



Conflicts as Triggers of Personal Growth: Post-Traumatic Growth in the Organizational Setup

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Abstract

Organizational bullying and harassment constitute severe adversaries inducing trauma in their targets. As their occurrences began to proliferate alarmingly in the postmodern era, they started attracting academic and practitioner interest due to their implications for individual health and organizational productivity. More recently and coinciding with the adoption of facilitative conflict mediation methodology in organizations, incivility has increasingly been explored through the growth its consequences can potentially trigger in individuals. Thus far, conflict research has abounded in studies of e.g. mediator style, mediation process phases, disputant behavior and conflict types, while the longer-term influences of conflicts and the related mediation have attracted less research attention. This empirical investigation explores the negative undercurrents in team communication through their underlying causes and impacts on individuals. Second, it presents workplace conflict mediation as an instrument restoring team harmony and disputant egos. Finally, it analyzes the positive outcomes associated with conflict mediation and the way it changes individuals' interaction styles. The findings are based on a qualitative investigation of conflict disputant perceptions, adopting participant observation (n=58) and a qualitative survey (n=42) of disputant perceptions to analyze expectations placed on mediator style and the socio-emotive load experienced during the mediation process. The results corroborate earlier findings indicating that the nondirective mediator style is frequently associated with discomfort in the conflict solution situation and less frequently with immediate satisfaction with the mediator style. Fortunately the nondirective style entails positive and longer-enduring organizational outcomes. Generally the findings confirm the key tenet of the restorative paradigm, describing the facilitative approach as an instrument promoting individual growth and organizational learning. Thematically, such renewal materializes as motivation for self-growth and skilling in self-reflective ability and communication.

Keywords: Intra-Organizational Conflict; Restorative Mediation; Personal Growth.

1. Introduction

Psychological capital has recently taken center stage in the study of working life as a reservoir accounting for positive organizational behavior [1, 2]. While positive psychology has accumulated convincing evidence for the effects of an individual's positive psychological states on cognition, work performance and physical health [3, 4], research linking socio-emotive load and organizational outcomes is scarce. In particular, the correlates of negative emotions elicited in the workplace have been under examined, or harmful effects have been examined merely as enduring moods or generalized attitudes, instead of discrete and distinct expressions [5].

Yet, negative emotions and their overt display have, alarmingly, become more prevalent due to the growingly diverse human mosaic and subsequently more complex team interplay in today's workplaces. Teamwork has become the norm [6], and the related diversity and mélange of value systems frequently trigger friction and tension,

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exacerbated by pressures associated with interdependency and collaboration [7]. The consequent emotional labor has attracted a surge of popular, theoretical and empirical interest, as the subjective feelings in the workplace [8] are known to induce load in two distinct ways. On the one hand, they force employees to regulate their emotional displays in compliance with their work role [9], and on the other, negative affective responses expose teams to interpersonal friction [10]. Conflicts presently constitute an omnipresent and undeniable dimension of organizational interaction [11], with far-reaching financial, social and emotive consequences [12].

Resultatively, studies in a number of fields have demonstrated that relational capital is beginning to challenge the earlier focus in organizational literature on economic efficiency targets [13]. As evidence of its role, an association has been found between employees' affective commitment and level of achievement [14], between work engagement and organizational outcomes [15], between leader influence and subordinate achievement [1-2], between leader personality and team health and performance [16], between intra-organizational conflicts and productivity [17], and between interpersonal conflicts and counterproductive work behavior [11]. Organizational literature has come a long way from viewing human beings as cogs in the wheel only fulfilling a mechanical function in a controlled and well-oiled system [18], to acknowledging the instrumental role of affect for organizational outcomes.

Surprisingly, recent research especially in the field of conflict management has reported benefits triggered by certain types of disputes e.g. in terms of team innovativeness and decision-making [19]. Also the functional and adaptive advantages associated with such episodic emotions as anger are recognized [5]. However, the extent to which misalignment with organizational rules for socially desirable in-role behavior can harm the organization makes deviance from expectations regarding emotional expression an important area of study [9]. This is increasingly critical as a growing number of studies agree that the number of socio-emotive stressors and the associated counterproductive behavior are on the rise in the postmodern workplace.

As a way of reducing mental load in organizations, this article investigates restorative conflict mediation as a process mitigating and remedying the corruptive effect conflicts have on employee commitment and performance [11]. To deepen understanding of ways in which restorative mediation reduces organizational distress and individual load, this work analyzes disputant experiences and perceptions during the mediation process. The article sets off by presenting restorative conflict mediation as a method for solving interpersonal conflicts in the workplace. It then explores empirically the views of participants (n=42) from nine mediation cases by means of a qualitative survey of the socio-emotive load induced during the mediation process and expectations placed on the mediator style and behavior.

The aims of the current work are two-fold. It contributes to 1) organization and management studies by describing workplace mediation as an effective method for solving conflicts and to 2) conflict mediation theory and practice by examining the affective and relational outcomes moderated by restorative workplace mediation

2. Workplace Conflicts

Conflicts are processes triggered by friction rising from real or perceived differences in the work community. When prolonged, their ramifications tend to extend to co-workers as bystanders, regardless of how hard they try to remain neutral. The more individuals are involved, the more resources are distracted from their tasks. This generally harms individual satisfaction and team productivity [6], depending on team norms, group structure and conflict type [20].

