it as "I also just think experience." As a footnote to addressing training through "trial by fire," Finley shared how daily experiences helped her manage conflicts. She stated, "I think also just kind of observing through a lifetime of personal and professional experiences of who I see can kind of rally troops and get people behind them is probably the best training I've ever had."

Halen, who was a Gallup Clifton Strengths coach, used those coaching skills as a foundation for working through incivility and bullying. She had held various management positions and many management experiences that helped her establish good communication between subordinates and managers. In her response to the question as to whether she had participated in conflict-management training, she explained that she complemented her skills through informal learning:

> By taking a few courses in LinkedIn Learning and also with my 16 years of management experience. Each case I've dealt with is unique, so I kind of learn from it, take news from it, and then I have colleagues that I keep in my back pocket because I might wanna listen to what they had to handle, in the past, [in] any of their situations—what they would be willing to share of course. Just take advice and hopefully, most of the time, with all of that and having the LinkedIn training, the knowledge; it has really helped me in figuring out how to help resolve situations.

Skyler shared that all of her training for conflict management was either incidental or through informal learning. She benefited from resources and practical training recommended to her by mentors. She explained how the mentors incidentally share the presence of those opportunities with her:

> Well, there's some practical things like trainings and stuff. OK either a smart manager or my supervisor said me, "Hey, I see this trending. This unity as management could work here as a new supervisor just going through some of that content". Managing different people, checking bias, things like that.

Tory shared that he was a self-taught manager when dealing with conflict management. He self-trained through "trial and error" and attributed creating strategies to conversations he held with his mentors. He shared this through the following anecdotal response:

> I learned some of it [conflict-management training] by trial and error. Some of it. I I've had dialogue with my mentors to help me kind of re-calibrate my own thoughts of "here's how you work through a situation." I think there have been some professional development seminars that I've attended; that's been really helpful, and last is probably, trial and error.

Subtheme 2: Institutional (HEI) Training. As previously stated, Emerson acknowledged that she attended supervisory training hosted by HR within her university system; however, she shared that the trainings were not exclusive to conflict-management training:

> I did attend a handful of sessions and those were usually hosted by HR, human resources. In some cases, I feel like those trainings were helpful not necessarily [for] conflict resolution specifically, but just how to handle different types of supervisor situations.

However, Emerson collected management experiences that became her trademark for her informal learning. She shared that her training was "trial by fire. I've used several examples. I could learn from the outside how a particular manager handled something in a particular way that was either successful or not successful."

Finley shared that she had participated in conflict-management training within the university system and acknowledged that the nursing department led conflict management institutionally. She shared that the nursing department offered training and workshops, so Finley considered the nursing department team as the most capable group to work on institution-wide conflict management:

> We get [training] from the district . . . you need to do conflict management, bullying. We have an in-house nursing division, the college's nursing department; it is here on campus. They have a strong focus on civility, and so they have Friday speakers.

Subtheme 3: Workshops. Participants of the study who responded in the interview to having participated in formal workshops provided the names of companies that provided the training with titles to specific workshops (e.g., LinkedIn). Charlie, Dakota, Halen, and Tory each participated in some type of formal workshop type of training. Charlie, Dakota, and Halen all participated in training through LinkedIn, online consultants, and employee talent development online platforms. Dakota had a minor contribution in the interview and this section because Dakota's conflict-management training at the higher education level was essentially through "trial and error," with a few LinkedIn courses, but she did not mention titles nor specific content.

Charlie shared had multiple opportunities to participate in various workshops in Europe and the United States on conflict training, which she found helpful for her career. Charlie shared that "every job in every country that I've know, I've had some kind of level of management

leadership training, which usually included conflict management." She also received a mediation certificate. She shared, "I also have a mediation certificate which is something that I wanted to do because I was faced with a major conflict, very big conflict upon taking a position, a role in an organization."

Charlie participated in Crucial Conversations, a safe-space workshop from a private entity, and received training to become a Crucial Conversations trainer within her institution. She recalled an experience in the Crucial Conversations training that baffled and concerned her.

> One of the first classes we had, we did a very short demo of what Crucial Conversations was about. We were asked a seemingly innocent question: Have you ever experienced when you say to somebody or when somebody says to you: How do I look? This was a room of 45 people. One of the tallest guys stands up . . . (and this was going to be the question to think about when we come back from the break.) I thought he was leaving for the break. He went to the door, closed the door, and said "Nobody is leaving this room until you answer how are we going in the future to handle this question because that is such a loaded question in my family each and every time, and no, you're not going on break." It was very interesting—a seemingly innocent question became a quick conflict!

Halen took advantage of online learning tools such as LinkedIn and TEDx talks. She explained how she arrived at the opportunity to train through LinkedIn:

> When I was in human resources, my first experience being in human resources was actually one of the first LinkedIn courses I took. It was on conflict management. Then from there, [the system] kind of gives you all different types of suggestions because now being in this role, I have people come to me all the time and the best solution I can give them is what trained knowledge I have received.

Along with LinkedIn training, Halen depended on various resources, including her Gallup Clifton Strengths coaching certification, virtual speakers, journals, and periodicals. She explained:

> I really tried to be a sounding board and really know my ways of conflict management to really help. There are a lot of books out there, and TedEx talks, etc. So, I really try to keep myself abreast and research conflict management.

Tory recalled how he had participated in conflict-management training through various seminars, not mentioning anything specifically. He participated in training through HR. He described his experience in detail, reminiscing about the worthiness of the workshop:

> It was an all-day workshop at a particular institution and we talked about different reasons. We gave some case study examples. It was being presented by HR and some situations that actually happened at the institution and how they had to work through that. During our table discussions, we shared manager-to-manager of what we dealt with, so we kind of approached it in a variety of facets.

Tory explained how he also took advantage of trainings that were offered throughout other departments and that did not bear the stamp of training offered through HR. He shared his thoughts on these types of departmental trainings:

> You know—there's more than one way for this [conflict-management training] to occur; it doesn't have to be in facilities; it doesn't have to be in HR; it doesn't have to be on the academic side; it doesn't have to be on student affair's side; it could be in advising; it could be anywhere in the institution. So having multiple examples of where bullying and instability can come from, hopefully, as a manager, you can cue yourself to say I really

need to pay more attention to and be more intentional about my responses when these bubble up or when I hear about them.

Subtheme 4: Conferences (CEUs). Continuing Education Units (CEUs) are earned when a course is a part of the workforce development curriculum for the state of Texas. Two participants, Lynden and Wrigley, participated in conflict-management training at state-approved CEUs.

Lynden shared that she participated in Title IX and mediation training. However, both types of training were "supplemental in nature" because most of the training she participated in was unrelated to her role. Title IX is required training obtained through online certification. The Title IX training included sexual assault and intimate violence training. Regarding conflict-management training, the mediation training Lynden participated in included conflict-resolution training. The mediation course was a certified, statewide course in Texas:

> I went through [a mediation course] for the state of Texas. It was a 40-hour course and so you kind of like lay the foundational philosophy behind it and then part of that philosophy is really just being an information gatherer and help build communication bridges.

Lynden also shed light on the focus of the mediation training and what that training was attempting to teach in regard to conflict management.

> A lot of the mediation training was focused on . . . they're coming because this conflict has reached this level that they feel like they need help, but there's usually kind of some underlying emotional thing that's really driving the conflict. So sometimes you can get there, sometimes you can get the person to realize . . . what you're really saying is you feel this makes you feel disrespected.

Further along in the interview and as an extended response regarding her training, Lynden explained how the real-life experiences with scenarios were a helpful part of this training.

> So, there's a structure to it [this training] and so we spent a lot of time practicing that structure, what an opening mediation would look like, how to help people find agreement even when it's on small things. We spent lots of time in scenario training where they would just kind of throw a random scenario at us (and not all of it was related to higher ed) and then it was just our job to kind of try to work through it. So sometimes I might be the person in conflict and sometimes I might not be, but it was really, really good practice. So that was probably the most hands on extensive example of training that I received related to conflict management.

Wrigley participated in conflict-management workshops, conflict-resolution training, faith-based pastoral training, supervisor training, and college district training for conflict management.

> I have gone through training at various places, places of employment and they offered trainings. This sounds bad, but the trainings you get at most places of employment are watered down and they're not good. It's always felt like a checkbox thing: "We offer this conflict management thing to say that we offered it." When I've gone to professional conferences and other places, institutes or other things the quality is so much better.

In addition, Wrigley provided examples of trainings he had participated in throughout his career and his concern regarding what the training lacked.

> I worked in three different university and college districts and each one offered conflict, conflict management, conflict resolution, dealing with conflict, dealing with difficulty.

> I'm thinking about all the little things there were some of the types. I feel when I worked in North Texas, both [conflict and mediation training] were required as I was hired, and so as you start your job, we wanna talk to you about these things, like you're in a position of leadership authority or title or whatever, these are things you need to have under your belt. I would say that those are not always the best [conflict-management trainings].

Wrigley added that his most significant concern regarding conflict-management training was the quality and focus of the training topics and how he found the quality and focus he desired at the conference level. Wrigley stated that his most memorable training was at conferences such as the National Council of Black and African American Affairs (NCBAAA; a division of the American Association of Community Colleges) and the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASS; formerly NASPA). Two additional pieces of training that offered Wrigley specific techniques in conflict management were training through the Texas A&M Hiring Practices Conflict Institute and training through the Gehring Institute, a student conduct institute for student conduct officers of which he had vivid recollections.

Theme 4: Managing Conflict

This theme was supported by data and descriptions of how managers and subordinates worked through behaviors that produced adverse reactions in the workplace and how those adverse reactions produced incivility and bullying, impacting workplace relationships. The data showed that workplace incivility was common nonverbally, verbally, and in writing. The data also showed that conflict manifested daily, purposefully, and incidentally. The conflicts in HEIs manifested at all levels of organizational staffing and created tension and stress for all the research participants. For the theme of managing conflict, the coded data is summarized into four subthemes: coping mechanisms, escalating conflict, grievances, and creative solutions.

Subtheme 1: Coping Mechanisms. A summary of codes that shows how middle-level managers coped and managed conflict appears in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Modes of Coping With Conflict

Asking questions	Organic conversations
Attention	Researching
Cheerfulness	Reading
Emulating	Sitting on a bench
Fairness	Thoughtfulness
Gracefulness	Tolerance
Leaving the office	Travel
Listening	Walking while talking

Charlie, Halen, and Finley shared how they used gracefulness, listening skills, and information gathering to cope with conflict. Charlie mentioned how "the pandemic had increased the level of grace." She had increased her awareness regarding working with others during the pandemic who did not have the required technology to work from home and was soft-spoken in her conversations. Charlie made sure that her communication was graceful, while Halen was a great listener. Halen dedicated her time to helping others, independent of the depth of conflict. Halen understood the importance of engagement: "You had to be a good listener. You also had to ask questions." What Halen did not know, she would research. She would look for information on conflict strategies and coaching.

