THE EFFECTS OF OPERATIONAL MANAGERS’ BEHAVIORS ON TEAM MEMBERS: TASK AND RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT, ROLE CLARITY, AND LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE

BY

SHIRLEY L. BARKER

A dissertation submitted to City University of Seattle in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2022
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Paul Gerhardt, PhD, Committee Chair
3/2/2022
Date

Susan Cathcart, PhD, Committee Member
3/2/2022
Date

Howard Jacobs, PhD, Committee Member
3/2/2022
Date

Vicki Butler, EdD
3/3/2022
Date

Vicki Butler, EdD, Dean
Date
DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad who inspired me to continue on with my journey. You always believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself. You encouraged me to go far beyond the boundaries that I had set for myself and allowed me to blossom into this new being full of light and love. I miss you!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Paul Gerhardt for listening to me, helping to get clear on what I wanted to say, guiding me along the way, and holding my feet to the fire when I needed it. I appreciate you guiding me through this journey! I want to acknowledge all the faculty and committee members who were so knowledgeable in this topic. I appreciate the latitude you offered me when I would go off on a tangent and ask all kinds of questions. I appreciate your patience when the tangents were bunny trails and your advice and expertise when you went deeper into a topic to help me understand it more fully. You have rounded out my education in a way I never anticipated.

To my family, who supported me from the beginning. Sherrie, for your countless hours reviewing my documents, calming me down, and encouraging me. Terry, Tim, and Sharon, for your inexhaustible positive energy and endless ability to hear me out! Joe, for your encouragement. I could not have done this without you. You are my cheerleaders, my advisors, and importantly, my disciplinarians when I was being stubborn and wanted to give in. I love you more than I can say, and I am so proud to be your sister!

A shout out is in order for Chris Paolillo, without whose help and guidance, I would not have made it through. You gave me incredible advice on how to keep going when all I wanted to do was stop and sleep. You are an incredible woman, a fabulous friend, and I love you doll! MWAH!

To my friends and family, thank you so much for your grace and understanding when I had to bow out of functions and gatherings to work on my project. I plan on making up for lost time now!! I appreciate your encouragement and listening to me when I was crabby because I was having a bad day.
I want to thank Dr. Bowen who helped me navigate the challenges of obtaining my doctorate while dealing with Multiple Sclerosis. I had convinced myself I could not work at such a high level. You showed me otherwise.

Thank you to the company and its participants who graciously agreed to meet with me to discuss the topic even after I left the company. Your input is invaluable.

Finally, I want to thank my cat, Alice, who always knew when I needed to step away from the computer and reset with some quality cuddle time. She showed up in my house one day when I left the door open, liked what she saw, and decided it was home. Thank you for making me laugh and putting up with the absence of playtime. I love you my little buggy boo! Thank you for adopting me!
TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ............................................................................................................................. iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................................... v

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................... xi

LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................ xii

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................... xiii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY .................................................................1

  Study Background/Foundation ......................................................................................... 3

    Current State of the Field in Which the Problem Exists .............................................. 4

    Historical Background ................................................................................................. 4

    Deficiencies in the Evidence ....................................................................................... 6

  Problem Statement ........................................................................................................... 6

    Audience ....................................................................................................................... 7

    Specific Leadership Problem ....................................................................................... 8

  Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................................... 8

  Methodology and Research Design Overview ............................................................... 9

  Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 11

  Limitations .................................................................................................................... 11

  Delimitations .................................................................................................................. 13

  Definitions of Key Terms ............................................................................................... 14

  Summary ........................................................................................................................ 16

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................. 18

  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................. 19

    Role Theory ................................................................................................................. 20

    Leader-Member Exchange ......................................................................................... 22
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Identity</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Awareness and Communication</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Behavior</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact to Team Members</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Performance</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms and Culture</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Conflict</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Conflict</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Method</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis Methods</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Evidence</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Validity</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Validity</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .................................................................59

Methodology .........................................................................................60

Participants .........................................................................................60

Data Analysis .......................................................................................61

Findings ...............................................................................................62

Presentation of Findings: Effects of Role Clarity ......................................63

Research Question 1 ...........................................................................64

Findings of Interview Questions Related to Research Question 1 ............64

Research Question 1 Themes ................................................................68

Presentation of Findings: Constructive Task Conflict ................................79

Research Question 2 ...........................................................................79

Findings of Interview Questions Related to Research Question 2 ..........79

Research Question 2 Themes ................................................................81

Presentation of Findings: Factors Affecting Task and Relationship Conflict ................................................................................89

Research Question 3 ...........................................................................89

Findings of Interview Questions Related to Research Question 3 ............89

Research Question 3 Themes ................................................................92

Summary ...............................................................................................98

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION ................................100

Discussion of Findings and Conclusions .............................................101

Research Question 1—Role Clarity and Task Conflict .........................101

Research Question 2—Constructive Task Conflict .............................108

Research Question 3—Positively Disrupting Team Task Conflict ..........113

Application of Findings ......................................................................117

Role Clarity ..........................................................................................118
LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1. Participant Demographic Information ............................................................. 61
Table 4.2. Themes and Conceptual .................................................................................... 63
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Deming Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle .......................................................30

Figure 2. The Situational Leadership II Model .................................................................32

Figure 3. Ladder of Inference ............................................................................................84
ABSTRACT

The topic of leaderships’ effect on team members has been the focus of research, including role theory, leader-member exchange (LMX), and social identity. Operational managers were moved between teams to gain experience. Over the years, the organization investigated in this study moved from authoritarian leadership to a more collaborative style. Operational managers’ formal training included technical expertise, but training for interpersonal skills did not keep pace. The objective of this study was to explore the effects of managers’ behaviors on team members, task and relationship conflict, and role clarity on team performance. The research methodology chosen for this study was a qualitative method using an exploratory case study as the research design. Ten participants were selected using the purposive approach, followed by one-on-one interviews to discuss factors impacting the relationship between the operational managers and team members. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Data collection was conducted through individual and open-ended semistructured interviews. Data analysis was conducted cross-case to determine conceptual categories that led to the emergence of three themes: Effects of Role Clarity, Constructive Task Conflict, and Factors Affecting Task and Relationship Conflict. The results of the data analysis led to recommendations: (a) increased awareness of operational managers’ behaviors on members, both positive and negative to mitigate or enhance the effect; (b) determine balance between enough and too much role documentation and the quality of existing documentation to determine what actions to take; and (c) investigate the cause of relationship conflict promptly to determine cause so it can be addressed appropriately. Future research could delve into (a) the effects of union culture on members and the efficacy of operational managers; (b)
deeper analysis into the factors of LMX, role clarity, and social identity to understand which approaches are most beneficial to the operational managers; (c) how the use of in-group and out-group attitudes affect the combination of LMX, role clarity and social identity; and (d) how operational managers’ personality and preferences affect their choices about approaching conflict.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The focus organization for this study is set within an international manufacturing company. For the purposes of this study, the company will be referred to as the Puget Sound Manufacturing Company (PSMC), a pseudonym created to protect the privacy of the company and its employees. Historically, the company has been based on a military hierarchy that uses vertical management without much cross-organizational collaboration; leaders in the company have typically used an authoritarian leadership approach. In this environment, team members have been expected to follow the direction of managers without question. In turn, first-line managers have been expected to follow the direction of leadership in the same fashion. Operational managers have been viewed as technical experts responsible for ensuring the quality of tasks being performed.