2.1. Workplace Conflict Types

Organizational literature recognizes three types of dissent: relationship conflicts, task conflicts [21] and process conflicts [22]. Where interpersonal conflicts often stem from differences in personality, values or norms, cognitive task conflicts are viewed as disagreements about task contents and outcomes [23]. Process conflicts refer to conflicts about logistical issues, involving e.g. scheduling and delegation of tasks or responsibilities [24].

This study centers on relationship conflicts as the major cause of socio-emotive load for employees. They are incompatibilities that are emotional and personal in nature and inflict animosity and tension [25]. They are characterized by emotional friction, personality clashes and attitude problems (Choi, 2010), lowering trust and making team members reluctant to genuinely listen and seek each other's expertise. Interpersonal dissent is generally more difficult to resolve as it tends to pose a threat to disputant ego [21].

2.2. Restorative Conflict Mediation

As the number of workplace conflicts is augmenting, various outside interventions are presently in high demand. Third-party mediation studies have identified e.g. adjudicative, inquisitorial, mediational, motivational, procedural marshal and restructurer approaches as strategies for dispute resolution [26]. The emerging popularity of mediation can be explained by recent understanding that conflicts and the related resolution processes provide potential for

organizational development by triggering positive change and growth in the personal and professional lives of disputants [27]. At their best, they are also known to reduce stress, deepen relationships, renew performance and enhance community morale [28].

In the absence of a universally accepted categorization of different mediation types, this study builds on the traditional, yet indefinite division between directive and nondirective, with restorative mediation being positioned at the nondirective, facilitative end of the continuum. The restorative and facilitative approach is characterized by mediator neutrality and objectivity, reliance on trust as a factor determining mediation outcomes, and strong emphasis on the mediator's presence and listening skill [29].

In Europe, the restorative conflict mediation process has gained momentum in recent years as an approach adopted from the 1970s US restorative justice practice. It is a process founded on the principles of facilitation rather than evaluation or judgment. It acknowledges the wrong, empowers the parties, helps restore disputant self-views, reconciles stakeholder interests, and rebuilds trust among the disputants, while setting aside legal foci [17].

This investigation centers on restorative mediation, which follows a process that, in its simplest form, advances through seven key phases. However, the process and its individual stages can be implemented iteratively, which adds to its flexibility and adaptability. Figure 1 depicts the process progression from start to follow-up, with the arrows pointing to the phases that typically require iteration.

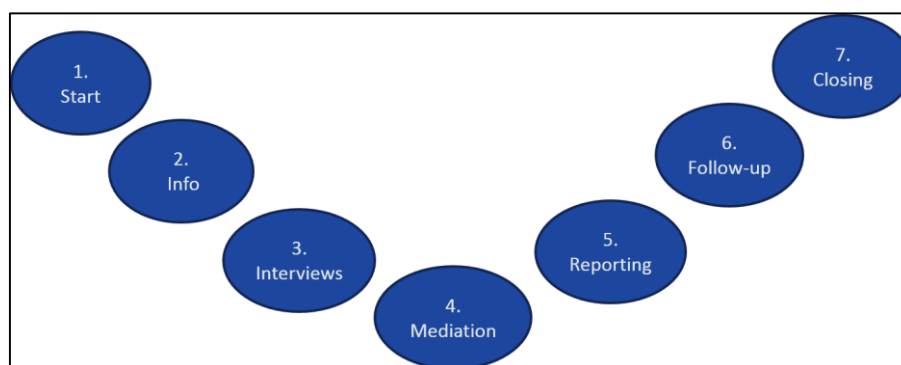


Figure 1. The seven phases of the restorative conflict mediation process (Modified from Domenici & Littlejohn, 2001 [30])

The process essentially serves two aims: it facilitates conflict resolution by encouraging the disputants towards a tangible outcome, the agreement. As a process, it skills employees in working life abilities and life competences such as self-critical thinking, reflexive introspection and self-awareness, liberating and empowering them not only as workforce but also as individuals [31]. In addition, disputants acquire mindsets that allow them to enhance social support, (self-) leadership and communication, which are pertinent for future conflict prevention and mitigation [32].

2.3. Mediator Style as an Antecedent of Conflict Outcomes

In mediation, the competing, inter-dependent and interwoven task and relational demands at play make the mediator's role extremely ambivalent. Task orientation typically shows as push towards settlement through a directive or evaluative style. In contrast, relational orientation emphasizes communication, reflexivity, facilitation, emotions and understanding. The extent to which mediators comply with either type of demands or adopt a hybrid approach, as is sometimes the case with more experienced mediators, is individually determined by their stylistic preferences or situational variables, impacting the process and its outcomes. Within the limits of quality assurance and ethical obligations, mediators implement the process according to their personality, values, identity and proclivities [33], sometimes even changing their style along the process.