Like Charlie and Halen, Finley relied on graceful tactics to engage with managers and subordinates. She requested narrations from subordinates and asked them to provide their perspective regarding conflict. Finley shared that she believed that "the truth is somewhere

between everybody's perspective." A lesson she used with all team members was to have them consider others' opinions and views to better understand the context of incivility and bullying. She said, "My truth is not everyone else's truth, which holds for everyone."

Azary, Emerson, Skyler, and Wrigley used a similar coping mechanism that involved walking out of the office and finding a different place to engage managers and subordinates. Azary traveled to relieve herself from the tension and stress that occurred from working in a stressful environment at every opportunity. She shared that while she accepted the challenge of working with conflict, she understood that self-care was also a priority. She shared that it was necessary to "take advantage of the good stuff [travel]." In a similar fashion, and while not leaving the state of Texas for travel, Emerson and Wrigley found ways to leave the office.

Similarly, Emerson, who enjoyed partaking in organic conversations, would leave the office for her preferred style of engagement: a conversation as a "walk and talk" or a conversation sitting side-by-side on a courtyard bench. Skyler held breakfast meetings with her team to allow members to share in a relaxed environment while receiving her undivided attention. She had learned from personal experience that if she wanted good interpersonal relationships, she needed to provide an opportunity to hold that engagement outside of an office. Wrigley's coping mechanisms were similar to Emerson's as he held conversations on benches in the courtyard, yet like Skyler, he too liked to take advantage of the campus coffee shop. He created an atmosphere of person-centeredness, displacing the importance of job titles and plaques. He desired to "have the best conversation possible" in an unstressed and unstructured environment.

Coping mechanisms for Dakota, Lynden, and Tory stemmed from prior experience and did not necessarily mean that there was a change of venue other than their offices. Their coping

mechanism was choosing behaviors and practical language skills obtained through observation and mentoring. Dakota learned from her colleagues and teachers in K12, and she could emulate them to her advantage. She shared, “I emulated from them how to resolve conflict between students or between students and me and then just translated that to [working through conflict with] faculty.” Like Dakota, Lynden quickly recognized abusive language and aggressive nonverbal gestures. She shielded herself by using rehearsed statements, such as “If we cannot agree to what the rules are, we’re done for this conversation, then we’re all done right here.” Tory redirected conversations through new questions and statements. He explained that he was fair and tolerant and resolved incivility and bullying gracefully.

Subtheme 2: Grievances. Participants shared scenarios that either triggered or escalated conflict and described how they chose to resolve the conflict. In a few instances, the conflict resulted in the parties’ filing grievances in the HR department. A grievance in HEI is a formal procedure in which an individual fills out a form describing an incident, including time, date, place, parties involved, and the egregious behavior that the party is accusing the other parting engaging in. The grievance process is available at all HEI institutions in Texas. Employees have a right to share concerns regarding behavior with HR if they feel they are party to an escalating conflict that can jeopardize their career. In the college system, the grievance process is a part of the college system’s HR department. In university systems, the grievance process may be a part of the HR offices, or a department specifically designed, such as an office of equal opportunity or a civility department, as mentioned by two participants in this study.

Grievances in the College System. Of the six study participants who worked in community college systems, two participants, Charlie and Finley, described their experiences with the grievance process or with alternative resources for grievances. Charlie shared how early on in her new middle-level management position, a subordinate, who immediately had a bristled response to Charlie's personality, filed a grievance against Charlie. The subordinate blindsided Charlie with the filing of the grievance:

> I began to transition a new person into their role, and for whatever reason there was an immediate misunderstanding that I was not aware of, but the person chose to write me up [grievance] for various things. [I was providing insight to departmental practices and] all things that really were a caution to them as they learned the new role they were about to begin.

Nevertheless, that was not the only experience Charlie had with a grievance. In another grievance incident, Charlie felt that the grievance filed by her subordinate was more about bullying her than the subordinate being correct. Charlie shared the second incident involving a contract negotiation where her supervisor agreed that Charlie was correct in handling the partnership contract and the outcome. The supervisor wanted to dismiss the grievance, but the perception of bullying was one that Charlie did not want to dismiss. She completed her story by sharing the closing:

> So, the end of the story was that none of the write up resulted in anything and my supervisor said, "OK well, let's forget about this," and I said, "No, let's not forget about this because this is a very aggressive form and I felt bullied". I felt bullied . . . to me it showed a pattern of operations that was not going to stop. Is bullying available and

> possible in those scenarios? Yes. You can become a target. Why I cannot say, but you become a target.

Finley provided an example of how a middle-level manager could work through escalated conflict and grievances without being a part of the intervention. Finley shared that it was acceptable to send the grievance for a resolution to a team or department with the background and resources to deal with that conflict. She said, *"*We have an in-house nursing division, colleges nursing department, it is here on campus. They have a strong focus on civility, and so they have Friday speakers and [resources] like that."

Grievances in the University System. Of the four participants in the study who worked in university systems, three participants, Dakota, Emerson, and Finley, described their experiences with the grievance process or with alternative resources for grievances. Dakota shared an incident in which two faculty members got into a disagreement, and one faculty member decided to file a grievance against the other:

> A faculty member got obsessed with someone and interestingly, she didn't come to me. She automatically filed a formal grievance on the other faculty member. She said she felt that the other person was bullying her in an email. Also, that in subsequent Zoom meetings, she felt bullied because of what the person said.

Like Charlie, Dakota was oblivious to the grievance filing, and the subordinate faculty member was oblivious to the filing:

> The respondent in this case was taken completely by surprise; did not have any idea that this person felt bullied, and said gosh, I wish she would have said something, I would have apologized, yes, there's no tone in email, and maybe I needed to revise what/how, what I said in that email, but . . . I wish she would have come to me.

Dakota explained how this grievance changed her perception of the filing process and the reason for filing a grievance. This grievance reported bullying, which is difficult to prove in an email and a virtual meeting; however, human resources allowed the filing of the grievance. Dakota said, “So that bullying, and incivility drew a different level [of grievance] that I hadn’t seen before because someone had charged bullying through email. I had never seen that before.”

Emerson shared that at her university system, there was an Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) that she and her fellow employees resorted to when matters regarding incivility required the formal grievance process. Emerson recalled an incident that escalated because a manager had spoken to a subordinate about a candidate’s search for a particular job and the subordinate was a candidate for the position. Emerson recalled the incident:

> So, an accusation was made against this particular manager, whom I managed, who went and approached this person [subordinate] about the position and essentially told them they were not going to get that position for essentially race related reasons, which is illegal. Based on that accusation, race being involved with higher education equal opportunity, I had to report that to OEO, and I felt like this is a serious enough accusation; this needs to be reported and visited through proper channels.

While Emerson appreciated the institutional presence of the OEO and the fact that the OEO team handled formal grievances, she did not prepare for the consequence of using OEO as a resource: Emerson perceived she was a bully to the subordinate for documenting the incident through OEO:

> She probably felt I think maybe accosted a little bit or that I was forcing her to tell-- if that’s the right word. Then when she got a phone call from that office as well, it made her extremely, extremely uncomfortable. So, she heard I had talked about that a little bit

afterwards, but I felt like I was bullying her to almost make an accusation against somebody else.

Lynden shared that at her university system, an onsite civility department, oversaw uncivil situations and offered various services, including intervention. In addition to the grievance process in HR, the civility department helped university students and institutional staff channel their incivility. They had the opportunity to share the struggle with incivility confidentially and document the incident through formal processes.

Subtheme 3: Creative Solutions. All participants had unique ways in which they resolved conflicts. Subtheme three includes descriptions of approaches and best techniques used in working through conflict resolution creatively, creating space, and trusting their instincts. Participants extracted best practices from past experiences or training. However, in reality, they used their personality and expertise to create an authentic and organic process for conflict resolution.

Creative Solutions Through Communication. Azary, Charlie, and Lynden similarly approached conflict resolution through clear communication. Azary reflected on "clear communication verbally or written" because she "knew that verbally they can add words to your comments, or they can twist it around. Not in writing." When looking for ways to work through conflict, Azary recalled that her preference was documenting information. She said, "Email was key for me." Similarly, Charlie shared that she had a safety checklist for oral and written communication:

> Checking that my form of questioning wasn't out of line, my verbiage wasn't out of line, that I didn't use name calling, labeling, or anything like this, and the tone. Not using derogatory terms, or wording . . . Finger pointing . . . nonverbals that can be equally uncivil.

Lynden also created space and time with her subordinates that allowed her to model her best behavior and communicate effectively so that she could have a positive effect. Lynden shared how she modeled her behavior and communication to subordinates:

> I've had times where people have sworn at me and or sworn at somebody that I am supervising, and in those situations, I will shut that conversation down and basically say "If we can't continue this without some type of level of respectability, then the conversation is over". So, I try really, really, really hard on my end to be perceived as civil. I double check what I'm putting in emails, I do not write emotional emails, I'm not going to have that tracked in writing. It doesn't mean that I don't have the emotion, but I'm just very, very, very aware on my end that I wanted to feel, I wanted to feel civil.

Creative Solutions Through Coaching. Halen and Wrigley shared that they used their background and experience in coaching to work through conflict. Halen was a Gallup Clifton Strengths Coach and applied her coaching skills to conflict situations that involved incivility and bullying. She used coaching to work through miscommunication. Halen shared her formula.

> You listen to both sides of the story and then you can decide from there what the next plan of action is. Whether it will be a write up, whether it be just LinkedIn learning training, or whether you need to take it further to human resources.

Wrigley had faith-based pastoral training and sports training. He used his coaching skills in both areas to make observations and arrive at a creative solution to conflicts. Wrigley

compared his experience in sports coaching to solutions to workplace incivility. He shared his views on the comparison of athletic coaching and civility coaching:

> So, I think about [sports] coaching and some other areas where you have the coach who yells and screams . . . and as an athlete—that's professional by any means. For other people, that probably increased their motivation. I've been yelled at, but I was never bothered by that.

Yet Wrigley also shared that incivility had no place in the workplace and his experience in sports taught him the signs of distress. He also learned how to refrain from succumbing to the temptation of exposing frustration through incivility. Capturing these moments mentally allowed him to be the subdued role model for his managers and subordinates. He shared his thoughts on venting anger:

> I know I try not to show up that way [angrily]. I know that there have been times I think I've been frustrated, and I probably had very small frustration moments where people know I'm frustrated but it's if I'm frustrated! But I wouldn't slam a table or chair. It may be that you are tense, or you look away type of thing, kind of smaller things. Because I know who I am, I know what I look like, I know how I kind of show up, so I don't want to feed into the negative stereotype of what I look like, based on what's out there. So, I try to be very cautious.