Over the years, however, company leaders began to realize the importance of collaboration among organizations, leadership, and team members and adopted a more holistic set of values. In the spirit of collaborating “with humility, inclusion, and transparency” (personal communication, PSMC, n.d.), the operational manager’s role has changed from purely technical expertise-sharing to relationship-building to create a cohesive team.

In the past, operational managers were team leaders who largely stayed with the same group throughout their careers. However, PSMC leaders saw the benefit of cross training organizational managers to give them wider exposure and enhance their organizational expertise. The ability to move between groups with less impact to teams supports the company’s value of predictability and stability (personal communication, PSMC, n.d.). Although technical expertise development is currently provided by the
Functional Excellence (FE) training organization, managerial relationship skills are still lacking among PSMC managers.

Incomplete training is an issue according to Young (2019), who recommended the use of the ADDIE model (i.e., analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation)—created jointly by the U.S. Army and the Center for Educational Technology at Florida State University (Hannum, 2005)—to determine the effectiveness of training. Although the model was developed for the military, it is applicable to other organizations. To counter deficiencies in training, organizations should use a training and needs assessment (TNA) approach. TNA is a systematic method, according to Pilcher (2016), of determining the needs of the organization to include the missing components.

Relationship training within PSMC will support the company’s value in the use of best leadership practices (personal communication, PSMC, n.d.). It is important for operational managers to improve their relationship skills as they move between groups within the organization to address team member relationships and conflicts. The focus of this study was on the effects of managers’ behavior on team members, task and relationship conflict, and role clarity on team performance. Actions were assessed that affected positive or negative results of managers’ behaviors on team members.

The following section includes (a) a review of the historical background, foundation, and purpose of the study; (b) a discussion of the general and specific problems of operational managers, including leadership concerns; (c) a description of the research questions that guided the study, methodology, and design overview; and (d) identification of limitations and delimitations of the study and a summary of the chapter.
Study Background/Foundation

Leadership in PSMC has been based historically on authoritarian leadership styles due to the company’s initial focus on military orders. Over time, the company’s focus has moved to one that is more collaborative and cross-organizational. Although leadership styles have changed, variables analyzed for this study remained focused on the relationship aspects of leadership. Historically, authoritarian leadership relationships (Young, 2019), have been characterized by one-way communication with the leader telling the follower what tasks to perform. As the styles become more collaborative, communication becomes more two-way and interactive.

Studies have shown relationships between leaders and members are affected by multiple variables (Newman et al., 2017), including lack of role clarity and communication, which create complexity in the interactions resulting in a task and relationship conflict. According to González-Romá (2014), when not addressed, task conflict may result in a relationship conflict, decreasing team performance and effectiveness. To minimize the negative impact of conflict, organizational leaders can examine several theories and themes related to operational managers.

Participants in this study were operational managers with at least 1 year of experience leading teams. Formal managers typically attend to leading employees’ administrative aspects within the organization (Northouse, 2016), including performance reviews, salary determination, and disciplinary actions. Operational managers in this study were seasoned team members acting as technical managers who lead team members daily and have closer, continual contact with the individuals than the administrative manager.
Operational managers are responsible for ensuring technical expertise is shared with team members through knowledge sharing and coaching. The study included an examination of the effects of leader-member exchange (LMX), role clarity, and social identity about leader awareness and communication, role clarity, team performance, and task and relationship conflict. By examining the effects of leaders on team members, this study will move the leadership field ahead by identifying factors that promote leaders’ positive behaviors.

**Current State of the Field in Which the Problem Exists**

Although research has progressed in leadership theories, little research has focused on the interaction of LMX, role, and social identity theories with operational managers. Much of the reviewed literature—including Hartnell et al. (2016), Kauppila, (2016), and Turner, (2017)—focused on upper leadership or team level dynamics rather than operational managers’ relationships and influence with team members. The consequence of the gap in literature—about the impact of LMX, role, and social identity theories on leader awareness and communication, and task and relationship conflict from the operational managers’ point of view—is decreased team performance (Hjerto & Kuvaas, 2017) and increased conflict (González-Romá, 2014). To better understand the literature reviewed, it is important to examine the historical background.

**Historical Background**

At its inception, PSMC was built on hierarchical leadership, with little attention paid to the relationship between operational managers and employees. Over time, company leaders saw the benefits of increased relationship quality. Operational managers were moved to various teams to give them more experience with a broader array of
variables. Before becoming operational managers, they received formal training on technical skills from the Functional Excellence (FE) training organization, but relational skills training was still lacking. Young (2019) suggested using TNA to identify underdeveloped areas of training to enhance the effectiveness of operational managers.

The lack of relational skills left the operational managers to feel their way through leading a new team with little guidance. This lack of skills can create conflict through unclear roles (Yadav & Kumar, 2017), lack of leadership self-awareness (Lee et al., 2017), and conflict in tasks and relationships (González-Romá, 2014). Underlying the lack of leadership self-awareness and understanding of relationship and task conflicts were the leaders’ lack of understanding of LMX, role clarity, and social identity. These issues needed to be examined to understand fully operational manager’s impact.

Previous research (Turner, 2017) has primarily focused on team members and upper leadership. Although upper leadership and managers have been discussed in previous literature, there was a gap in the literature addressing operational managers and their relationships with team members. Operational managers are experienced team members who oversee the daily tasks of employees and possess technical expertise.

According to Hajela (2015), close contact between operational managers and members can influence the team culture. Similarly, Xie et al. (2019) suggested operational manager’s skills and insight can positively or negatively guide members’ behaviors. When the operational manager’s behavior negatively affects a team, it can lead to disruptive behaviors and decreased morale.

According to Malos (2012), in the past, it was thought a leader could force a team to do well using authoritarian leadership employing coercion, close oversight, or using
punishment to discourage unwanted behavior. Instead of obtaining the desired results, however, authoritarian leadership may be counterproductive. Over time, the use of authoritarian tactics gave way to multiple leadership styles, including democratic, situational, transformational, collaborative, laissez-faire, and so forth (Malos, 2012). The focus of studies shifted over time to the effects of LMX relationships (Liden & Graen, 1980), leaving gaps in literature.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Much of the reviewed literature focused on upper leadership or team level dynamics (Turner, 2017), which bypassed the importance of the symbiotic relationship most employees have with their operational manager—their primary point of contact due to the exchange of technical expertise. Gaps in the literature included LMX quality and organizational socialization from team members and leaders to assess LMX quality, role, and social identity theory. Lack of awareness has led to problems in PSMC.