Between the two orientations, studies have consistently reported higher disputant feedback scores for mediator styles that are more on the relational and facilitative than the evaluative end of the continuum. The latter correlates negatively with participant feelings of being listened to, understood, and of being allowed to express their sentiments [33]. In general, listening and emotional expression tend to characterize the facilitative approach, whereas fact-oriented or closed-end questions and judgmental analysis designate an evaluative register [29].

The importance of listening is accounted for by the nature of mediation. A typical cognitive problem with mediations is that disputants tend to frame whatever they hear based on their former beliefs and values. Articulating these ideas is the only way to make the determinants of their perceptions surface and become visible, which is a prerequisite for changing the conditions of their thinking. As organizational conflicts rarely stem from matters of right or wrong but rather from misunderstandings and preconceptions, it is crucial to find a way of regulating disputant interpretations [34]. The mediator thereby becomes instrumental in allowing the participants the time and space to reflect more objectively on their thinking patterns. However, despite the mediator's patience and active listening skills proving beneficial in mediating disputant emotions and overall perceptions [35], the nondirective style has been

reported by many studies to be less productive in terms of tangible and financial outcomes [33], or it has moderated a levelling effect on the settlement terms [35].

Generally, mediator styles follow a dichotomy of facilitative vs evaluative, or transformative vs problem-solving approaches [29]. More specifically, the altogether 25 or so different mediator styles identified in literature can be grouped into five: neutral, relational, transformative, analytical and pressing. Only the last one seeks agreement as the goal, while the others aim to maintain or improve communication and understand the underlying causes of the dispute [36].

Despite conflict mediation having taken off as an effective method for relieving the mental load induced by intra-group conflicts, surprisingly little empirical research has been conducted on the effects and implications of mediator style on the process outcomes [29], with conflict parties having drawn most of the attention. Instead, research is biased towards such related topics as: the role of gender as a parameter moderating negotiator behavior [37]; the influence of power on negotiation behavior and cognition [38]; the impact of communication processes as influence on the individual level and of communication strategies on the organizational level [26]; cultural norms surrounding disputants, including sensitivity to collective interests and concern for authority [39]; conflict reactions and conflict management styles [40]; and conflict progression and escalation phases [32]. Only recently has the third-party role as a mechanism controlling either the process or the outcomes [26] attracted interest. As a result, more accentuated note on mediator role has emerged when monitoring whether a mediation practice is competent, ethical or effective [36].

In general, the scant mediator research that is available suffers from several handicaps, with the strong biases and limited assumptions stemming from the narrow focus on only few dominant views. This has left relational, communicative, discursive and systemic aspects largely ignored [26]. The subsequent study of mediator approaches has been undermined by a lack of robust conceptualization and theoretical framework. Further, mediator styles have often been examined through self-reports where goals, values, repertoires, tactics or skills are easily mistaken for styles [36]. The paucity of evidence available is therefore debilitated by respondent bias that could be avoided with observational research, but unfortunately, behavior coding is time-consuming and expensive. For simplicity, the related research is mostly outcome-based, which is naturally pivotal in measuring the effects of the process, but it disregards the impact of mediator strategies while examining the process itself as a standard variable [29].

This study is a modest effort to expand understanding of disputant perceptions of the mediation process and mediator impact. More specifically, the aim is to empirically corroborate prior, tentative findings signaling that the facilitative mediation approach is associated with disputant learning and organizational growth.

3. Empirical Research

Despite its effect and utility as a resolution method, workplace mediation still suffers from biases and misconceptions hindering its wider application. To improve the process in a way that counteracts the possible negative outcomes associated with the method, it is critical to understand participant emotions during mediation and the factors that impact participant perceptions.

Qualitative methodology has been seen as an important supplement to quantitative methods as it expands social understanding by investigating individuals' inner worlds [41]. This work took the phenomenological approach to deepen understanding of the disputant reality during mediation. To investigate the parties' experiences, the work adopted qualitative research, which is the preferred paradigm in studies of interaction and of sensitive or complicated topics that are unmeasurable [42]. A complementary research design, built on both an anonymous qualitative survey and participant observation, was a means to ensure reliability when the sample size was only moderate. Survey methodology was crucial to secure anonymity, and the interpretative inquiry approach was selected to meet validity criteria on credibility, authenticity, criticality and integrity [43].

3.1. Participant Observation

To take a modestly ethnographic approach to study mediation as a social phenomenon from the viewpoint of the study subjects, this research adopted participant observation, which proves beneficial if there is reason to doubt the ability of the respondents to verbalize their experiences [44]. As a data collection method it involves a researcher role that is social, attaching a paradox to the process: the researcher is empathetic and distancing, emotionally engaged and dispassionate, at the same time. This means an inherent battle between subjectivity and objectivity, which is the major concern and possible flaw associated with this method [45]. In the present setup, the social aspect questioning objectivity became particularly accentuated due to the dual role of the researcher observing the sentiments raised by the process while mediating the case. This induces risks, as how the participants see the researcher tends to have an impact on the quality of the data shared and gathered [44].