Creative Solutions Through Tasks. Dakota and Finley observed incivility and grouped uncivil behaviors to learn how to resolve conflict. They organized the incivility to work through the situations as individualized tasks. Dakota had the experience of faculty-to-faculty conflict being "perpetual." She shared how she categorized conflict:

(a) It may not have been exactly the same conflict, exactly the same reason, but I'm just mad at you and I'm mad at you about this, and then a few months later I'm mad at you about something different, and a few months later about something even different than the other two things, so it was a continual conflict; what I would see is that they would become less and less civil with one another.

(b) Then maybe the next conflict was I'm going to go tell my boss, I'm going to tell my friends, and now I'm just going to avoid you and make you feel very uncomfortable because you're making me mad.

(c) Then the third incident was I'm going to tell my boss, I'm going to tell my friends about you, and then I'm going to confront you in front of other peers, or I'm going to say hurtful things to you in front of other people, or maybe I will even threaten formal grievances or lawsuit.

Like Dakota, Finley checked on subordinates to create a grouping of behaviors that she could then readily identify to resolve conflict. This organic manner of working through conflict stemmed from her personality and the fact that she described herself as "kind of a taskmaster":

Whenever we were in meetings, I didn't spend a lot of time dilly-dallying in conversations because our to-do list was so long. One of the things that I was really intentional about during COVID was just spending time every week, just to spend 10 minutes, you know, just to check in to see how people [subordinates] were doing. That happened during grouping, and I think we had conversations that in a lot of ways during COVID brought us together.

Creative Solutions Through Authority. Emerson, Tory and Skyler looked at conflict through the lens of a manager having authority and the challenge of presenting oneself as the

authority, whether through a title, degree, or mission for the institution. Emerson saw conflict mired in the levels of authority, and she explained it in this manner:

> I think incivility is just a lack of tact and professionalism and a lack of kindness. Bullying really comes into play a lot when we talk about hierarchy, and because I think it's much harder to feel bullied from somebody who is on your same level that if it is more "they weren't nice to me" or "this happened but you don't know"; they have that extra added level of authority. Or you feel attacked within that level. I think bullying, and people in my experience with that in our office, bullying really tends to come from a higher level. So, for example, the manager whom I managed and in some cases probably me as well.

Tory saw authority as something that subordinates were unwilling to take into consideration and an element that led to many disillusions. As a middle-level manager, one of the expectations is respect for authority. Tory explained the lack of respect in how subordinates approached him:

> [In this conflict] that individual did not approach it professionally by pre-scripting words by saying, "Can I schedule a meeting with you? I'd like to bring something to your attention?" It was more of a direct, in your face, "I'm going to walk right up to you and say this is wrong, you're not paying me correctly, I can't believe this you're allowing this to happen". It's along the lines of blame and "I'm strongly considering giving my resignation because this is unacceptable" without allowing me the opportunity to have a formal meeting, to have a congruent conversation with looking at this. It is just all dialogue; there's no hard evidence to go back and forth over visually.

Skyler understood that authority was necessary, especially if one could use it to model behavior so that subordinates could see that exemplary work ethic was an excellent personal trait. She described it as follows:

> Getting promoted meant having that person [who is in conflict] report to you, which can be unfortunately a secondary part of a conflict because then the conflict compounds itself. So, I got promoted with tasks and duties that needed to be done or decisions that were made that were coming back to me. . . . I'm into my position, my place because I'm good at my job and my two teams know that. They take into account my hard work, ethic, and how I treat other human beings.

Summary

Chapter 4 included reporting of the four themes that emerged from the data: structural challenges, sources of conflict, conflict training, and managing conflict. The structural challenges section included the description of hardships created by dotted-line organizational reporting structures and the participants' challenges within those reporting structures. The sources of conflict section included participants' perceptions of where conflicts emerged, and the conflict training section included the training or lack of training per participant in the study. The managing conflict section included the participants lived experiences and how they coped and innately worked through conflict in the workplace. Chapter 5 presents the discussion of the research questions, implications, as well as future research and recommendations.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

The problem statement for this study was the absence of conflict training in middle-level management positions within HEIs, and the purpose of the study was to investigate the lived experiences of middle-level managers with conflict-management training as to how well middle-level managers could improve the workplace with proper training in conflict management. The study included participants' examples of how the absence of conflict training hindered an educational institutions' daily progress creating internal conflicts for HEI middle-level managers across the United States (Fortunato et al., 2018; Holzweiss & Walker, 2018; Martinez, 2019). Within HEIs, middle-level managers work with subordinates' different personalities and temperaments and must work with incivility and bullying that develops through conflicts (Akella & Eid, 2020; Van Gramberg et al., 2020). Three learning theories comprise the conceptual framework for this study: adult learning theory, human capital theory, and Gagne's theory of instruction. The three theories support that any form of learning can happen at any age. Adult learning theory is an andragogical approach to learning in which adults learn in two-way communication processes in a developmental framework while self-assessing learning for mastery and to show progress (Merriam & Kee, 2014; Svein, 2018).

This study examined the experiences of 10 HEI middle-level managers in academic districts and systems in North Texas and explored the common types of conflict the participants experienced through a basic qualitative study design. A limitation of the study was the selection of participants from North Texas. The sample for this study was purposive, chosen deliberately because the participants could provide insight into the research questions and contribute to the purpose of the study (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The 10 middle-level managers supervised subordinates in their academic positions in HEIs (Table 1). Moreover,

the study explored conflict management regarding incivility and bullying in the workplace, and the participants' coded interviews provided data necessary to understand the HEIs middle-level managers' lived experiences.

Participants in the study were middle-level managers with similar positions in HEI systems, which provided transferability through the codes identified in interviews and follow-up interviews. Data triangulation occurred through the saturation and repetition of codes retrieved from interview data, follow-up interviews, and questions for clarification and thick descriptions regarding incivility and bullying. Triangulation in this study also appeared through participants' responses to the study's interview questions that were cross-checked using in vivo data coding and the online NVivo 12 coding tools.

Four themes emerged from the participants' coded interviews: structural challenges, sources of conflict, conflict training, and managing conflict. The structural challenges section included the description of hardships created by dotted-line organizational reporting structures, the participants' challenges within those reporting structures, and changes in structures. The sources of conflict section included participants' perceptions of where conflicts emerged, while the conflict training section included the sources of training or lack thereof for each participant in the study. The managing conflict section included the participants' daily experiences with conflict, how they coped, and the creative manner in which they worked through conflict in the workplace.

In the structural challenge's theme, participants shared dotted-line organizational reporting structures and the confusion that was created between their job descriptions as new middle-level managers and their institutions' immediate needs (i.e., vacant positions, reorganizations, and consolidation). The participants' challenges included learning how to

supervise within their purview with their direct subordinates and learning how to supervise outside of their purview with indirect supervision of subordinates who reported to other managers.

The sources of conflict theme, which included participants' perceptions of where conflicts emerged, included participants' experiences expressing how they became aware of the stress, tension, and uncivil behavior that caused a conflict to emerge in the workplace. Participants expressed their innate perception of what kind of friction could cause an argument, behavior or rise in temperament to affect the relationship between managers and subordinates. The participants also shared examples of lived experiences at work with daily conflicts.

The conflict training theme included participants' recollection and reporting of various trainings in understanding and dealing with conflict and conflict management. Participants reported training they obtained within their HEIs and external of their HEIs in workshops, online, and at conferences for which they earned CEUs. The participants also shared their lack of training and the impact that the lack of training had on their careers as middle-level managers.

In the fourth theme, managing conflict, participants shared their daily experiences with tension, incivility, and bullying. Participants described their involvement in conflict at work and how it impacted interrelationships in their departments and office settings. Participants also described how they coped and which coping mechanisms became their best technique for working through the stress and tension that impacted them. Last, participants shared their creativity in developing strategies that worked for them to resolve conflict in the workplace.

In summary, Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings and implications of each research question, interpretations, and conclusion of the study results based on the 10 participants' coded responses in relation to the four research questions. Moreover, the chapter

establishes relationships between the literature, the theoretical framework, the findings, and recommendations for further research.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature

This section provides an overview of the significant findings of the study's four research questions, with conclusions supported by scholarly literature and the theoretical framework used to frame this study. Appendix D provides a matrix that shows the connection between the themes and subthemes of the four research questions.

Newly hired middle-level managers arrive at their positions with professional skills and backgrounds emblematic of their outstanding scholarly achievement and relational academic experiences (Arvaja, 2018). Nevertheless, scholarly achievement and academic success may not include readiness for conflict-management skills (Seale & Cross, 2018). To be successful in an HEI middle-level management position, managers must be able to resolve conflicts so that they may reduce the tension and incivility that impacts interrelationships in the workplace (Seale & Cross, 2018).

Each participant in the study had a minimum of two years' experience as middle-level manager in HEIs in academic and nonacademic departments within their institutions. They described a high-level capacity for working through incivility in the workplace and learning from managers and subordinates the negative behaviors that affect the emergence of conflict, as supported by adult learning theory (Svein, 2018). Participants in the study also shared that they collected experiences through first-time uncivil encounters with subordinates, uncivil workplace relationships with managers, and experiences shared through colleagues and institutional information.

Participants provided thick descriptions of incivility in the workplace, sharing and narrating the nucleus of the conflict, the impact on one-on-one relationships, and the impact on departmental mayhem. Participants also shared that they built awareness of their surroundings and office personalities to be better suited to identify where incivility could emerge. These thick descriptions presented scenarios on many levels and scales, depicting participants as willing learners and open to managing conflicts that emerged in the workplace, as supported by adult learning theory (Svein, 2018).

Participants shared various uncivil scenarios and situations that stemmed from subordinates, managers, and student-centered and faculty-led disputes and incivility. Participants noted that their descriptions of experiences in different departments and clusters of employees and customers either sparked the harmful behavior at the center of a conflict or magnified it. Through each interview, participants shared scenarios that are further analyzed in this discussion of the four research questions of this study.

The research will help the HEI community and current and future middle-level managers increase their knowledge of conflict training and practical conflict management due to incivility and bullying.

Research Question 1

RQ1. How do HEI managers perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

1a. How do conflicts manifest in the workplace?

All participants responded to the first research question by describing their perceptions and meanings of the words conflict, incivility, and bullying. They characterized the conflict as personal strife and added that it took at least two individuals with different points of view or

interests to fall into conflict. They explained conflict using informal definitions, such as conflict was interpersonal friction, incivility was disruptive behavior, and bullying was the persistent and harsh treatment of others. At least one of the two individuals involved in the conflict had a self-interest or was participating in a power dynamic that impaired a positive interaction between managers and subordinates. Explaining these negative interactions that fostered conflict, participants offered examples of various behaviors and workplace interactions that they had experienced in their careers as HEI middle-level managers and that happened through a myriad of difficult circumstances in the workplace. They noted that conflict, incivility, and bullying frequently occurred between managers and subordinates and between subordinates. Conflict was unpredictable, occurring daily at any moment and interrupting the workday and workweek, depending on the duration of the conflict. Participants reported incivility centered on nonverbal, verbal, and written communication. Participants also shared how conflict manifested daily, both purposefully and incidentally.