**Problem Statement**

Companies experience employee turnover among operational managers, creating uncertainty within the team. White et al. (2018) found the introduction of disruptive behavior reduces a team’s effectiveness and morale. According to Roybal (2016), the negative effect ultimately can affect the company’s profits and viability. In PSMC, uncertainty was compounded by operational managers’ movement within the company between teams without formal relationship training. Although the preference for moving organizational managers from one group to another has changed, relationship training has not kept pace. A TNA, according to Young (2019), is important to determine current needs for training within the organization.
At PSMC, operational managers may not have been aware of their behaviors as they attempted to forge relationships with their new team members. According to González-Romá (2014), lack of awareness can lead to a lack of role clarity, task and relationship conflict, and low-level LMX relationships. As suggested by Mafuba et al. (2015), these variables can induce task and relationship conflict. Exploring these variables assisted multiple entities within and outside the organization to lead the team to greater efficacy.

**Audience**

PSMC, its executives, the training organization, and other company leaders can benefit from the current study’s findings. Executives will know operational managers retain the interpersonal skills knowledge gained in future training. The training organization can focus on interpersonal skills training and deliver consistent messages for use by operational managers.

By recognizing interactions between the organizational managers and team members in the context of LMX, role clarity, and social identity, organizational managers may adjust and guide the teams effectively with greater clarity. The research findings can guide future researchers into the field of operational management, which is underexplored in current literature. Those in the field of leadership can benefit by using new information pertaining to the impact of LMX, role clarity, and social identity on leader awareness, clear roles, task, and relationship conflict. Study findings also contribute to a greater understanding of the variables in play when leaders attempt to forge relationships with team members, thereby clarifying operational managership problem’s variables.
Specific Leadership Problem

At PSMC, relationship skills and task clarity were lacking in operational managers, which lead to confusion about roles and interpersonal conflict. It was unclear how leader’s behavior drives team members’ behaviors. Currently, operational managers are moved between teams to cover for another who has moved on or to gain more experience leading a diverse team. Operational managers receive formal training on technical skills, but relational skills training has been lacking, resulting in inconsistent operational management. Although feedback sessions with operational managers have occurred, FE has not conducted an in-depth TNA (Young, 2019) to determine the updated needs for relationship skills for operational managers.

Inconsistent leadership at PSMC has negatively affected team members and left operational managers to feel their way through leading a new team with little guidance. A lack of operational managers’ skills can create conflict through unclear roles (Yadav & Kumar, 2017), leadership lack of self-awareness (Mo & Shi, 2017), and conflict in tasks and relationships (Lee et al., 2017). Underlying the disconnects were the leaders’ understanding of LMX, role clarity, and social identity. These elements needed to be examined to understand fully the influence of operational managers on team members.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the impact of the actions of operational managers in PSMC on role clarity, LMX, team task conflict, and relationship conflict. Included in the study was an examination of ways leaders can positively disrupt task conflict before it degrades into relationship conflict. By explicitly
focusing on the interactions between the operational manager and team members, greater understanding of how conflict is constructively was addressed.

According to Northouse (2016), the ability to decrease conflict will successfully integrate members more quickly. New knowledge generated from this qualitative exploratory case study will add to the leadership knowledge base and may apply to leaders in many industries and organizations. For this study, a qualitative methodology and a case study research design were employed.

**Methodology and Research Design Overview**

A qualitative methodology using exploratory case study research design was chosen for this study and included in-person interviews, which were repeated as analysis occurred. According to Pauly et al. (2014), case study, when paired with theory-driven evaluation, can create a better understanding of the variables within the real-life context of a study.

According to Punch (2006), a case study focuses on the holistic, in-depth, contextual examination of one or more cases. Case study is used for inquiring empirically about a person, event, or organization that is the focus of the research bounded in time using various information sources (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). Patton (2014) suggested a case study is not the creation method of the case, but the core meaning derived from the case. Therefore, predetermined analytical categories were not used for this case study (Patton).

An exploratory case study (Punch, 2006) was chosen to focus on answering why something occurs. For this study, exploratory research pertained to the research questions. By answering why an action occurs, the data showed how unwanted actions
can be counteracted. For instance, one could ask, “Why does relationship conflict turn into a negative occurrence from a constructive task conflict?” This question could be rephrased as, “How do leaders allow for constructive task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict?”

The case study researcher analyzes interactions, processes, or behaviors from the participants’ viewpoint. In addition to data collection, a case study involves an iterative process of determining the connections between data categories and refining the resulting theories (Creswell, 2014). Analysis of both the mental (thought process) and physical (behaviors) aspects of the leader expands the context in which events occur. Thought processes and behaviors can be directly correlated to events and may later be correlated to team member’s experiences. This initial study provided a starting point to help PSMC determine how leaders can allow for constructive feedback and determine the effects of role clarity or lack of role clarity. This study also offers insights to help organizational leaders determine how to positively disrupt team task conflict before it escalates into interpersonal relationship conflict.

At PSMC, the suspicion was that task clarity, uniform treatment of team members, and clear roles were lacking, leading to interpersonal conflict, disruptive behavior, and, ultimately, decreased team performance. Conducting a case study validated the problem statement and offered insights into the elements that led to team conflict from the operational manager’s perspective. Future studies can revisit this topic using case study theory ethnology to go deeper into the organization’s culture by including team members and using the findings from this study.
Research Questions

Exploring operational managers’ relationships with team members involved understanding the variables in LMX including role clarity, task conflict, and relationship conflict necessary for healthy relationships. The focus of this study was the impacts of task and relationship conflict and role clarity from the operational managers’ perspective.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How does a lack of role clarity contribute to task conflict?

RQ2: How do leaders allow for constructive task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict?

RQ3: What are the best ways to positively disrupt team task conflict without it turning into interpersonal relationship conflict?

The goal of the research questions was to provide data to develop themes about the variables of LMX, role clarity, task and relationship conflict between operational managers and team members from the operational managers’ point of view. This information was used to understand the variables more fully. There were limitations to this study.

Limitations

Limitations were defined by Hancock and Algozzine (2017) as factors out of the control of the researcher and may affect the results of the study. Limitations of this study were affected by the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The initial plan was to conduct in-person individual interviews using a standard list of questions for each participant. However, under social distancing mandates, the interviews were conducted using a social media platform, which may have introduced different reactions or answers.
than those that may have occurred in person. Consistency in how questions were asked during the interviews helped reduce biases. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), the benefits of openly declaring researchers’ biases make them more manageable and transparent so the reader can determine how those elements affected the study.

Limitations also include the use of only one organization and the political climate within that organization. The use of a single organization was offset with a statement declaring that other institutions or organizations were beyond this study’s scope. Access to and availability of participants was another limitation of the study. To minimize the potential time and access issues, approval was obtained from the organization’s upper leadership to conduct interviews on-site during company hours in exchange for sharing the findings after the dissertation is completed and approved.