These risks will be further analyzed under study limitations but it is important here to recognize that this dual role also entails benefits. As a researcher, the mediator is advantaged owing to her in-depth understanding of the process

under scrutiny. Due to her training, knowledge and experience as a mediator, she can put emotional expressions into proportion as commonplace displays and typical features of the process, without becoming overwhelmed or consumed by the expressions. It can therefore be hypothesized that mediator-researchers' objectivity and neutrality persist farther than those of observers who have not invested in the mediation process on a personal level.

Some researchers have been concerned with the unnatural impact of the presence of the researcher in the observed situation – “the mere presence of the observer may impact the actions of the observed” [42]. Inherently, third-party involvement is already there when the mediator steps in. At the same time, an interpersonal conflict raises emotions and insecurities to the extent that disputants tend to focus more on emotive self-regulation and on monitoring mediator attitude and behavior towards themselves than on adjusting their behavior to appear as socially desirable in the eyes of the mediator. Due to this inward-turned attention, any additional mediator role seems secondary or irrelevant for the participants.

3.2. Qualitative Survey

Data were collected through a qualitative survey with two broad and open-ended questions with unlimited space for response to encourage personal narratives that disclose the subjective views without restricting focus, content or form in any way. The data were sorted to allow thematic analysis and categorized into patterns to interpret data and to capture commonalities in the study population. The analytic strategy inherent in thematic analysis enabled exploring data while constructing new theory [46].

The survey asked two open-ended questions that focused on the socio-emotive aspects inherent in the mediation process:

1. What felt awkward, difficult, and unpleasant about the mediation process?
2. What felt rewarding, motivating, educating about the process?

The questions aimed to shed light on disputant positions and perceptions more deeply and followed the example of Charkoudian (2012) [29], seeking feelings about the mediation situation through elaborate, non-guiding questions. The questions can also be regarded as pertinent for future mediator training and process improvement. The responses were analyzed for content, with a particular focus on participant emotions, experiences and interpretations.

3.3. Cases

The sample comprised altogether 58 participants from 9 mediation cases. The mediation followed the principles of the facilitative, restorative process, for which the mediator-researcher was trained. The number of disputants varied between two and 13 per mediation. Seven of the cases involved the team leader, and two only the team members. In six of the cases, the team leader had instigated the process and in the remaining cases, an employee had been the active party requesting for an intervention. One of the cases had been brewing for six years, one for 18 months, and the remaining seven anything between. All the cases were officially resolved, at least on an ostensible and formal level, with a settlement drawn and signed between the parties. However, in two of the cases, the settlements were, according to the follow-up, not satisfactory, or rather temporary.

The fastest mediation process, between only two disputants, was managed in two months from the start to follow-up. 42 disputants out of the original sample of 58 responded, yielding an answering percentage of 72.4. The extraordinarily high percentage is explained by the procedure: the mediator asked the disputants to fill out the questionnaire on the spot, upon follow-up discussion end. The missing 27.6% is accounted for by those participants who promised to return the form later but never delivered. The genders were represented in an extremely unbalanced manner in the mediations: 10 of the disputants were male and 48 female. The youngest participant was 21 years old and the oldest 63.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1. Survey

Respondent answers to Questions 1 and 2 were documented as reported in the survey. The content of the 42 disputant respondents was analyzed, sorted, and organized into five broader themes, as shown in Table 1.

Question 1 - What felt awkward, difficult, and unpleasant about the mediation process?

The answers to Question 1 show that generally the process was experienced as emotionally burdening and extremely personal. Upon process start, many disputants felt they were pressured to take part and were naturally reluctant. This was conveyed in their communication with the mediator: they demanded to know whether the employer had to right to force them to participate. In fact, under Finnish legislation, employees have the obligation to participate, but they determine themselves how they contribute and what kind of information they share.

“No-one asked if we wanted to participate.”

The reluctant disputants who protested against the waste of time and piling of work, surprisingly often, however, found the process useful, despite their prior attitudes:

"I apologize for my earlier aggression. You were right – one can only understand the benefits of mediation if you take part in the process."

"This wasn't at all as bad as I thought beforehand."

"At first I felt we were forced to participate in mediation. Now I think it was a privilege and it should be everyone's right."

Many were worried about process confidentiality and loss of professional image if external parties found out about their stake in the conflict. Some had doubts regarding mediator neutrality and thought they detected signs of mediator partiality. These suspicions always disappeared during the face-to-face discussions with the mediator but insecurities regarding peer involvement and quality of contribution remained more persistently:

"I'm disappointed not everybody spoke honestly what they had on their mind."

"The entire discussion seemed fake."

Many responses conveyed exhaustion and load triggered by the discussions:

"The entire process and the topics treated were unpleasant."

"I wouldn't have wanted to dwell on things."

"Dialogue was challenging as there were two opposing fronts."

"Looking back and remembering it all was unpleasant."

"Digging the dirt just brought all the stress and harm back."

"I haven't been able to sleep as I just keep thinking of all this. This morning I woke up before five to think about my role in this."

"In the beginning I was really exhausted and worried that X's distorted views and assumptions would again end up being rationalized and normalized with these conversations."