Participants described the beginning of their careers in middle-level management in HEIs. Almost all participants acknowledged that they had arrived at their new positions with prior experience in management from previous positions in HEIs, yet subordinates marked them as novice managers. The participants then explained how they reached out to other middle-level managers or colleagues to inquire about their experiences with conflict, incivility, and bullying. The participants added that reaching out to other managers helped them learn about issues within their HEI systems and helped them build awareness about jobs and departments where conflict was occurring and recurring. The participants' learning process demonstrates adult learning theory as adults possess the flexibility required to attain concepts and content to benefit their learning experiences (Merriam & Kee, 2014; Svein, 2018). The participants were willing to

begin their careers by adding new information learned in their new positions to develop good working relationships with their new subordinates.

Participants in the study shared various negative management experiences that were beyond their control as they responded to the question about the pressure of working in an HEI system with the demands of structural challenges. These structural challenges included dotted-line management responsibilities, reporting structures that were impacted due to reorganization, which required middle-level managers to receive additional responsibilities within their new positions, and unfilled job vacancies' impact on their workloads. Clifton and Harter (2019) proposed that workers need clear direction to avoid falling into conflict in the workplace. Structural challenges presented participants with unique tension and stress in the workplace that negatively impacted their focus on the job and created conflict with other managers and subordinates.

All study participants reported dilemmas with their reporting structures that negatively impacted their middle-level management positions. This study was undertaken during the pandemic, a time when HEIs may have been challenged financially. All participants reported structural challenges prior to and during the pandemic. Given the impact of Covid 19 on the ability to fulfill all obligations in HEIs, it is understandable that all 10 participants acknowledged this issue. However, only seven of the 10 participants shared that dotted-line responsibilities (their duties were controlled by two different areas of the organization) impacted them.

Two participants in the study shared how the dotted-line reporting structure created consternation and contributed to miscommunication that burdened the needs of internal requests and external community partnerships. These two participants also shared how the dotted-line reporting structure impacted employee rank and the fine line between manager and subordinate,

creating an overlap of various responsibilities. This issue made it more challenging to establish a vital leadership role early in a middle-level manager career within an HEI.

Two participants shared how the dotted-line reporting structure involved communication with the higher administration and the C-Suite level of their HEI system. At best, these two participants shared how continuously reporting to this higher level of administrators added significant pressure to the existing pressures of being a new middle-level manager. For these two participants, there was time to learn and ease into a standard reporting mode above the middle-management level.

Four participants shared that their particular HEI was going through either reorganization or a system-wide organizational realignment during the hiring phase for middle-level managers. Two of the four participants had the experience of being a new middle-level manager with a new reporting structure and a new supervisor who was new to their position and the HEI. The other two participants shared how coming into the middle-level management job meant being a part of an unstable organizational structure. All four participants shared how this meant dealing with tension, stress, and/or becoming overworked.

Seven participants shared that one of the most challenging dilemmas was inheriting a department with a prior history of conflict between subordinates for which they had little information or knowledge. Participants agreed that the presence of behavior problems when not attended to quickly, increased the problem of incivility in the workplace (Blomberg & Rosander, 2020; Miner et al., 2018). The participants shared how subordinates would convey details of strife or dilemmas with former managers. For the participants, this meant initiating the process of identifying conflict to learn how to resolve it. This reflects the importance of a

manager possessing appropriate skills in conflict training so that they may work through dissension, tension, bullying, and incivility (Akella & Eid, 2020; Petrova et al., 2020).

Eight participants in the study described scenarios in which they perceived negative behaviors from subordinates. The participants mentioned distrust and disrespect as two elements they could readily perceive as being at the root of incivility, especially in the work environment. Participants described that having a manager or subordinate not trust their supervisor or coming across to a manager or subordinate in a disrespectful manner was an early sign of incivility. When confronted by these behaviors, it was important for the managers to make either mental notes or written notes of the behavior and begin the process of learning where the behaviors may impact manager-to-subordinate interrelationships.

Another element that participants mentioned as a source of conflict were the lack of boundaries between managers and subordinates. Participants described that when subordinates encroached on other subordinates' responsibilities or when managers encroached on other managers' reporting structures, the lack of boundaries could ignite incivility. An additional element was usurping others' responsibilities. Participants stated that not having compartmentalized job responsibilities for each individual in the workplace with appropriate titles and job descriptions meant having subordinates crossover onto the responsibilities of other individuals, thus creating conflict in the workplace. Participants also mentioned workplace environmental issues stemming from office floor plans and inadequate space partition. For example, cubicles were too close to others, which promoted uncomfortableness, inequities, and the creation of silos.

Two participants shared that conflict could be an individual versus the institution or system rather than two individuals. In this case, both participants mentioned job dissatisfaction

from the subordinate regarding how they fit into the university system as a form of conflict. The participants shared that this type of personal strife creates job dissatisfaction that can generate conflict because there can be an unawareness of the internal dilemma affecting that manager or subordinate. Both participants shared that the manager or subordinate may conflict with this scenario's institutional mission and goals.

Participants also explained that the perception of a subordinate not fulfilling their responsibilities, not belonging to the team, and lacking recognition created incivility in the workplace. Participants explained that a subordinate who turned off a video camera was either disengaged or insubordinate. The disengagement and insubordination were especially true in virtual scenarios due to the pandemic. One participant shared that obsessive online behavior created virtual incivility. Additional elements that provided the perception of conflict, incivility, and bullying both face-to-face and in online interaction included the tendency not to favor particular genders and the use of nonverbal communication using aggressive tones of voice, lewd gestures, and insensitive facial expressions.

Participants perceived conflict as an unnatural response to interrelationships that were otherwise supposed to be positive in the workplace to establish good rapport between managers and subordinates and create environments where excellent outcomes could emerge. Participants acknowledged that while they did not enjoy the fact that they had to work through conflict, it was one of the responsibilities in the workplace that middle-level managers understood that they would either inherit from previous managers or accept as part of the job. Responses from participants showed that middle-level managers did not view conflict as a primary responsibility related to their positions. Participants shared that the presence of incivility came from pressure within job responsibilities and pressure within the institutional systems. For participants,

bullying manifested as the pressure to succeed from higher-level supervisors, while middle-level managers then displaced pressure on to subordinates.

The participants used experiences from their previous careers to analyze what they perceived as conflict before engaging in a strategy to remedy it. One participant described working in an environment where bullying was prevalent and having to identify the behaviors that brought forth bullying and doing so very quickly in their career to survive the job. Two participants acknowledged that acquiring skills related to sensing conflict, while one was developing as a middle-level manager required a learning curve. In this instance, the middle-level manager could recognize one's limitations in the world of conflict while trying to dispense the most suitable way to intervene. These actions are supported by human capital theory in that adult learners are willing to commit to performance improvement in the workplace (Branson et al., 2016; Petrova et al., 2020). That commitment to improvement kept the participants employed as they understood that there would be outcomes to the conflicts that could be of good use to subordinates and the workplace environment. One participant acknowledged that even learning skills through institutions outside of the United States helped develop a better understanding of how to learn to work through conflict here in North Texas.

Four of the ten participants shared that they relied heavily on their intuition and prior experience and became very savvy about perceiving conflict, incivility, and bullying as they worked with faculty, students, and staff coming forward with disruptive situations. These four participants attempted to work through the squabbles, noting that keeping the participants within the institution was essential. For these participants, it was necessary to ensure that subordinates remained employed and that middle-level managers tried to provide the institution with the highest level of productivity to satisfy the mission and goals of the institution.

Two of the 10 participants described how their limitation in management skills required purposeful connections with other managers. These two participants reached out to managers and colleagues who could provide them with similar scenarios through which they had perceived conflict to match the experiences to give the middle-level manager ideas to build on. Participants created this process to build a personal library of definitions of conflict, circumstances under which conflict occurs, and strategies that could assist with vetting conflict to learn what type of resolution would work best. The participants explained that this was time consuming because it required them to make constant phone calls and email other managers while trying to keep the information confidential. The process also required face-to-face confidential meetings so that they could collect as much information as possible to learn how to work with conflict.

These two participants acknowledged the daily struggle and not having the capacity to work through conflict without being able to consult with other managers. They also explained that obtaining information from other managers through informal learning allowed them to create strategies based on their capacity two mediate conflict. Informal learning and the individualized attainment of skills through these professional exchanges permitted ongoing intake and interpretation of learning for immediate application as a part of serendipitous learning (Jeong et al., 2018). Participants shared that if they felt they could not mediate conflict at any moment, they could learn about resources and ways to report the conflict to another department or HR or attempt to outsource the situation.

Research Question 2

RQ2. How do HEI managers resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

2a. What types of interventions are used to resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

Participants in this study used informal learning to identify, assess, and recognize the incivility that could bring forth conflict. The informal learning opportunities served as the basis for participants learning to resolve conflict at the beginning of their careers. In many instances, participants understood that they did not possess the skills necessary to mitigate the tension and stress impacting their subordinates. Participants lacked knowledge of behaviors that are a part of conflict and did not possess skills that allowed them to identify assertiveness or cooperation as types of conflict behaviors (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Hall, 1969).

The lack of assertiveness or cooperation in conflict behaviors meant that participants in the study had to spend significant time creating interventions independent of any knowledge or source of information related to conflict management. This opportunity allowed for thought processes and discernment that allowed the participants in the study to become self-reliant as they used their creativity to resolve the conflict. Specifically, participants drew from past experiences, informal learning, intellectual skills, and cognitive strategies to create their conflict management interventions (Werner, 2017).

Participants used their creativity to formulate steps to acknowledge the faults in communication that created misunderstandings and to recognize the negative behaviors that could produce conflicts. This is similar to the different techniques reflective of Gagne's instruction theory and an adult's ability to create different techniques to establish learning (Werner, 2017). According to Werner (2017), in Gagne's theory, adults design learning so that concepts may be more easily understood, and that learning can occur through different modalities.

Six of the 10 participants admitted that they could perceive the rise of incivility through individual behaviors. They also explained that learning to perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying stemmed from daily observations and sharing information with other managers who served as mentors. These six participants captured the nuances of small incivility experiences, so they had to engage individuals at each opportunity. They had a better perception of what made them fall into conflict. They learned to identify strategies to work through the tension, stress, and disagreement, building incivility and bullying.

For seven participants, these unique circumstances with structural challenges meant seeking advice, training, and resources on how to resolve conflict in an academic setting. One participant shared how they used their experience in K-12 to resolve issues between students and teacher and student. The participant used K-12 experiences to learn how to resolve a conflict between manager and faculty member or between faculty members. The transfer of knowledge obtained through these experiences of adapting to structural challenges in the HEI is explained through adult learning theory, as adults can apply what they learn in different contexts (Merriam & Kee, 2014). Two participants shared that visiting with subordinates allowed them to learn about workplace tension and stress and the idiosyncrasies of ongoing bullying. For these participants, it was essential to understand their personality and positional power to work through workplace conflict. The introspection of attitudes and the use of cognitive strategies for learning is a part of Gagne's theory of learning (Loeng, 2020; Werner, 2017).