A seminar will be conducted with the organization to share the results of the study in exchange for upper leaders’ cooperation with the on-site interviews. Although permission was obtained to conduct the interviews, approval was not given for direct observation of participants. To counter the loss of observational data, multiple sources of data were used to triangulate among the transcripts (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Union affiliation of some of the leaders may have affected the responses of the participants. Both union and nonunion participants were interviewed. This study was a snapshot in time. As suggested by Merriam (2009), attempts to include participants with various perspectives gave richness to the data being gathered. Participants’ self-reporting may have limited the data being gathered.
There are also limitations related to researcher bias. Although attempts were made to reduce bias, there may have been an element of bias in the study. To counter the bias, Creswell’s (2014) suggestion to use reflection and member checking was used to increase the data’s validity and decrease the bias. This study included several delimitations.

**Delimitations**

Although generalizability was a goal for this study, as posed by Hancock and Algonzzine (2017), the findings may not apply to other contexts due to the case study’s specificity. This study was bounded by the time period, participants, and organization. Consequently, as Yin (2018) suggested, generalization was conducted at a higher level using cross-case themes to provide analytic generalizability.

The participants included PSMC operational managers within a manufacturing organization who have experience as an operational manager. The study was conducted with 10 participants using demographic surveys and in-person interviews with the same open-ended questions asked to all participants.

A survey of open-ended questions was used to collect demographic information. The study’s focus was limited to the operational manager and employees’ interactions from the operational manager’s perspective. Conversely, the population not included in this study were team members, executives, and participants from other industries, states, or countries. Operational managers who did not fit the established criteria were not included in the study. The findings and results of this study may not necessarily generalize to other subjects, locations, or future time periods.
Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms are used throughout this dissertation. The purpose of the list of key terms is to clarify the unique words and acronyms found in this study.

Collaborative leadership is the process of facilitating, encouraging, and enabling stakeholders to work together (Malos, 2012).

Collectivistic behavior is focused on an individual’s behavior that benefits the team (DeChurch et al., 2013).

Democratic leadership occurs when the leader makes decisions about who is asked to participate and to what degree (Malos, 2012).

Functional Excellence (FE) is the training group responsible for conducting formal training of operational managers within the organization of focus in this study.

In-group/out-group is defined by in-group members who are favored with higher quality LMX relationships by the leader, thereby receiving more information, resources, and support. Out-group members possess lower quality LMX relationships and do not receive the same benefits (Davis et al., 2019).

Individualistic behavior occurs when an individual’s behavior is focused on self (DeChurch et al., 2013).

Laissez-faire leadership occurs when the leader delegates tasks to followers with little or no direction (Malos, 2012).

Leader-member exchange (LMX) is focused on the dyadic relationship between the leader and team members. Higher LMX relationships are rewarded with increased resources, information, and favor (Lam et al., 2018).
Manager is the formal administrative team manager responsible for administrative tasks about team members. The manager may or may not have technical expertise, or technical advice on how to complete daily tasks, opting instead to defer to the operational manager (team leader; Northouse, 2016).

Norms are guidelines of acceptable behaviors, expectations, and interactions (Hackman, 2012).

Operational managers are responsible for daily activities of team members and typically possess high technical expertise. Operational managers have minimal administrative tasks about employees. Operational managers are known within PSMC as team leaders (O. L. Sackrider, personal communication, June 4, 2020).

Organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) are voluntary behaviors that contribute to and support the organization (Mo & Shi, 2017).

Plan-do-check-act (PDCA), also known as plan-do-study-act (PDSA)—or the Deming cycle—is a systematic review of the problem to determine the issue, root cause, solution, implementation of the solution, and feedback loop to ensure the solution solved the issue and did not create unintended consequences (Deming, 1986).

PSMC is an acronym for Puget Sound Manufacturing Company, a pseudonym created to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the company that was the focus of this study.

Relationship conflict is based on the relationship between team members on a personal level. It may be a result of unresolved task conflict (Hjerto & Kuvaas, 2017).

Role clarity is a set of defined behaviors to support specific roles within the organization (Biddle, 1986).
Role theory is intrinsic behavior, independent of explicit rewards, contributing to organizational efficiency (Klose, 2018).

Self-entitled behavior is conducted to focus on self, including holding on to power, position, and benefits (Han et al., 2018).

Situational leadership happens when the leader offers development dependent on needs of the group, relational to the situation (Malos, 2012).

Social identity is focused on the strength of the individual’s identification with the group (Marstand et al., 2017).

Task conflict occurs when team members disagree on steps to take to complete a process (Hjerto & Kuvaas, 2017).

Training needs assessment (TNA) is a process for gathering data to determine business needs for developing and delivering training (Young, 2019).

Transformational leadership occurs when the leader offers vision, inspiration, and role modeling related to the benefit of the organization (Malos, 2012).

Tuckman model, created by Tuckman and Jenson (1977), represents the stages teams experience on their journey, starting with forming, moving through storming, norming, performing, and ending with termination.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the impact of the actions of operational managers in PSMC on role clarity, LMX, team task conflict, and relationship conflict. It was unclear how the leader’s behavior may drive the team members’ behaviors. Operational managers with 1 year of experience or more leading a team were included.
For this study, qualitative methodology was employed using a case study design to develop a theory of variables affecting the relationship between the operational manager and team members. A case study approach was chosen to examine operational managers’ behaviors and relationship skills from the operational managers’ perspective. In-depth interviews were used to obtain, analyze, synthesize, and categorize the data to create a theory.

PSMC provides operational managers’ training; however, the training is primarily focused on technical expertise instead of relationship skills. As research shows, the causes of conflict often arise from a lack of self-awareness from the leader (Mo & Shi, 2017), task or relationship conflict (Lee et al., 2017; Northouse, 2016), and unclear roles (Yadav & Kumar, 2017).

The following chapter contains the literature review. This chapter included an overview of the literature about leader awareness and communication, behaviors, roles, norms and culture, task, and relationship conflict. Included in the following chapter are discussions about the theories of LMX, role clarity, and social identity.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the reviewed literature did not examine the importance of frequent contact most employees have with their operational manager—who is responsible for the quality of daily task completion and minor conflict resolution before it has a significant impact on team members. Conversely, first-line administrative managers are responsible for performance reviews, salary, scheduling of training, addressing behavioral issues, and significant conflicts within this target organization. Gaps in the literature include LMX quality and organizational socialization from team members and operational managers to assess LMX quality, role, and social theory. Guenter et al. (2016) suggested further research should exam team conflict using assessments of team conflict behavior from the operational managers’ perspective. A significant gap in literature includes lack of information focused on the operational managers’ effect of team member behavior when combined with social identity, role clarity, and LMX. Mafuba et al. (2015) suggested research is needed to explore (a) how lack of role clarity affects the ways team members interpret and enact their roles and (b) how policy translates into the roles.

The literature indicated conflict is an ongoing issue that needs to be addressed from both team and organizational perspectives (Lee et al., 2017; Northouse, 2016). The causes of conflict are thought to derive from (a) inefficient communication and a lack of self-awareness from the leader (Mo & Shi, 2017), (b) unclear roles (Yadav & Kumar, 2017), (c) task, and (d) relationship conflict. Although most studies focused on upper leadership or team level dynamics (Hartnell et al., 2016; Kauppila, 2016; Turner, 2017), Northouse (2016) focused on the variables from a team leader perspective, providing insight for this current study about operational managers. Operational managers (team
leaders) are members of the team with the technical expertise to help the team focus on their daily activities and who have symbiotic relationships with the team members, in contrast to administrative managers who focus on team members’ performance for reviews, salary, and training. This study is based on three theoretical foundations: role clarity, LMX, and social identity.