Some conflict parties were disappointed with the mediator, especially if they had had high expectations for an active mediator role as a problem-solver. They accused the mediator of passivity and of failure to introduce a solution that would not have been superficial or temporary. Many also revealed they felt embarrassed about or ashamed of their emotional outbursts.

"The mediator just sat there without doing anything."

"Some chairman you were, allowing X to continue talking!"

"The mediator should have been more assertive, telling us what to do."

Question 2 - What felt rewarding, motivating, educating about the process?

Considering that disputant views were often negatively biased and pessimistic, it is noteworthy that most of them still ended up being grateful for the mediation process. Even though they had diverse worries regarding mediator impartiality, support and competence, they expressed gratitude for the employer's investment in the process and for mediator presence and contribution.

"We should have been given this opportunity years ago, before the problem escalated."

"I am extremely grateful for this process and for having a good person by my side, helping reflect my thoughts."

"It was refreshing to finally talk about things openly."

"Even though this didn't really change much in our team, I'm grateful our employer at least tried to help us."

Some participants were surprised by the by-products of the process: they felt that the resolution itself became secondary and their own, personal processes took priority. They were grateful for the feedback, the opportunity to see their own behavior through colleagues' eyes, and for the chance to raise self-knowledge:

"Even though it was scary, I now understand the value of self-reflection."

"I'm constantly learning new things and the mediator was a great mirror in this process."

These comments show that the focus on mediation be distanced from mediation resolution and contract to the mental processes involved. Deepest learning takes place through hardships and conflicts should be viewed as enablers of learning and growth [31]. Some of the disputants saw the connection between the agony associated with the personal nature of the discussions and the potential for personal growth:

"Mediation has truly empowered me."

"I have really grown as an individual during this process."

"This has increased my self-knowledge and self-confidence; it was an important finding understanding that I'm doing the right things even though no-one thanks you for what you do."

The participants articulated takeaways in terms of communication skills and strong resolution to change their team dynamics and interaction culture:

"After this process, we will for sure lower our threshold of speaking up whenever there's even the slightest friction."

"I wonder why no-one has told me before how my communication has affected them. I had never realized it could be interpreted that way."

Some comments revealed the participants valued the mediator's role, contribution and presence:

"Having an external party sit with us was actually really valuable for the process."

"I don't know how I could thank you enough as you have really changed my world. Despite the emotional burden, I feel good and I'm grateful this process happened to me."

"This mediation process was the highlight of my year. You are, no doubt, among the top-3 individuals who have impacted my thinking and leadership philosophy."

4.2. Participant Observation

The mediator-researcher had direct and immediate access to observing the disputants in action and any emotions or reactions involved. She learned that there is no reason to be concerned or afraid of emotional expressions since they serve as the turning point guiding the discussion to deeper, emotive levels, where the real problems lay. A trigger is often needed to find a more authentic layer in the dialogue; until this point, disputants tend to merely discuss concrete matters and superficial issues relating to work organization, responsibilities and structures, as such topics are safe and cause less emotive pressure.

The initial set-up had no predictive value in terms of process outcomes. The parties often worried that "our situation is so difficult that there's no way any intervention is going to help"; however, there is now indication that strong feelings may actually motivate the participants for sincere and genuine investment in the process. Also the likelihood of an emotional discharge increases in proportion to the amount of frustration experienced and the duration of the mental load, which again serves as a turning point in the discussions.

Surprisingly, the bonds between the mediator and the disputants evolved relatively quickly and smoothly from early hostility and suspicion towards the mediator into trusting and confiding. The information session is naturally important for ensuring that the parties know enough of the process and its key principles but typically it was the one-on-one interview time that changed disputant attitudes towards the mediator. It is therefore critical to reserve enough time for this process stage. The mediator-disputant relationship became sometimes so meaningful that the disputant began active email correspondence, which is not ideal for a process that is to be transparent, objective and neutral.

Witnessing a resolution in the work communities under scrutiny is naturally rewarding and the key motivator for disputants, but participants often took away a by-product, inspiration for self-development that might out-value the original purpose. Some claimed they had never before received such frank and direct feedback on their conduct, personality or communication, and understanding its value for self-growth, they began to look for ways or practices in the team to root in a permanent and more authentic feedback culture.

Even though conflict mediation constitutes an extremely emotive process, not all the related emotions are negative. The most glaring positive feeling displayed was relief, not only as witnessed through oral testimonies during the process or in the survey. The researcher could see a physical change in many participants: when the most troubling root cause had been dealt with, they started looking the counter-party in the eye, changing their posture, sometimes smiling, even laughing. The release of tension also reflected from their face and brought warmth and humor to their interaction.

4.3. Thematic Areas

The responses to the survey were documented and analyzed for thematic content, with an eye on expressions revealing participant perceptions, interpretations, personal experiences and emotions during the process. Question 1 yielded four main themes (1. Frustration with the quality of peer participation, 2. Load induced by the strong emotions the process raised, 3. Disappointment with the mediator, 4. Bitterness about the weak settlement) and Question 2 five (1. Gratitude for the process, 2. Raised self-awareness, 3. Motivation to grow as an individual, 4. Lessons learned about communication, 5. Gratitude to the mediator).