Three participants explained how their previous experiences outside of middle-level management or outside of the United States presented severe limitations to how they could acknowledge the presence of incivility and conflict in the workplace and then learn what was necessary to resolve it. The three participants shared that it was essential to create a network of

managers and collect their experiences with conflict to learn to resolve conflict. They also shared how they kept close contact through correspondence or phone calls for immediate consultation. In addition, these participants shared how they sought training of any kind and at any level that would benefit them as they started working through conflicts in their new middle-level management positions. This serendipitous learning was ideal and presented unique intervention opportunities for the study participants (Jeong et al., 2018).

Participants described how they used the formal grievance process within the HEI as a strategy to resolve conflict. The formal process was utilized when it resided within HR or a dedicated office for employee relations, such as an office of equal opportunity or a department dedicated to civility in the workplace. When participants responded to the application of the grievance process to work through conflict, two participants who worked in community college systems described going through the HR grievance process. In the college system, the grievance process is a part of the college system's HR department.

For the participants who had access to formal grievance processes, one participant described how a subordinate had filed a written complaint about an internal situation without their knowledge. Another participant described how a conflict that had escalated was sent to a resolution team in the nursing division so that they could work through the conflict. The availability of a grievance process allowed a second party to manage the incivility of both participants. The second party removed the middle-level manager from the duty of working through the conflict. However, another participant acknowledged the advantage of an OEO, because the participant preferred having that independent office review the grievance complaint. This referring participant also acknowledged the subordinates' perceiving the manager as pressuring the transfer of the grievance when the grievance went through OEO; thus, sending the

grievance to OEO could have the opposite effect on the manager. In this instance, the manager comes across as being the one bullying a subordinate for referring the grievance to the OEO.

While the grievance process was a way to resolve conflict for five participants, common amongst all participants were intervention methods emerging through their creativity. Each participant in the study relied on their personality, experience, and expertise to create new, authentic processes for managing conflict. Participants described their creative solutions: communication, coaching, and authority to apply their manner of intervention for conflict, incivility, and bullying in the workplace.

Communication

Three participants' approaches to resolving conflict occurred through clear and concise verbal and written communication. For these participants, documenting information that clearly explained how the conflict was manifesting and who was a part of the conflict helped with analyzing and understanding how to mitigate the conflict. One participant acknowledged that they executed communication with the best intention of ensuring that things were accurate and fair by formulating a checklist that included effective communication with others through tension and incivility. For this participant, the checklist included polite verbiage, correct personal pronouns, the correct pronunciation of surnames, and the exclusion of hurtful words and phrases. Another participant recalled checking that the content of emails was not emotionally driven. For one participant, the form of communication also included nonverbal gestures and tone of voice because these two elements also had the potential to add more strife to existing conflict.

Coaching

Two participants in the study participated in training and certifications in personal and career coaching. They approached conflict creatively through the coaching elements they had

learned to develop a personal style of working through conflict. For these two participants, a creative solution was using their personal experiences of athletics and workplace coaching to work on subordinates' needs. Davis et al. (2016) described this as the manager-to-subordinate relationship in which managers serve as coaches and advisors using observation and consultation to guide subordinates at work. Participants used coaching as a creative solution to help subordinates' behavior in the workplace, whether helping with miscommunication or other forms of incivility.

Authority

Three participants used their authority as middle-level managers to present a sense of decency, respect, and decorum to model the behaviors that subordinates needed to adopt in the workplace. For these three participants, establishing levels of command as crucial, primarily to mitigate bullying.

Research Question 3

RQ3. What are the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying at HEIs, as told by middle-level managers?

As noted in the literature, Thornton et al. (2018) found that middle-level management in HEIs is responsible for ensuring that there is civility amongst subordinates and that the absence of civility brings forth consequences that impact interpersonal relationships and employment. These consequences in HEIs, due to conflict, incivility, and bullying, may be either internal or external (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). Internal consequences include lower-performing HEI department subordinates who experienced less clarity about their behaviors, and thus their work was interrupted by incivility (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Kok & McDonald, 2017). Participants in the study described the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying, and these

descriptions placed the consequences into three categories: personal emotional conflict consequences, interpersonal work-based conflict consequences, and institutional processed-based consequences.

Personal Emotional Conflict Consequences

Several participants described the positive and negative feelings and emotions managers and subordinates experienced within their position. For example, there were feelings such as appreciating having the position they were assigned to and enjoying being in the position. One participant described the daily pressure of constant conflict as exhausting, leaving one feeling like one is operating in a vacuum or in a black hole. Another participant described the emotional discomfort with the perception of discrimination, intimidation, and intolerance and the unintended negative result of managers and subordinates resigning from their positions.

Interpersonal Work-Based Conflict Consequences

Managers may use tactics to improve workplace interpersonal relationships (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Estes & Wang, 2008). As presented in the literature, strategies are tools that involve planning and implementation to improve and transform conflicting situations in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). Participants share that being strategic could combine their efforts with institutional protocols to create consequences that did not have to go through a specific HR procedure. However, different from strategies, participants shared that they relied on tactics, specific actions or behaviors that may be serendipitous in planning and that a manager or a subordinate may engage in while working through a conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Folger et al., 2016). These tactics emerge from personal experience in dealing with conflict, which is experimented with over time and through various situations (Folger et al., 2016). In most scenarios, tactics emerge through the use of power in manager-to-subordinate relationships

independent of styles of conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Folger et al., 2016). In this study, all participants used tactics from their personal experiences dealing with conflict and reported that the tactics appeared through the power between manager and subordinate in most conflict scenarios.

In the interpersonal conflict category of consequences, participants shared that the incidents and scenarios stemming from uncivil behavior created consequences that needed to be documented or resolved by following a set protocol. Participants shared that on the milder side of consequences, a manager could request a visit or a meeting without sharing the details with other managers or department administrators. If the consequence required a sterner approach, the consequence could involve a procedure or protocol with some input from the administration. A formal process was required if the incivility was egregious. Thus, participants acknowledged three interpersonal conflict consequences: informal, semiformal, and formal.

Informal Consequences

Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) proposed that managers develop interest-based conflict-management systems so that they may improve communication, procedures, and interpersonal relationships. Participants noted that informal consequences included keeping the interest of the manager and the interest of the subordinate in mind.

Within the departments, these informal consequences occurred in person and virtual environments. In instances in which the informal consequence was in person, participants asked subordinates to take part in informal visits or chats to collect perceptions and information about conflicts and decide what steps to take next. In this informal process, participants would listen attentively and take light notes. The tactics used by participants included particular behaviors

that do not require rigorous planning or detailed itemization. Using a tactic helps a manager or subordinate work through conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Folger et al., 2016).

For instance, one participant described responding to an email cautiously to avoid exacerbating a conflict. Interacting through email alerted the manager and subordinate about their behavior and provided both the manager and the subordinate an opportunity to reconsider personal actions before meeting in person. The manager and subordinate returned to the office and continued to work with a verbal commitment to personal improvement.

Another informal consequence participants described included using the tactic of mentoring so that the manager or subordinate could emulate exemplary behavior. One participant described assisting a subordinate with learning to complete a task of writing responses to emails to meet a specified level of performance. Had the subordinate not responded to the informal mentoring, the consequence would have been taking the task away from the subordinate and finding a new assignment within the subordinate's capability. Retaining a subordinate employed under special conditions is also a tactic a manager may use to enhance interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Estes & Wang, 2008).

Semiformal Consequences

Participants described various steps in the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying that were, in part, shaped by institutional rules about improving interpersonal relationships in the workplace. The steps were a part of a semiformal process to remedy the conflict. These steps were alluded to as semiformal because managers and participants agreed on them per the institution's administration, HR, or department manager. With the approval, the middle-level manager could put the consequence in place.

In some instances, a few participants described the environment in their departments as impacted by open floor plans, the placement of offices and cubicle spaces, or other types of architectural setup. A semiformal consequence was the opportunity to change a subordinate's office space or area to mitigate tension and friction. Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) and Estes and Wang (2008) posit that middle-level managers have to develop intervention strategies for their subordinates so that they may improve interpersonal tension and conflict in the manager-to-subordinate relationship. The semiformal process of improving the office environment for subordinates is an opportunity for middle-level managers to promote improvements in interpersonal relationships.

Another participant described having to move a subordinate out of the office area due to what a subordinate claimed as toxic fumes. The participant shared that transferring the subordinate to another department was a strategy that improved the office arrangement for the subordinate causing the toxicity and for the subordinates impacted by the toxicity. Miner et al. (2018) posit that middle-level managers need strategies that combine various work styles and personality traits. Thus, transferring a subordinate to a different department is a strategy that assists with work styles and personality traits.

All participants described using a conversation or meeting as a semiformal consequence. They described the process as one that could be less intimidating to the subordinate because it did not necessarily have to take place in the HR department or in any other office that provided conflict management for the HEI system. These semiformal meetings did not necessarily have a third-party present, nor did they have to be scribed and presented to a higher-level administrator. The process could include exchanging apology letters.

Formal Consequences

Branson et al. (2016), Cloke and Goldsmith (2011), and Petrova et al. (2020) reported that middle-level managers must navigate tense situations and perceptions of conflict to be able to reach conciliatory outcomes. Participants shared that they had learned to assess highly tense situations and locate resources to work through the conflict. The participants shared how they depended on formal processes such as grievances to allow for a third party to find a resolution for a conflict.

Participants used the formal HEI grievance process to resolve conflict. They shared that the process worked since it was vetted through HR or a dedicated office for employee relations. The dedicated office was an office of equal opportunity, or a department dedicated to civility in the workplace. In the college system, the grievance process is a part of the college system's HR department. One participant described how a subordinate had filed a written complaint about an internal situation. However, the process was not advantageous to the participant because the subordinate filed the written complaint without the manager's knowledge. The other participant described how a conflict that had escalated was sent to a resolution team in the nursing division so that they could work through the conflict. For both participants, the availability of a grievance process and a resolution process allowed management of the incivility through a third party. These two processes alleviated the middle-level manager from the duty of working through the conflict.

Three participants who worked within university systems described being able to send faculty-to-manager and faculty-to-faculty-grievances through the formal grievance process of their institution. They all described that it was better to report incivility and bullying through a formal grievance process than to initiate an intervention independently. In university systems, the

grievance process may be a part of the HR offices, or a department specifically designed to handle grievance processes. One participant shared that they were surprised that a grievance could include bullying, which is hard to prove if it has occurred through electronic correspondence such as email or virtual engagement such as a video meeting. However, the participant acknowledged that the HR department allowed filing these types of grievances.

All participants shared an understanding of the final formal consequence of job loss. The participants acknowledged that as an at-will-state, in Texas, an HEI middle manager or subordinate could be relieved of their duties without much explanation. A few of the participants had used this formal consequence, and one participant noted that the process was an HR process that did not have a formal recommendation for separation stemming from the middle-level manager.