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework for this study. The theories of role theory, LMX, and social identity are examined, and aspects of leadership awareness and communication about leadership behaviors and roles are explored. The final theory introduced is task and relationship conflict.

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), a theoretical framework provides procedures and assumptions to guide a study. This literature review focuses on multiple theories related to the operational manager. These theories guided this study and provided a well-supported foundation for the research.

The theories described in this review include role theory, LMX, and social identity. Role theory is included because it explores the impact of the leader’s clear or unclear roles. LMX is discussed to help clarify the influence of leaders’ behaviors on team members that affect the leaders’ efficacy. Social identity is discussed to provide insight into how leaders’ behaviors influence how role clarity and relationship with team members create a positive or negative environment. These three theories are intertwined. The outcome of behaviors related to one theory can impact others. Mo and Shi (2017) found links between LMX and role clarity. Marstand et al. (2017) identified links
between LMX and social identity, and Hajela (2015) described links between social identity and role clarity found in role theory.

**Role Theory**

According to Klose (2004), role theory is based on role clarity, which has been attributed to Linton (1936) and Mead (1934). Seminal work for role theory is also contributed to Gross et al. (1958) and Kahn et al. (1964). More recent works include Yadav and Kumar (2017), Newman et al. (2015), and Klose (2018), among others.

According to Yadav and Kumar (2017), role theory is defined as the intrinsic behavior, independent of explicit rewards, contributing to organizational efficiency. Biddle (1986) defined roles as characteristic behavior patterns containing behavioral expectations within a social position. Biddle suggested role theorists have failed to focus on the origins, dynamics, and effect of roles, expectations, and social position in favor of role conflict, role-taking, role-playing, or consensus.

Although this study was focused on the operational manager’s perspective, it touched upon the dynamics and effects of roles and expectations by exploring how lack of role clarity contributes to task conflict. It was anticipated the answer to the research questions would connect the effects of roles on positively disrupting conflict before it elevates to interpersonal conflict. Biddle (1986) suggested the operational manager sets the norms for other members of the social system to follow and induces other team members’ conducive behavior.

Biddle (1986) also suggested multiple role theory variations, including symbolic interactionist role theory, organizational role theory, and functionalists and structuralist role theory. An early role theory is symbolic interactionist role theory (Mead, 1934),
which stressed individual members’ role, role evolution due to social interaction, and self and others’ cognitive concepts interpretation of behaviors. Although symbolic interactionist researchers focused on norms, attitudes, contextual demands interpreted by the members, contextual limits for the application were often left out of the discussion or study of contextual limits for applying their findings.

Organizational role theory (Biddle, 1986) is centered on formal organizations that have preplanned, task-oriented, and hierarchical social systems. According to Biddle, roles are linked with social position based on official requirements of the organization and informal drivers. The influx of multiple norms results in role conflict. Functionalists and structuralists’ roles denote individuals as representative of a social position with behavior patterns typical of those with similar structural positions. Conversely, symbolic interactionists and cognitive theorists see roles as evolving coping strategies adopted by the individual. The theory should be contextualized to determine the appropriate type to use.

Role clarity exists in the workplace to define behaviors and should include the approved manner for achieving goals and expectations to prevent unethical behavior (Newman et al., 2015). Role clarity assists in determining priorities and training related to the task. Unclear roles promote apathy (Yadav & Kumar, 2017). As members seek to identify their and other team members’ statuses, they are guided by group norms of acceptable or unacceptable behaviors, interactions, and expectations.

Another aspect of role theory, according to Klose (2018), is the use of alter-casting, which encourages others to assume specific roles to establish and uphold validating routines. The purpose of alter-casting is to combat uncertainty. By reinforcing
expected roles, alter-casting can promote a shared vision, which decreases task and interpersonal conflict. The positive use of alter-casting should, therefore, benefit the operational manager by enhancing team cohesiveness.

Adler and Borys (1996) emphasized the importance of a shared vision to provide direction, security, and confidence of team members in their organizational roles. Kauppila (2016) expanded on the importance of a shared vision by emphasizing the managers’ responsibility for deciding when and how to share the vision with team members. Shared vision includes setting behavioral expectations and setting aside personal status to focus on the objective. According to Kauppila (2016), a shared vision can clarify how the roles of members support the vision and why various members are differentiated.

By being transparent, the leader shows how differentiation is needed, acceptable behavior. As suggested by Kauppila (2016), the negative aspect of this approach is the effect on low LMX relationships because some may see it as limiting upward mobility. Therefore, the leader must attend to aspects of both operational context and LMX relationships. According to Mo and Shi (2017), role clarity promotes voluntary behaviors that contribute to and support the organization—known as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB)—through the positive use of LMX.

**Leader-Member Exchange**

As presented by Lam et al. (2018), LMX focuses on the dyadic relationship between managers and team members and is based on resources and the emotional quality of the exchange. LMX was thought to be derived from vertical dyad linkage research (Graen et al., 1982; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), which proposed leaders, in
response to their direct reports, evolved separate, unique relationships. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) furthered LMX theory by investigating organizational effects and suggesting the use of dyadic partnership building.

Klose (2018) defined high LMX differentiation as leaders setting high-quality and low-quality relationships with team members. If the relationships are similar in quality, there is low differentiation. High differentiation could be seen as a positive opportunity for those in the out-group to move up due to the focus on members’ knowledge and expertise.

The opposite may be true for those in the in-group who may have seen differentiation as a threat to their status within the group because they needed to defend their privileges. According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), the change in status denotes a positive impact for one team member as they move forward and a negative for another who loses access to resources and time with the leader. To counter such adverse effects, Klose (2018) suggested the leader should use high LMX relationships with all team members.

According to Lee et al. (2017), LMX relationships could be paradoxical as leaders strive for close relationships with members while maintaining the hierarchy. Lee et al. coined the paradoxical term LMX ambivalence, whereby bivalent aspects of retaining both positive and negative thoughts toward a relation exist. Lee et al. found LMX ambivalence to be negatively related to performance no matter the LMX quality. Lee et al. further suggested potential conflict arises from relational ambivalence through the need to take on various roles needed at the time.
Leaders need to be aware of creating in-group and out-group identities within the team as LMX relationships are built. As defined by Davis et al. (2019), in-group members are favored with higher quality LMX relationships by the leader, thereby receiving more information, resources, and support. Out-group members possess lower quality LMX relationships and do not receive the same benefits.

Although in-group designation can increase employee effectiveness, the out-group designation can result in decreased effectiveness (Davis et al., 2019). LMX relationships are not strictly positive or negative, according to Kauppila (2016), although using them properly affects followers’ behaviors. The proper use of LMX is supported by Newman et al. (2017), who found LMX and empowerment to be significantly related to OCB; when leaders used a servant leadership style, relationships with high-quality LMX followers exhibited higher OCB levels.