Participant observation yielded five key themes (1. Impact of emotional expression, 2. Early emotions as an antecedent of process outcomes, 3. Disputant relationship with the mediator, 4) Motivation for personal growth, 5. Relief). The 14 key themes that surfaced and their key content markers are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. The content themes yielded in the empirical research.

SURVEY QUESTION 1	SURVEY QUESTION 2	PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION
<p>1. Frustration with the quality of peer participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -lack of openness -lack of honesty -attitude problems: reluctance and hostility -exaggeration and drama to argue for one's case more convincingly 	<p>1. Gratitude for the process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -for the opportunity to openly talk about the real problems -for mediator presence, caring and goodwill -for employer investment in the process: time, money and prioritization of tasks to enable participation -for relieved stressors in the workplace and in workplace interaction -described mediation as a more effective leadership coaching than formal training 	<p>1. Impact of emotional expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -disputants often stated before the mediation discussion that they worried they would start crying - employees generally felt embarrassed about their open expressions but the outbursts in all the cases triggered a positive change in dialogue -one employee's emotional outburst often triggered more genuine discussion -outbursts were always the turning point and predicted success
<p>2. Load induced by the strong emotions the process raised</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -embarrassment about emotional outbursts -having to re-live the conflict -shame for having become involved in a conflict -questioning of one's professional identity 	<p>2. Raised self-awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -rare opportunity to receive honest, direct feedback -the time and space provided by employer allowed reflecting on one's conduct -the revelations about one's impact on others' helped understand others' reactions 	<p>2. Early emotions as an antecedent of process outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the atmosphere or early-process emotions did not predict process outcomes -sometimes the observer found that the more difficult the case, the bigger the relief and the more positive the disputant reactions
<p>3. Disappointment with the mediator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -mediator role viewed as passive and weak -expectations for mediator-provided solutions were not met -lack of assertion and force in leading the discussion 	<p>3. Motivation to grow as an individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -newly-found enthusiasm about growing as a person -commitment to new ways of working and thinking -faith in anyone's ability to change and grow -genuine requests to ask for others' feedback on their new conduct in the future 	<p>3. Disputant relationship with the mediator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -prior to process start, disputants, except for the ones who had requested for mediation, were negative, hostile, arrogant or aggressive towards the mediator - their attitudes always changed during the individual interviews, where the mediator had the chance to explain her values and process principles - even though not part of the process, surprisingly many disputants emailed the mediator during or after the process to share their emotions, often also to thank for the mediator's contribution, and sometimes to try and influence the mediator's thinking
<p>4. Bitterness about the weak settlement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the contract was regarded as superficial -unfair that no-one was punished for bad behavior -disappointment with missing employer force in implementing the agreement 	<p>4. Lessons learned about communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -understood the importance of dealing with problems at their early stages -committed as a group to more active and frequent communication and feedback -realized the difference in impact between accusations and constructive criticism -appreciated diversity and personality differences as a source of richness 	<p>4. Disputant motivation for personal growth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the most glaring finding relates to individual disputants' eagerness, inspiration and commitment to personal growth, once they got to experience the benefits of genuine feedback for the personal lives -a few outstandingly humble individuals were able to reflect on their own conduct critically and genuinely in front of others, which encouraged also others for self-reflection -particularly many superiors expressed interest in further self-development and asked for coaching or guidance of the mediator
	<p>5. Gratitude to the mediator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -for triggering self-growth -for guidance and support in self-reflexive practice -for empathy and caring 	<p>5. Relief</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -regardless of initial feelings, disputants unanimously expressed overwhelming gratitude to the mediator for helping the disputants find a relief from work-induced stress -some sent messages to the mediator afterwards, thanking for her help and expressing relief for surviving the process -many claimed the benefits and rewards were so huge that they wished they had been entitled to participate in mediation much earlier, before the stress accumulated

5. Discussion

Analysis of Question 1 answers shows that the attendees in general perceived the process as an extremely exhaustive and emotionally consuming ordeal. They also often felt reluctant and "forced" or "pressured" to participate, which, admittedly, is technically true owing to the employer's directive. Others argued that they did not feel it was their responsibility to contribute as they were not the ones who had instigated the dispute. Disputants did not downplay their criticism towards the process and how they felt having to be part of it, and twice the verbal expressions

towards the mediators grew close to aggressive. Participants had accumulated frustration, anger and disappointment for years in the worst case, which made it understandable that they channeled their emotions to someone they knew they would not have to face or work with after the process. Apparently either they were convinced by the mediator's arguments or then the process proved itself as they did not complain about having to participate in the survey.

Most disputants had high expectations regarding the process itself and the mediators' ability to solve the conflict at hand and were disappointed with the outcome, which often seemed like a compromise. Many were frustrated by the mediator role; they expected an external intervention to mean that the mediator would impose a resolution. Instead, they found they had to do the work and process a solution.