Participants in this study identified the various ways conflict, incivility, and bullying brought forth consequences, and they shared the type of consequences associated with these negative behaviors. Nevertheless, the participant's responses did not include critical steps in conflict resolution as proposed by Cloke and Goldsmith (2011). In this study, the participants' responses showed that the middle-level managers' knowledge of steps to resolve the conflict was absent from their skill set. This lack of knowledge in conflict resolution includes the absence of analysis, identification, resolution alternatives, cost-effective measures, and intervention methods as appropriate consequences of the incivility and bullying exhibited by managers and subordinates in different scenarios.

Institutional Process-Based Consequences

Of the three types of consequences, the final consequence, institutional process-based consequence**,** was part of the HEI's processes attributed to incivility. Historically, institutional

processed-based consequences were a part of the HEI's practice due to the distrust of arrangements provided by government entities to resolve conflict (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). HR offices or offices dedicated to employee relations provided the consequences for manager and subordinate incivility rather than the middle-level manager being involved in the process (Nicholas, 2019; Swanson & Holton III, 2009).

All participants in the study acknowledged that the state of Texas is an at-will state and that subordinates could be faced with job loss due to incivility in the workplace. One participant shared that an institutional process-based consequence was a subordinate turnover of 150% in just two years at their university system stemming from conflicts that lingered in their department and that remained unresolved. This participant shared that the HEI's HR office handled these cases of subordinate turnover, and that the middle manager had no role to play in the eventual subordinates' firings.

A final institutional process-based consequence was the effect of financial losses for the HEI due to negligence in following through with external corporate agreements. One participant described how a terse situation in the department led to the loss of significant earnings from a corporate contract developed with an external partner and how the manager had to rectify the situation immediately. However, the manager could not save the contract from its cancellation. This burden of financial loss was placed on the manager, and the participant acknowledged that as a manager, they expected to assume responsibility for the financial loss.

Research Question 4

RQ4. What are the HEI managers' experiences with conflict-management training?

All study participants shared their desire and felt the need to acquire any form of training that would allow them to perform better when confronted with incivility at work. They shared

how they sought training to improve their daily working conditions. Blomberg and Rosander (2020) and Einarsen and Nielsen (2015) stated that various negative behaviors, including bullying, impact middle-level managers' work as they attempt to establish good interpersonal relationships with their subordinates. Participants in the study shared scenarios in which they experienced the aforementioned negative behaviors and bullying, which they had to confront with either skills they possessed innately, or skills acquired through training. The types of learning and training participants shared regarding the research question are classified into four types: informal learning, institutional (HEI) training, workshops, and conferences in which the participants received continuing education units (CEUs).

Informal Learning

Eight participants shared that their ability to work through incivility, conflict, and bullying was based on experiences with conflict, which they labeled as "trial and error" and "trial by fire." This type of learning is incidental or serendipitous, allowing the adult learner to center their acquired knowledge around an immediate need (Jeong et al., 2018). Informal learning is supported by the andragogical approach of adult learning theory, which is a conduit that advances general knowledge in adult learners (Merriam & Kee, 2014; Svein, 2018). Participants in the study agreed that informal learning gave them some of the tools needed to work through conflict management.

One participant in the study had not received any training in conflict management yet was managing conflict routinely. Another participant shared that to work through incivility. They recalled experiences from previous jobs and managers that they could sample when attempting to work through conflicts. Nevertheless, another participant shared that their experiences in student-teacher interrelationships in K-12 teaching were the foundation on which they had acquired their

training for managing conflict in the workplace. All of these participants observed conflict through various situations at work, yet the participants noted that those learning experiences were insufficient to manage conflict at work.

Two participants shared that they had participated in training through their institution or their HR department and that that training provided some form of additional content that could be used in conflict management. One participant participated in emotional intelligence training, while another participated in communication strategies training. The participants shared that their training included supplemental management training; however, one of the participants did not feel that training was beneficial to middle-level managers, because the content did not apply to their needs. Middle-level managers need to learn how to work through behavior problems, including arguments, verbal attacks, and threats, as uncivil behavior quickly escalates, causing more significant problems (Akella & Eid, 2020; Blomberg & Rosander, 2020; Werner, 2017).

As an alternative to an HEI's internal training, one participant in the study participated in an external commercial training opportunity with Gallup Clifton Strengths. HEIs' leadership departments may purchase access to commercially produced personality assessments to help managers and subordinates learn about their behaviors (Speer et al., 2021). The participant was a Gallup Clifton Strengths coach who used the coaching skills to work through incivility and bullying. However, they shared that they required training in conflict management to improve interpersonal relationships, and this content was not a part of the Gallup Clifton Strengths curriculum.

Many participants shared spending time in conflict-management workshops based in their neighborhood's community and civic centers, such as faith-based pastoral training. This disclosure indicates that middle-level managers were anxious to access any type of workshop or

learning experience that could assist them with acquiring the skills to manage conflict. These community-based workshops were very informal and led by goodwill, faith-based leaders, or citizens wishing to provide training in civility.

Institutional (HEI) Training

Two participants in the study reported having had opportunities to participate in conflict management training that was either developed internally or offered within the HEI system. Access to this training was by invitation or solicitation. One participant shared that the training included skills in conflict management but did not have practical application because it was more in line with the duties of a human resources staff member rather than a middle-level manager. The other participant described the conflict-management training as provided by a student services department. The curriculum was topical or thematic in nature related to conflict, but the content was not centered on intervention strategies for middle-level managers. The content was faculty-to-student conflict management. Gagne's instruction theory suggests that adult learners are willing and capable of understanding content if the learning is designed to achieve good outcomes (Werner, 2017). In the absence of suitable learning outcomes geared to middle-level managers, the trainings provided institutionally failed to provide good training for their audience.

One participant acknowledged attending supervisory training hosted by HR within the university system; however, the participant shared that the training was not exclusive to conflict management training. The participant explained that the content in training did not apply to middle-level managers. Another participant shared that they had participated in conflict management training within the university system but that the nursing department led conflict management training for the institution. Therefore, the participant referred cases to the nursing department rather than attempting to utilize the skills obtained in the conflict-management

training. The decision by this participant to refer cases to the nursing department aligns with adult learning theory and the fact that adults can self-assess learning to understand concepts and content (Merriam & Kee, 2014; Svein, 2018). This participant self-assessed their attainment in the conflict-management training and felt incapable of using the skills presented in the workshop to work on employee interrelationships.

Workshops

Participants in the study shared that their HEIs offered a variety of workshops regularly through various departments, including student services counseling, workforce corporate development, internal HEI faculty professional associations, and the HR department. One participant shared how they took advantage of interpersonal training that was offered throughout several departments. Nevertheless, the participant also stated that participating in the various pieces of training had a minor impact on their knowledge and application of skills in managing conflict. The participant stated that many of the workshops were not approved by HR, nor were they created by a team with a background in conflict management.

Most participants shared that they participated in formal corporate and online workshops (i.e., Gallup Clifton Strengths, LinkedIn, TEDx). Four participants took part in formal workshop training, while three took part in training through LinkedIn. One participant held a certificate in Gallup Clifton Strengths coaching and used the tenets with conflict. Participants shared that the advantage of these formal workshops was that most were sponsored by a credible group of experts or were supported by a credible team of researchers. Therefore, participants trusted the content of the training and appreciated the opportunity to connect to subject matter experts if these opportunities were free of cost. According to participants, HEIs holding licenses to access

LinkedIn provided the platform free of cost to employees yet would not pay for the additional resources provided by the platform.

Participants indicated that other access to formal training was through contacting online consultants. However, they expressed concern that they could not verify the content's credibility or cover costs if the consultant charged for the training. One final form of formal training, according to one participant, was through workshops led by internal or system-wide talent development teams. Three participants mentioned that these trainings were not offered consistently and were led by team members who did not necessarily have the expertise in conflict management, yet the team's effort to offer some form of training was appreciated.

One participant described having had multiple opportunities to participate in conflict-management workshops in their home country overseas, which was helpful for their management career. The participant also received a mediation certificate through an institution in the United States. In addition, and through their HEI, the participant had taken part in a personal development workshop entitled Crucial Conversations, a safe-space workshop for interpersonal development. The participant acknowledged that they had participated in these workshops in many instances because they had sought the opportunities independently and without consultation of a manager or leadership from their HEI systems.

Conferences With CEUs

One participant shared that the best training they obtained was training in conflict management that stemmed from a nationally recognized conglomerate or a research-based nationally recognized institution. The participant enumerated a series of reputable conferences, such as the National Council of Black and African American Affairs (NCBAAA; a division of the American Association of Community Colleges), the National Association for Student

Personnel Administrators (NASS; formerly NASPA), and training through the nationally recognized Gehring Institute, an institute that offers training that includes student conduct and incivility training for student conduct officers. The participant described a few of the real life experiences with scenarios that were a part of many of the conferences and indicated that this training was exceptional, with content readily applicable to incivility in HEIs. Nonetheless, to access these training opportunities, the participant acknowledged that the middle-level manager needed to be a part of student conduct and counseling. The participant added that the quality and focus of these training and topics were optimal.

Additional training with CEUs included small conferences offered locally through institutions. One participant shared that they had participated in training through the Texas A&M Hiring Practices Conflict Institute, which offered specific techniques in conflict management. The participant described the training as exceptional, recalling the content and fond memories of the facilitator and the facilitator's presentation. One participant received CEUs through the Texas Mediation Trainers Roundtable (TMTR), a 40-hour basic mediation course. The participant shared that while this mediation training with CEUs was exceptional, more than 50% of the content addressed the philosophy of conflict management which did not apply to middle-level managers seeking in-depth scenario-based training in conflict management. Consequently, the participant did not feel that the subject matter covered in the 40-hour program was applicable to middle-level managers but was more geared to lawyers and the judicial system.

One participant explained that they attended Title IX and mediation training offered by a credible national organization. The participant acknowledged that the training provided CEUs, but the content regarding conflict management was supplemental because the Title IX training target was sexual assault and intimate violence training. The participant described that most of

the content was unrelated to the role of a middle-level manager in an HEI, and that it was more so related to officers leading efforts in reporting cases to Title IX offices.

Participants in the study in conferences did not mention content related to learning about conflict styles or conflict skills. The absence of this information was also noted in participants who took part in workshops and formal training. Participants in all four types of learning and training acknowledged the lack of training needed, desired, and required to enable them to be successful middle-level managers.

Limitations

As with all research studies, there are limitations beyond the researcher's scope and control. For this basic qualitative study, one limitation was the scope of participants: the study was limited to middle-level managers in HEIs in academia in various management roles with a minimum of two years of experience and with more than one subordinate. A minimum of two years of experience allowed middle-level managers selected for the study to move on from the novice year of management in an HEI. Another limitation was the geographical scope: the research was limited to HEIs in the North Texas region, which comprised four HEI systems and five HEI college systems. A final limitation is that this study was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 through 2022, and participants were limited to video meetings via Zoom. This limitation did not allow for interviews in a natural setting with the comfort of human connection.