LMX may have begun with transactional leadership, as suggested by Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995), but it is more effective with transformational relationships, according to Bass (1997). By enabling, envisioning, and empowering team members, the leader can move members from a position of self-interest to a desire to do what is best for the group. Driving the focus on transformation are shared goals and team adaptability. The leader acts as a role model, teacher, and coach and uses individual consideration to identify members’ needs, aspirations, and development.

In a study by Seltzer and Bass (1990), transformational leadership was found to inspire team members to increase problem solving and innovation whereby the outcomes exceeded those of transactional leadership. Seltzer and Bass also found the effects of the leaders’ charisma to be positive on an individual level—but not at the group level. Bass
(2017) found transformational leadership was likely to materialize in times of uncertainty or turbulence. Bommer et al. (2005) suggested, at such times, employees may have experienced a heightened sense of confidence through proactively offering solutions for issues. According to Oreg and Berson (2011), reframing a threat as an opportunity results in the leader improving employee motivation. By using transformational leadership, rather than transactional leadership, the leader strengthens relationships with team members and increases the quality of LMX relationships.

When LMX is used effectively, according to Hogg et al. (2005), a leader encourages the team to adopt shared values, attitudes, and goals to create cohesion within the team. Fostering high-level LMX relationships instills trust, respect, and obligation as the leader’s goals are internalized. According to Hogg et al. a shortcoming of LMX is the emphasis on dyadic relationships with the individual rather than on the group in its entirety. Internal comparisons of relationships may lead to a sense of decreased fairness and impact the social identity of the team member.

LMX and social identity theory have similarities. Both are influenced by leadership behaviors and use the concept of in-group and out-group behaviors. LMX is focused on the relationship between the leader and team members. According to Hogg et al. (2005), social identity theory is focused on the strength of identification with the group. According to Marstand et al. (2017), as relationships are forged with leaders, LMX can influence members’ social identities within the organization.

Social Identity

The third theoretical foundation for this study is social identity theory. Social identity is based on the individual definition of how one fits into the organization. As
Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015) recommended, social identification is a process whereby an individual engages in successes and status by proxy, resulting in increased self-esteem. Social identity theory was first posed by Tajfel (1974).

The focus of social identity is on the characteristics of one’s behaviors toward others—depending on whether they are members of the in-group or out-group—and one’s position in context of the larger organization (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). Interestingly, Cannon and Yaprak (2002) found in-group members could retain indifference, sympathy, or admiration of out-group members if they did not feel threatened. Zeugner-Rother et al. (2015) found operational managers may have leveraged the neutral and positive feelings toward the out-group members and emphasized the out-group members’ positive traits to increase team cohesion—if they were aware of their behavior.

When operational managers are unaware of their behavior, they confuse incongruence between espoused standards and behaviors and actual behaviors. Social identity theory suggests individuals (a) experience a sense of oneness (Hogg et al., 2016; 2005), (b) act according to set standards, and (c) receive feedback on their behaviors. If the leader matches the in-group archetype, they are accepted more readily by the in-group members and lead productively. For team members, if others agree with another team members’ behavior, it continues. If the behavior is not warranted, according to Davis et al. (2019), the individual either changes their behavior or seeks others’ agreement to continue their behavior.

According to motivated identity construction theory, as posed by Thomas (2006), members align with the social identity of the team, internalized traditions, purpose, and
sense of belonging in the context of the teams’ identity. Motivated identity construction theory integrates the motivation of team identity—such as self-esteem, uniqueness, being accepted by the group, and a focus on the group instead of the individual. According to Thomas, identification with the team suggests, as individuals gain their sense of self from membership in the group, individual identity decreases and attachment to the team identity increases. The tendency to take on the traits of team identity results in the team becoming “greater than the sum of its parts” (Thomas, 2006, p. 511).

A challenge to social identity is the impact of role conflict. According to Ashforth and Mael (1989), when one possesses multiple social identities, they can experience inconsistent demands, culminating in conflicts of norms, beliefs, values, and demands specific to identity. According to Ashforth and Mael and Güney and Taylor (2014), with the perception of strong organizational ties, a member is more willing to go beyond the minimum expected effort for the organization’s benefit. As with LMX, in appreciation of the extra benefits supplied by the leader, the team member reciprocates positive interactions and behaviors with the leader.

Another variable affecting social identity is group salience, as suggested by Hogg et al. (2005). In their study, Hogg et al. found low-salience groups preferred individual personalized leadership, but high-salience groups preferred group depersonalized leadership. Leaders who were aware of the salience level of group members were more effective in their leadership by tailoring their style to the salience of the group, which, as Hogg et al. concluded, supported social identity analysis of leadership.

The closer a leader models the group’s traits and behaviors; the stronger the members’ endorsement is for the leaders’ abilities. The tendency to support a leader
based on their corresponding behavior supports social identity. As a result, operational managers need awareness of their behaviors and communication style.

**Leadership Awareness and Communication**

Leadership affects team members. Lack of self-awareness, communication skills, and clear roles result in confusion, conflict, and the team’s lower social identity. The operational manager sets the culture and norms of the team members and influences their behaviors (Mo & Shi, 2017). The ability to set expectations begins with operational managers’ behaviors.

**Leadership Behavior**

Themes about this topic include leader awareness, communication, and task conflict. Leader awareness and communication style are driving factors in the behavior of members. According to Mo and Shi (2017), if the leader is not aware of how members perceived their actions or their intensity of delivering a message is too high, members may not embrace the desired social identity with the team OCBs.

When conflict arises, operational managers need to systematically define the issue, determine the root cause, and select the correct course to solve it (Northouse, 2016). Northouse cited several authors who have described aspects of determining the steps to take when leading a team; these include Barge (1996), Fleishman et al. (1991), and Wageman et al. (2009). The HILL model (Northouse) offers a roadmap for leaders to navigate the decision process, beginning with types of leadership decisions, potential internal and external actions, and the resulting changes with a feedback loop to the beginning.
Although the authors focused on the realm of leadership, a similar process was found in manufacturing. Referred to as the Deming cycle (Deming, 1986), or PDCA/PDSA (plan-do-check-act or plan-do-study-act; see Figure 1), leaders need to be analytical when determining the best method to assist their teams and lead them to success.

PDCA includes (a) analyzing the issue, (b) finding the root cause, (c) choosing the best solution out of the available options to implement, and (d) auditing to see if the solution responded as anticipated (Deming, 1986; Dudin et al., 2017; Northouse, 2016). According to Deming, if the results are not as anticipated, the PDCA cycle could be used again to select a different option. The PDCA model was familiar to PSMC operational managers due to their manufacturing experience. It is useful for improving communication and reducing task conflict.