Many felt awkward and embarrassed about addressing their emotions, and emotional outbursts were looked upon in retrospect as humiliating. This is a particularly accentuated phenomenon in the Finnish culture, which on the population level does not encourage expression of emotions but is rather technocratic, analytical and fact-oriented. At the same time, disputants understood the significance of openness and expected that of the others, while not always ready for genuine articulation of their views and feelings themselves.

Some were concerned about confidentiality, worrying that people outside the team would learn about the process, which might jeopardize their reputation. All the mediations were characterized by emotional outbursts such as sobbing and tears, indicating that the situation was found stressful. A couple of times, participants apologized for their reactions in the follow-up and revealed how ashamed they felt about having got carried away with their feelings. Disputants had accumulated much mental load over the years and the relief often caused an emotional outburst; crying and sobbing seem to belong to the phase where disputants are allowed to unleash their grievance and stop pretending everything is alright, which is often the requirement for professional behavior. Pretense is confirmed by a Harvard Business Review survey (2015) [47], which shows that 24% of employees rarely let others know they are upset at work, 26% only hint at their disagreement, and only 28% speak up if they have been misunderstood.

A number of disputant were relatively hostile towards the mediators in the beginning, but their tone usually softened during the individual interviews. Some expressed concern or disappointment at having detected signs of mediators being on another party's side and listening more carefully to someone or nodding their heads more for one of the parties.

Question 2 answers reveal general gratitude for the opportunity to finally address issues that had been nagging and corrupting the team spirit, and many stated they should have been given access to the process earlier. The most easily generalizable finding indicates that despite initial reluctance or disappointment with the mediator, the colleagues or the settlement, close to all disputants felt extreme relief about the opportunity for a heads-up.

All throughout the responses, one can detect satisfaction with the individual interviews, which was often expressed also orally during the individual discussions. Generally they were satisfied with their interaction with the mediator, even when the settlement was regarded as weak.

Probably the most noteworthy conclusion relates to disputant self-growth. Even the ones who were unhappy with the settlement content seemed excited about the discovery of self-leadership themes as a by-product of mediation. The ideas of personal growth and lifelong learning almost thrilled some of them, as if self-development was a novel and surprising element offered as a bonus. In relation to such development, they found the importance of self-reflective practice. As a result, they enthused about new approaches to communication and began to understand their own responsibility for team atmosphere and functioning. Instead of continuing to blame others, they turned inward, took a look in the mirror and began to question their own ways of interacting with others. It came as a revelation that exposing oneself to something as emotionally consuming and demanding as conflict mediation is an effective way to professionalize oneself and to acquire not only working life credentials but also skills that bolster their private-life relationships.

Participant observation confirmed the survey findings but additionally raised a theme that did not show in the anonymous responses: process-start emotions and atmosphere had no predictive value in terms of process outcomes. Or, if they did, the correlation may be counter-intuitive: the more tension and frustration the team had accumulated and the longer the conflict, the more surely the disputants would find relief and resolution. This may be accounted for by two distinct mechanisms. First, any improvement is likely to feel like progress when individuals have for years suffered from massive emotive load or stress, which is a typical outcome of long-enduring relationship conflict. Second, strong friction is more likely to climax in an outburst of emotion, which tends to serve as a critical turning point and important component inherent to the resolution.

The empirical evidence collected with the two methods shows that conflict mediation progresses along two distinct tracks. On the first track moves the conflict, following its own unique, unpredetermined path, with its ups and downs, steps forward and leaps back. A scientifically validated process as the foundation ensures outcomes that are controllable, if the disputants choose to invest any effort at all in the resolution. These investments nurture collective effort and the benefits fortify themselves, inviting further effort.

The second track is more personal and individual and less predictable or certain. It is the route that each disputant takes on their own during the mediation process, often triggered by the example of or feedback from a colleague. It can be a painful route, requiring acknowledgement of one's weaknesses and blind spots, but the related self-reflection and individual learning yields mental rewards that may outweigh the importance of any improvement in the team dynamics.

5.1. Practical Implications

This study set out to explore the relational and affective outcomes associated with relationship conflict mediation, often viewed as secondary to its core mission - resolving interpersonal friction. The empirical study revealed the emotional turmoil and the exhaustive mental load related to the different stages of the process and this signals an elevated need to prepare the participants better in the information session for what lies ahead emotionally.

In general, the findings show, however, that the mental rewards gained both on the individual level as well as on the level of team dynamics are so immense that the process deserves attention also as a method relieving organizations of socio-emotive stress and of enhancing well-being at work. Many disputants found that their atmosphere and interaction was taken on a higher, warmer and more genuine, level than before the conflict.

On an even more accentuated note, this study identified evidence for the instrumental role of restorative mediation for deep individual and organizational learning. This provides us with a new argument for selling mediation: as a low-threshold method of organizational development, it benefits individual members as means of acquiring feedback and of learning about the impact of their personality and interaction in a way unavailable through other channels.

5.2. Study Limitations

One of the risks when taking a confluent role as both a mediator and a researcher is that objectivity could become clouded when observing the fruits of one's own labor. Perhaps the mediator wants to see process outcomes that are objectively not there, or perhaps the researcher perceives signals that were not part of the process per se. On the other hand, researching cases that one mediates is an effective way of gaining access to the phenomena at play at the inter-human interface, which is not always easy for an outside observer, or intruder, as many participants might claim.