The study also had several delimitations. One delimitation was the focus on tension, stress, incivility, and bullying, even though other behavioral factors are present in workplace conflict-management issues. Another delimitation was that to protect the anonymity of the participants, information regarding participants' race, ethnicity, gender, and job titles were

collected yet not disclosed. This information was delimited and masked in the interview if the respondents pointed to any particular participant.

Other factors may present the study's vulnerability: transferability, credibility, and trustworthiness for qualitative designs. Concerning these factors, this study was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 through 2022. Due to the period of lockdown and isolation of the pandemic, it was not possible to have in-person interactions. Participants were contacted via email, and all interactions took place virtually using online video meetings via Zoom. Therefore, a delimitation was the potential threat in using audio/video recording and its automated transcription from within the Zoom online application. In a few instances, the audio transcription was inaccurate. Consequently, the transcriptions were downloaded, printed, and edited manually to match the exact wording compared to the video/audio recordings. Then, the participant and the second transcription auditor received via email and reviewed each video/audio transcription and responded to me via email, acknowledging the accuracy or inaccuracy of the transcription. In the event of inaccuracies, the transcripts were revised a second time.

Implications

The literature suggests that amid learning their job and responsibilities, middle-level managers can understand the organization's mission and vision and add value to their jobs while increasing their skills (Werner, 2017). In this basic qualitative study, responses to the research questions revealed several implications regarding having, acquiring, and maintaining management skill sets in various areas. Nevertheless, the skills set were not in incivility, conflict, and bullying. Middle-level managers sought skills to work through challenging reporting structures, organizational realignments, and reorganizations. The middle-level managers'

responsibilities compounded these issues with structural challenges to their subordinates, who also felt the effect of structural challenges. The absence of conflict-management training surfaced as a general implication for all HEI middle-level managers.

An implication derived from the structural challenges is that middle-level managers should be provided with clear and current views of the mission and goals of an HEI so that they can identify challenging areas as they take on the responsibility of working with new subordinates. The manager-to-subordinate relationship must begin with careful attention to communication, power differential, and the general work environment. These three areas are vital components of employee relations and exacerbate conflicts when not approached appropriately.

Another implication is that the instability of the HEI system and the convoluted, dotted-line reporting structures served to distract from conflict issues because middle-level managers displaced their focus from working with subordinates and interpersonal relationships to focusing on the institution. In response to the first two research questions, the participants alluded to the issues with reporting structures and the presence of conflict as one that challenged and weighed upon the shoulders of middle-level managers and that weighed upon subordinates. Therefore, HEI systems should ensure that the reporting line allows middle-level managers to proceed with their intended responsibilities and concentrate on growing and maintaining proper interpersonal relationships. The impact of $359 billion on various workplace issues should be the impetus for HEIs careening to the presence of conflict training in the system (World Economic Forum, 2017).

A third implication of the study is that as conflict emerges and subordinates also begin to report conflicts to middle-level managers, the middle-level managers need to begin to assess

those conflicting situations so that they may begin to determine a course of action (Davis et al., 2016). The literature contends that at HEIs, manager-to-subordinate conflict arises from incivility and bullying, and these behaviors are destructive ones that can escalate into civil disputes (Akella & Eid., 2020; Van Gramberg et al., 2020). Therefore, middle-level managers must acquire the skills necessary to manage conflict and access resources to resolve harmful interpersonal conflicts (Werner, 2017). When subordinates report discomfort in the workplace due to tension and stress, middle-level managers depend on their supervisory skills to enable them to identify and resolve conflict in the workplace (Rudhumbu, 2015). These skills are obtained through formal learning.

A fourth implication is that the presence of an HR, an office of equal opportunity, or a department dedicated to incivility does not preclude middle managers require training in conflict management. In the study, the attainment of modest skills in conflict management did not encourage the middle-level manager to work through conflict. Instead, the referral to any office that could handle the matter was the best recourse. Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) posited that knowing the critical steps in conflict management can help provide conflict resolution with the inclusion of strategies for effectiveness. The study revealed that middle-level managers preferred not to undertake the conflict.

Formal Learning

The fifth implication of this study is that while formal learning can occur through institutional workshops and conferences with CEUs, middle-level managers reported that the themes and content of the formal learning did not provide the skill sets needed to work through conflict management. Thus, implying that formal learning, while available, was not optimal. The literature posited that acquiring skills in interpersonal relationships should occur through credible

training. The knowledge that a middle-level manager may have obtained in conflict training benefits all parties in the HEI system: the leadership, the middle-level manager, and all subordinates (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017). The manager-to-subordinate relationships demand additional skill sets in conflict management.

The literature supports that conflict disrupts communication through incompatible workplace relationships and poor interpersonal interactions (Folger et al., 2016). These incompatible relationships sometimes create resentment, competition, conflict, escalating tension, stress, incivility, and bullying (Miner et al., 2018; Van Gramberg et al., 2020). The underlying behaviors need to be adapted and changed to connect lived experiences to training to advance and improve conflict management for all middle-level managers within HEIs (Nicholas, 2019; Tan, 2014). In those experiences, we find the sixth implication: the opportunity for middle-level managers to obtain and understand ways to work through conflict and achieve that through informal learning.

Informal Learning

The sixth implication surmises that with adult learning theory (Svein, 2018), human capital theory (Petrova et al., 2020), and Gagne's theory of instruction (Werner, 2017), adult learners can acquire skills at any age and any stage in their developmental learner years. In these six implications, the study revealed that consulting with other managers, asking colleagues questions, and reviewing the different components of a conflict are manners in which middle-level managers acquire skills in conflict management. The study revealed that any instances of informal learning from serendipitous attempts at solving conflict were obtained daily (Jeong et al., 2018). The implication is that in the absence of formal learning, obtaining skills from

informal analysis of a lived experience afforded a middle-level manager the essential skills for conflict resolution.

The seventh and final implication of the study is that informal learning led to creative solutions that benefited middle-level managers. Creative solutions meant a dependency on serendipitous tactics to improve incivility, conflict, and bullying. Further along in their lived experiences and through informal learning, middle-level managers could create strategies they could apply to incivility in the workplace. These instances of tactics and strategies worked well in the absence of knowledge of styles and skills related to the conflict.

Recommendations

This study examined conflict management in HEIs within the manager-to-subordinate relationship. This research study aimed to understand how college and middle-level managers solved workplace incivility and bullying. The focus was on the individual HEI organizational conflict resolution practices in manager-to-subordinate or subordinate-to-subordinate conflicts. The gap in the literature as to how well middle-level managers could improve the workplace with proper training in conflict management fueled a desire for the research.

The basis of these recommendations is the managers' and subordinates' requirement to work through the incivility that emerges from manager-to-subordinate uncivil engagement, poor communication, and conflicting behavior problems (Kok & McDonald, 2017). The three learning theories that served as the conceptual framework for this study: adult learning theory, human capital theory, and Gagne's theory of instruction, supported the acquisition of basic conflict skills attained through lived experiences and supported the contention that more research was necessary to learn which subset of leadership skills grounded in interpersonal relationships

and conflict management may assist middle-level managers' work with conflict in the workplace (Estes & Wang, 2008; Folger et al., 2016; Gonzales, 2019).

In addition, middle-level managers possessing training in conflict management allowed for significant opportunities to work through challenging situations such as arguments, insults, and threats (Werner, 2017). Middle-level managers obtained knowledge informally through their lived experiences and the additional acquisition of skills in the conflict training, such as tactics and strategies, benefited the leadership, the middle-level manager, and all subordinates (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017).

Last, there is the confirmation that conflict can be beneficial because it challenges those involved and builds creativity and forward-thinking methods of resolution (Bradley et al., 2015). In the study, participants concluded that their creative solutions provided better responses to the resolution of incivility, conflict, and bullying than the content of any formal learning of conflict skills that occurred through workshops and conferences. While training in conflict management at the middle-management level helps the manager discern whether the conflict is beneficial and whether the conflict resolution skills required to mitigate the issues enable stability in the manager-to-subordinate relationship (Thornton et al., 2018), in the absence of formal learning, informal learning may be the key to conflict resolution.

Recommendations for Practical Application

This study concludes with four recommendations for practical application stemming from the findings in issues with structural challenges, the absence of formal learning, the presence of informal learning, and the consequences of inaction toward accessing institutional resources. These recommendations are a part of the overall contention that, based on the findings of this research, there was a notable absence of assertiveness and cooperation, two definitive conflict

styles (Folger et al., 2016), amongst all participants of the study. The absence of assertiveness and cooperation may have contributed to the lack of formal training, the reliance on informal learning, and the hesitation to access resource offices and staff members present within the HEIs.

Practical Application #1 Regarding Issues With Structural Challenges

The first recommendation is based on structural challenges and the impact on middle-level managers as structural changes in reporting requirements within the HEI may impact the relationship between manager and subordinate. Organizations should acknowledge that middle-level managers (a) require clarity of an institution's mission and goals, (b) must be able to understand the institutional perspectives, and (c) must be able to relate to key performance indicators for the HEI.

Practical Application #2 Regarding the Absence of Formal Learning

The second recommendation for practical application is based on the absence of formal training in conflict management. Even though the literature supports acquiring skills in interpersonal relationships through credible training, only a few participants attended institutional workshops and conferences with CEUs. Most of the participants reported that training did not include content geared to middle-level managers working with conflict. Organizations should acknowledge that middle-level managers would benefit from the addition of system-wide, credible formal training in conflict management to supplement the middle-level manager's use of tactics and strategies (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017).

Practical Application #3 Regarding the Presence of Informal Learning

The consistent use of tactics and strategies stemmed from the participant's reliance on informal learning. Participants created tactics from their routine consultations with managers, colleagues, and leaders. The tactics were also created from responses to inquiries regarding how

to manage conflict with subordinates. Similarly, participants created strategies to work through conflict with their subordinates. Organizations should acknowledge that middle-level managers (a) use tactics and strategies that are a byproduct of informal learning and are presented opportunities for immediate application of conflict-resolution skills (Jeong et al., 2018); (b) use informal learning that also segue into creative solutions to improve incivility, conflict, and bullying; and (c) would benefit from the development of in-service trainings for middle managers to share the tactics and strategies developed through informal learning.

Practical Application #4 Regarding Inaction Towards Accessing Institutional Resources

An additional implication was the presence of an HR office, an office of equal opportunity, or a specialized department dedicated to managing incivility and conflict. Participants in the study were not knowledgeable about the effectiveness of their conflict styles or the critical steps in conflict management and effective strategies (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Folger et al., 2016). Organizations should acknowledge the important role that specialized offices, departments, and staff could provide in way of conflict-management services for middle-level managers as some middle-level managers (a) prefer not to undertake conflict management, (b) need learning support regarding how to manage conflict with subordinates, and (c) need formal conflict-management training

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined conflict management in HEIs within the manager-to-subordinate relationship to understand how college and middle-level managers resolved workplace incivility and bullying and focus on the individual HEI organizational conflict resolution practices.