According to González-Romá (2014), inconsistent or nonuniform messages decrease communication quality and increase task conflicts through LMX. Avoiding task conflict within the team leads to more aggressive relationship conflict by members. To prevent members from pulling back and disengaging (Rusticus & Justus, 2019), leaders should offer guidance and support to set clear roles and encourage members to work together effectively and resolve conflict constructively. Establishing clear roles decreases conflict.
Figure 1

*Deming Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle*

*Note.* The PDSA cycle begins with planning and moves clockwise to act. This figure demonstrates PDSA as an iterative approach to change applicable to manufacturing and leadership. From *The Deming Cycle*, The W. Edwards Deming Institute, 2020 (https://deming.org/quality-improvement-in-maternity-services-how-deming-can-help/). In the public domain.

**Roles**

The level of clarity in roles directly impacts team members. Mafuba et al. (2015) advocated for clear role definition to support role theory and reduce role ambiguity. Lack of clear roles impedes the successful implementation of policies and team cohesion (Hajela, 2015; Mafuba et al.). Wang et al. (2016) recommended increased role clarity, an indicator of growth in LMX and psychological empowerment. According to Northouse (2016), clearly defined roles speed the onboarding process with new members and creates
a cohesive team that improves team members’ social identity. Team performance decreases when the leader allows role conflict to focus on an individual instead of the process (Hjerto & Kuvaas, 2017).

In addition to team member roles, the operational manager has multiple roles to fulfill. Depending on members’ needs, Hackman (2012) advised the operational manager to act as a coach, influencer, or mediator. To effectively address conflict, leaders should be aware of the team’s stage when conflict occurs. The Tuckman model (Tuckman & Jenson, 1977) is based on five stages of group development. Forming occurs when the team is first assembled and is learning more about team members. Storming happens as team members attempt to solidify their positions within the group. In the norming stage, the team settles into their roles and is ready to start working together. Performing results when the team acts as a cohesive identity. As the team departs, they experience the termination stage.

Knowing the team’s stage helps determine whether a leader monitors the conflict, such as in the forming or storming stages, or steps in to mediate during the norming and performing stages. When the leader understands the team’s lifecycle, according to Hackman (2012), they more easily assess whether to move the team forward or allow debate. By understanding if the issue is task- or relationship-oriented conflict, the leader addresses the issue by reinforcing the team’s standards or engaging in conflict resolution.

Blanchard (2008) identified situational leadership styles that match the development level of team members. Situational leadership theory was originally developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969). As with the skills needed for the Tuckman
model, the situational leadership model was later updated to the situational leadership II model (Blanchard, 2010).

**Figure 2**

*The Situational Leadership II Model*

According to Blanchard (2010), the initial style often used with a new member is directing. In the directing stage, the leader is high-directive and low-support where the leader provides the specifics of the role and task completion through one-way communication and retains problem-solving and decision-making. These responsibilities remain with the leader.

The second style, coaching, is used as members’ knowledge and skills grow. The leader provides directions but is open to suggestions and ideas. The communication increases to two-way but with decision-making and control remaining with the leader. At this point, the member has low to moderate development with support and direction still needed.

The third style, offered by Blanchard (2010), uses high-supportive, low-directive behavior. At this point, the member has moderate-to-high development levels. The members are competent with varying degrees of commitment to the task. Two-way communication and active listening by the leader increases. Some control is given to the member for routing decision-making and problem-solving.

In the fourth style, delegation is used with the leader employing low-supportive and low-directive behavior to transition responsibility for implementing plans to the member. Members determine details for task completion, but the leader remains open to requests for resources.

Like the Tuckman model, the development level with the situational leadership II model is based on the competence and commitment level of the member. Over time, Blanchard (2010) suggested, the team develops norms, traditions, and customs. The leadership style changes for one-on-one situations, which requires situational leadership
that adapts to the circumstances. To determine which style the leader needs to use, the leader needs to understand the development level of members. Understanding the stages of the Tuckman model and the situational leadership II model can help the operational manager increase the positive impact on team members.

**Impact to Team Members**

In reviewing the literature on aspects of the operational managers’ impact on team members, team performance, norms, and culture were examined. Team performance is the ability of team members to complete their tasks. Norms and culture refer to the set of standards, behaviors, and mindset of the team and leaders.

**Team Performance**

According to Hjerto and Kuvaas (2017), team performance can be degraded with the presence of task conflict, which may escalate into relationship conflict if not addressed by the leader. Guenter et al. (2016) suggested escalation may be due to a lack of role clarity and members defending their position within the team. When relationship conflict occurs, it degrades team performance and cohesiveness. Self-entitled behavior also can negatively influence team cohesion. According to Han et al. (2018), entitled employees use high LMX relationship levels for more significant personal gain, which results in lower OCB. Entitled employees focus on maintaining the status quo to keep their leverage, perks, and power. Leaders should be aware of the LMX relationship level to understand team members’ motivation better.

Team members may not fully assimilate their social identity because of a lack of operational managers’ understanding of their behavior when addressing task and relationship conflict through LMX, role clarity, and social identity. Leaders’ actions or
inaction may cause the team to function below its potential, and relationship conflicts erode team cohesion. By examining operational managers’ effects, this study moved the leadership field ahead by identifying factors that promote positive behaviors exhibited by operational managers on team members through team norms and culture.

**Norms and Culture**

Team norms are guidelines of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, expectations, and interactions that influence the team’s social identity. To assist with team members’ social identification, Hajela (2015) suggested the operational manager—who sets the member’s roles and creates a shared vision—produces member commitment and an effective, positive team culture, thereby influencing members’ behavioral norms and culture. As proposed by Mo and Shi (2017), norms are the acceptable mode of behavior followed by team members, which influence OCBs.

An operational manager may experience challenges in establishing norms that go against the status quo. Entitled employees, as implied by Han et al. (2018), tend to ignore OCB to retain their position and privileges. Norms need to be clear and concrete standards that include set expectations and feedback (LaFasto & Larson, 2001; Northouse 2016). Setting expectations for openness to experience, change, and conflict resolution can lay the foundation for changing norms, thereby reducing team conflict (Bradley et al., 2013). Hackman (2012) and Northouse (2016) agreed that possessing a shared vision reinforces team identity, as members are prompted to support a compelling purpose. Conversely, the lack of a shared vision creates conflict within the team.
Conflict

Task and relationship functions are interrelated; according to Northouse (2016), each affects the other either positively or negatively depending on team members’ climate. The leader sets expectations through their skills and the use of an appropriate function that changes depending on the group’s needs. Conflict will not resolve itself. According to Chang and Zelihic (2014), conflict must be addressed in a non-self-serving manner before it erodes the team’s success and camaraderie; therefore, operational managers need to be aware of high task conflict situations and adjust their communication accordingly.

Task Conflict

Task conflict occurs when members disagree on steps to follow to complete a task. Task conflict does not necessarily carry negative consequences. DeChurch et al. (2013) found conflict is either positive or negative depending on the context. Collectivistic behaviors result in benefits from the conflict, but individualistic behaviors end in unfavorable results due to a desire for personal gain.