The social position and dual-role of the mediator-researcher complicates study reliability in two distinct ways: on the one hand, her theoretical preconceptions might determine what she sees, and on the other, participant images of her shape the quality of the data she is able to gather [44]. However, in the current setup, the authenticity of the data gathered is not compromised as the researcher role is merely secondary in the minds of the disputants. The more prominent challenge for them is the conflict at hand and possibly and secondarily, the presence of a third party, the mediator. Once they have seen the value of the intervention, any other roles become insignificant. Besides, even when the field researcher is disguised, participants form a relationship with and an image of her [44].

Further, this is not a unique set-up, as also others have recognized the utility of participant observation of one's own work and have adopted the method to "prevent imposing alien meanings upon the actions of the subjects" [44]. In order to understand what is 'alien' and what is inherent to the process, the researcher should be involved on the same, emotive, level as the participants.

However, as it is also important to recognize the risks associated with the observation of one's own investments, achievements and actions, this study selected a complementary methodology. The anonymous survey provided insurance against researcher biases and confirmed the findings from participant observation.

Another weakness of the present study is its narrow research design and sole focus on qualitative analysis. Subsequently the findings can only be viewed as suggestive and likely to support earlier findings regarding the outcomes associated with the extreme ends of the dichotomy between evaluative vs facilitative styles, instead of opening entirely new avenues in the related research realm.

A third flaw relates to the small sample size, which does not allow generalizability of the findings. However, in qualitative analysis, it is the individual experiences and their thorough and high-quality analysis that counts more than augmenting the volume of data.

However, with intensive and yet lengthy processes extending as long as ten months, as in two of the cases in question, with bi-weekly sessions, iterative interviews and mediations, and strong mediator involvement, the analysis tends to be deep and thoroughly informed by the stakeholders' insider views. Furthermore, this study resorted to other ratings instead of the traditional self-reports, which expands earlier understanding of mediator behavior with a new angle.

Finally, the mediator-researcher, owing to her doctorate in Organizations and Management and studies in communications and languages, was well versed in analyzing and observing the team dynamics in the cases in question, which likely deepened the examination with a critical, apt and keen eye.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

In order to complement the organizational battery of problem-solution instruments, conflict mediation has recently gained momentum as a method of relationship conflict resolution. To rid employees of inhibitions to adopt this relatively novel tool, it is crucial to develop the mediation process in a way that counteracts and counter-argues for any biases and misconceptions associated with third-party interventions. This necessitates analysis of participant experiences and process outcomes, as well as of the mediator role.

This study lends strong support to previous findings regarding the dichotomy of mediator styles, especially when backed up with participant observation by the mediator-researcher. Namely, the expressions that revealed most satisfaction with the interaction with the mediators and the process were provided by disputants in those cases where the follow-up meeting showed that the process was not as successful as in the cases where the respondents were more critical about the process. In other words, the disputants found the settlement only to be a superficial compromise and the issues agreed on to be too abstract to help resolve the situation, and yet their analysis of mediator behavior was more positive.

This corroborates the dichotomy between task and relational demands to signify a competing values paradigm; the mediator style and behavior seem decisive to which ends are served and which requirements met. However, competing does not per se mean contradictory or contrastive, and one does not have to rule the other one out either, they likely only compete for the same attention and resources. The scarcity of organizational resources together with the general cost-cutting schemes and productivity trends drive such competition toward choices or either/or, but the two demands can coexist side by side when managed by an experienced mediator and with time and other resources allowing.

Conclusively, the variance between directive and nondirective mediator styles is associated with different conflict mediation outcomes in terms of agreement, but more importantly, in learning. Although claiming that the outcomes are contrastive would be overstating the case for the impact of mediator styles, studies have demonstrated that directive mediator behaviors tend to lead to settlement more effectively, whereas nondirective styles support organizational learning and individual growth and also show in higher disputant satisfaction with the process. The tentative findings here but also in earlier studies [48] suggest that even the most dramatic and traumatizing life events bear potential to trigger positive outcomes for the individual. However, further studies are needed that expand the body of sample targets to solidify these conclusions. Alternatively, a comparative research design analyzing the outcomes of the mediator styles representing the opposite ends of the continuum might prove of value in corroborating the antecedents of various sorts of process outcomes.

Disputants sometimes worry that restorative conflict mediation yields no real, concrete or tangible outcomes immediately and effectively, at least when assessed in terms of settlement. This urges us in future investigations to shift attention to process outcomes, which often take more enduring and persisting forms: learning to reflect on one's behavior and communication provides unlimited potential for individual growth and organizational learning. Increased reflexivity and introspection are key outcomes associated with restorative mediation and a burning educational topic in the postmodern society, promoting self-growth, self-leadership and self-regulation. Ultimately, the mediation process not only helps resolve intra-team conflicts but as a by-product, it helps individuals learn about themselves and about proactive conflict avoidance for the future – what an effective way to leverage personal growth, team dynamics, and organizational well-being and productivity.

7. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

8. Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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