A recommendation for future research is for the research to be able to conduct observations of conflict resolution with participants of the study, as this study was conducted

with North Texas HEIs. Behavior problems manifested through arguments, insults, threats, and bullying that result in incivility are observable, and annotations can be made as to the tactics, strategies, conflict skills, and conflict styles applied by the participant (Akella & Eid, 2020; Kok & McDonald, 2017; Petrova et al., 2020; Werner, 2017); consequently, a study using an observation method would extend research in this area.

Another recommendation for future research is to focus on bullying independent of other forms of conflict. Given that bullying is constantly exposed to indefensible negative behavior (Blomberg & Rosander, 2020; Einarsen & Nielsen, 2014), more time should be spent on specific narratives associated with bullying. Within this focus, attention can be given to the tactics and strategies applied to resolution and the long-term effects of bullying, since the manifestation of behavior problems when unattended increases the problem of incivility in the workplace (Blomberg & Rosander, 2020; Miner et al., 2018).

In addition to the recommendations provided above, the following recommendations are significant for future research:

Informal Learning

More research is needed to link informal learning to the concepts of disposition, time, dedication, extrapolation, and lived experiences to the daily rigor demanded of middle-level managers when confronted with manager-to-subordinate conflict. While informal learning is a part of ongoing adult learning, the information obtained from lived experiences and content related to conflict management needs to be cross-examined with conflict skills and conflict styles found in the literature (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Jeong, et al., 2018). With the additional research in informal learning, middle-level managers will have improved opportunities for managing conflict in HEIs.

Self-Determination

Participants in the study described the mental and physical acuteness needed to focus on work and improving interrelationships. In this regard, the participant's responses to interview questions pointed to self-determination as a key component to their daily work in seeking a resolution to incivility, conflict, and bullying. Additional research in the area of self-determination is necessary to learn about the persistence required by middle-level managers to participate in conflict management. Therefore, further research into self-determination is necessary to learn what physiological and psychological personality traits can be attributed to middle-level managers who participate in conflict resolution.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

During the interviews for this study, a few participants alluded to issues about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Participants related the issue of DEI to the national incivility during the pandemic, and specifically with the events surrounding the George Floyd murder, which occurred on May 25, 2020. DEI is a new interrelationship concept, with research beginning in the mid-2000s. Future research on middle-level managers' work in conflict management should include research regarding DEI and its impact on conflict management. A consideration for future research may also be the inclusion of research of specific types of conflict related to equity, racial discrimination, stereotypes, and ageism. Finally, for this research, participants did not wish to disclose their race or ethnicity; however, recognition of participant ethnicity would be desirable in future research.

Culture

Participants described culture in general terms and as a part of an HEIs mission statement, motto, branding, and C-suite leadership preference. The use of the term culture was

not one-dimensional as related to divisions and departments. Therefore, there is a need for additional research regarding organizational culture and its impact on incivility, conflict, and bullying.

Mentor Programs

While a few participants mentioned seeking supervisors who could serve as mentors, participants did not disclose participation in mentoring programs or being assigned a mentor during their two years as middle-level managers. Therefore, additional consideration and research should be given to mentor programs as a part of supporting middle-level managers experiencing incivility, conflict, and bullying in HEIs.

Summary

Middle-level managers are a crucial employee population in HEIs who understand missions and visions, and add value to their systems, all while increasing and developing their management skills (Werner, 2017). Tension and stress increase incivility and bullying in the workplace, and middle-level managers must assess conflict and determine a course of action (Davis et al., 2016). If middle-level managers are to survive in the workplace, an improved research-based understanding of conflict is imperative. Understanding behaviors required to adapt and change within lived experiences depends on conflict training so that advances and improvements can be made in conflict management (Nicholas, 2019; Tan, 2014).

This research found that for manager-to-subordinate relationships to be effective for all-around interpersonal relationships and productivity, additional skills in conflict management are required. The research also found that middle-level managers must develop skills to properly support their fellow managers and subordinates (Werner, 2017). In doing so, middle-level

managers will advance the agenda of positive interpersonal relationships at work and positive gains for productivity in HEI systems.

At HEIs, the manager-to-subordinate conflict appears through incivility and bullying; therefore, managers must be able to depend on their innate ability to access resources to mitigate conflict (Werner, 2017). While the literature is sparse in stating the precise skills that middle-level managers must possess to work with conflict management, this research adds to the literature by identifying the middle-level manager's creative solutions to managing conflict.

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

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
January 7, 2022

Maria Caratini Prado
Department of Graduate and Professional
Studies Abilene Christian University

Dear Mari,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "The Presence of Incivility and Bullying in the Absence of Conflict Management Training: A Qualitative Study of Middle-Level Managers in Higher Education Institutions",

(IRB# 21-200)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: Participants' Request for Participation (Email)

Greetings,

My name is Maria Caratini Prado, and I am a doctoral candidate at Abilene Christian University. I am conducting a research study about perceptions of incivility and bullying in the workplace and conflict training within the middle management level in higher education institutions in North Texas. Middle management employment includes titles such as deans, associate deans, academic directors, directors, and department heads.

I am emailing to ask if you would like to participate in an interview for this research project. The interview is approximately 60 to 90 minutes long and will be recorded via an electronic platform such as Zoom, Teams, Webex, etc. Participation is completely voluntary, and your answers will be anonymous.

Participants should have a minimum of two years supervisory experience at the middle management level and have had at least one subordinate. Middle management level positions include positions of dean, associate dean, coordinator or director.

If you would like to participate or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me xxxxxxxxx.

Thank you for your time,

Maria Caratini Prado
Doctoral Candidate
Abilene Christian University

Appendix C: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled the presence of incivility and bullying in the absence of conflict training: a study of middle level management in higher education. Participants for the study are supervisors with experience in managing subordinates for a minimum of two years. This form is an informed consent that permits you to understand the research before deciding whether to participate.

Purpose of the Study: This basic, qualitative study is designed to *research* conflict management from the perspective of HEI middle level managers. The study examines the experiences of HEI middle-level managers with conflict related to incivility and bullying. Last, the study explores the common types of conflict experienced by college and HEI middle level managers, how managers resolve conflict and their training experiences.

Procedures:

With your consent to participate in the study, the researcher asks that you:

- meet virtually for an interview to address the RQs that are a part of the study
- be open to meeting virtually for a period of approximately 45 minutes to one hour
- agree to the audio recording of the session
- participate in one session as required for the study

Participation: This study is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will be respected. If you decide to join the study, you can stop your participation at any time without penalty.

Risk and Benefits: Participating in the study does not pose a risk to your safety or your well-being. The interviewer will act with respect and sensitivity; however, the discussion of conflict may generate an emotional reaction. Such reactions can range in intensity from serious to not serious. There are no payments or gratuities related to participation. A benefit of this study is the development of a better understanding of the perception of conflict management amongst middle-level managers in higher education.

Privacy: Information you provide will be kept confidential. Personal information will not be disclosed during participation in this research. All participants will be identified with a participant number. Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board or individuals affiliated with the granting agency.

Data will be kept secured in a locked environment by the researcher, and data will be kept for a period of at least five years as required by Abilene Christian University.

Contacts and Questions: If you have any questions about this informed consent document, you may ask them at any time by contacting the researcher via email. If you have questions about the research study, the lead researcher is Maria Caratini Prado, and she may be contacted at xxxxxxx. If you are unable to reach the lead researcher or wish to speak to someone other than the lead researcher, you may contact Dr. Dana McMichael at xxxxxxxxx. If you have concerns

about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at xxxxxxx or xxxxxxxx.
320 Hardin Administration Bldg., ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699

The IRB Approval number for this research is _____ and it expires on_____. You will receive a copy of this informed consent document to be kept for your files.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information, and I feel I understand the study well enough to decide my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I agree to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant _____
Date of Consent _____
Participant's Signature _____
Researcher's Signature _____

Appendix D: Interview Questions

Part I Participants' Information

Item 1. Place of employment
Item 2. Job title
Item 3. Educational Level
Item 4. Background (Discipline)
Item 5. Reporting Structure
Item 6. Management experience
Item 7. Management load (Department responsibilities)
Item 8. Number of employees supervised

Part II Interview Questions

RQ1 How do HEI managers perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

Item 9. How do conflicts manifest in your workplace?

Item 10. Who is typically involved in a conflict? (manager, subordinate)

Item 11. How do you perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying in your workplace?
Item 11 a. Tell a story of when you have experienced incivility and bullying during interactions with subordinates.
Item 11 b. Tell a story of when your actions may have been perceived as uncivil or bullying.

RQ2 How do HEI managers resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

Item 12. Do these conflicts involve incivility? If so, how does incivility manifest itself? (Please provide examples.)

Item 13. Do these conflicts involve bullying? If so, how does bullying manifest itself?

Item 14. Tell a story of how the pandemic has impacted your ability to resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying.

RQ3 What are the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying at HEIs as told by middle level managers?

Item 15. If you have an intervention strategy, what is it like, and how do you use it?

Item 16. What are the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying at your workplace?

Item 17. How did most conflicts end? (Please provide examples.)

RQ4 What are the HEI managers' experiences with conflict management training?

Item 18. How did you learn to manage conflict?

Item 19. Tell a story about your experience with conflict management training.

Item 20. Describe the techniques learned and used during conflict management. (Please provide examples and include descriptions of effectiveness.)

Item 21. Last, would you be available for a follow-up interview? If yes, please provide your full name, email address, phone number

Item 22. Do you have any additional comments regarding the interview?

End of document.

Appendix E: Matrix of Research Questions, Themes, and Subthemes

Overarching Themes / Subthemes / Structural Challenges	Reporting Structures	Organizational Realignment	Management in Academic Settings	Poor Communication	Power Differential	Work Environment	Informal Learning	Institutional (HEI) Training	Workshops	Conferences (CEUs)	Coping Mechanisms	Grievance Processes	Creative Solutions
	Sources of Conflict			**Conflict Training**			**Managing Conflict**						
Research Question													
RQ1			X	X	X	X	X						
RQ2	X	X	X			X					X	X	X
RQ3						X					X	X	X
RQ4							X	X	X	X			

Note: This this matrix reveals the mapping of the various themes and subthemes to the four research questions. The research questions are:

RQ1 How do HEI managers perceive conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings? **1a.** How do conflicts manifest in the workplace?

RQ2 How do HEI managers resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings? **2a.** What types of interventions are used to resolve conflict, incivility, and bullying in their work settings?

RQ3 What are the consequences of conflict, incivility, and bullying at HEIs as told by middle-level managers?

RQ4 What are the HEI managers' experiences with conflict-management training?