When task conflict is high, Todorova et al. (2014) concluded managers and leaders are perceived as more confrontational. As the level of task conflict decreases, González-Romá (2014) found team members more readily accept information from leaders. Task conflict increases with the application of nonuniform messages from leaders. However, when members, including managers, are open and respectful with each other, Rusticus and Justus (2019) found team efficacy increases. Conversely, Rusticus and Justus found imbalances in communication results in higher conflict. If left
unaddressed, task conflict can lead to relationship conflict if the focus of conflict moves from the process to the individual.

**Relationship Conflict**

According to Hjerto and Kuvaas (2017), it is beneficial for the leader to focus conflict on the process or task—instead of individual team members—as early as possible. Focusing on a specific person reduces team cohesiveness. In instances of perceived low team performance, the risk of an unaddressed task conflict becoming a personal conflict escalates if the task conflict is not addressed when it first occurs (Guenter et al., 2016). According to Guenter et al., conflict escalation is typically due to members’ protecting their position or ego.

**Summary**

Operational management is a complex process with multiple variables affecting the outcome. The introduction of a new operational manager disrupts team dynamics and may create negative effects. Through examining the literature on the use of leadership self-awareness, communication, role clarity, and team performance to prevent or decrease task and relationship conflict, insight was gained into the combined dynamics of LMX, role clarity, and social identity. When organizations ignore the impact of operational managers’ behaviors on the team members, they experience negative results in the quality of LMX relationship, lack of role clarity, and decline of the teams’ social identity. When the operational manager exhibits these behaviors, team members experience increased conflict and lower efficacy levels.

The literature review indicated task and relationship conflict derives from inefficient communication and lack of self-awareness from the operational manager—and
unclear goals—and needs to be addressed (Mo & Shi, 2017). The literature review also found links between LMX and role clarity (Mo & Shi), LMX and social identity (Marstand et al., 2017), and social identity and role clarity (Hajela, 2015), indicating the theories are intertwined. Compounded by links among the theories are connections between conflict and leader awareness and communication.

All organizations have a culture specific to the company. The culture is reinforced by the hierarchy with the operational manager being responsible to model and instill desired norms for team members. Effectively setting expectations and roles positively influences the teams’ behaviors, norms, and culture (Hajela, 2015). Operational managers’ behaviors were analyzed in this study to identify actions that resulted in positive or negative outcomes for team members. Some gaps in the literature related to operational managers, LMX, role clarity, and social identity can be filled with the findings from this qualitative exploratory case study.

In the next chapter, the research methodology is described, including techniques and approaches to case study research. The research method used for this research was qualitative, and the research design was a case study. The research questions focused on the dynamics between LMX, role clarity, and task and relationship conflict from the operational managers’ perspective.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the methodological design of the current study is discussed. A qualitative methodological approach was used with an exploratory case study research design (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) to gain insight from the operational managers’ perspective. The interview questions for each research question are listed in Appendices A and B. Appendix A includes the demographic questions to verify potential participant fit with the case study requirements. Appendix B includes participant interview questions related to each research question.

A case study is a holistic, in-depth, contextual examination of one or more cases (Punch, 2006). A case study is a bounded study used to inquire empirically about a person, event, or organization using various information sources (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Yin, 2018). According to Patton (2014), a case study is not about the creation method of the case, but the core meaning derived from the case. A case study can provide deeper understanding of the variables within a study’s real-life context when paired with a theory-driven evaluation (Merriam, 2009; Pauly et al., 2014). Because the categories and themes in this case study were extracted from the coding process (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Yin, 2018), predetermined categories were not used (Patton, 2014). The case study was analyzed by reviewing the interactions, processes, or behaviors from the organizational managers’ viewpoint.

In addition to data collection, a case study involves an iterative process of determining the connections among data categories and refining the resulting theories (Creswell, 2014; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Analysis of both mental (thought process) and physical (behaviors) aspects of the operational manager expanded the contexts in
which events occur. These mental and physical aspects can be directly correlated to events, and later, they may be correlated to team member’s experiences.

The findings from this initial study provide a starting point to help Puget Sound Manufacturing Company (PSMC) determine how a leader allows constructive feedback and determines the effects of role clarity or lack of role clarity. The findings from this study also offer insights so organizations can identify ways to positively disrupt team task conflict before it escalates into interpersonal relationship conflict. In the future, findings from this study may be used to conduct additional research and examine the variables more deeply (Yin, 2018).

At PSMC, it was suspected task clarity, uniform treatment of team members, and clear roles were lacking, leading to interpersonal conflict, disruptive behavior, and decreased team performance. The case study verified the issues identified in the problem statement and provided insights into the elements that led to team conflict. Future studies can revisit this topic using case studies to go deeper into the organization’s culture by including team members. This chapter includes a description of (a) the research methods, (b) the research design, (c) data collection methods, (d) instruments used, (e) study participants, (f) data analysis methods, (g) quality of evidence, (h) study limitations, (i) delimitations, and (j) a chapter summary.

Research Method

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study. Qualitative methodology is used to examine complex variables related to a particular problem. Qualitative methodology processes are used to examine participants’ perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the focus on operational managers’ experiences, rather
than upper-level leaders or team members, made a qualitative approach an appropriate choice.

Quantitative and mixed methods were ruled out due to the need for numerical descriptions or a treatment affecting the outcome. Phenomenology was ruled out due to the inability to show a correlation between an action and repetitive results. Grounded theory was ruled out because of the requirement to observe participants in their daily duties. Ethnographic research was excluded because of the observation requirement, as stated by Hancock and Algozzine (2017), of the participants for extended periods. Narrative research was ruled out due to its focus on a single participant. Quantitative research was also ruled out due to the minimum number of participants required for a sample size. O’Dwyer and Bernauer (2014) recommend a sample size of at least 30 participants for quantitative and mixed methods. There were 10 participants in this study.

Although research exists on higher-level managers and organizational leaders—and LMX, role theory, and social identity as individual theories—there is little research specifically on operational managers with the combined dynamics of LMX, role theory, and social identity theory. The use of qualitative methodology made it possible to gather more in-depth and rich data for analysis. One-on-one interviews were used to establish patterns and themes from the responses (Creswell, 2014). Creswell emphasized the alignment of the methodological design and the research questions.

**Research Design**

The use of case study research provided data about how operational managers allow constructive feedback before it becomes destructive relationship conflict. Research has shown the best approach is to intervene positively in team task conflict and prevent it
from becoming relationship focused. The data from this study provided insight into the dynamics between role clarity and task conflict. The analysis revealed how operational managers perceive and address inequity through LMX. Case study was the best choice to answer the research questions.

An exploratory case study is an all-inclusive method used to understand a contemporary event in a real-world case to answer “how” and “why” research questions from the participants’ points of view (Yin, 2018). The design included Zoom interviews and open-ended surveys to gather information to increase depth and clarity. Choosing an exploratory case study provided the ability to gather more in-depth information upon which a theoretical explanation from the data could be created (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). Because little research exists on the combination of operational managers’ dynamics, LMX, role theory, and social identity, a case study was chosen (Creswell, 2014). According to Yin (2018), the intent of a case study is to explore a central phenomenon, determine factors related to the phenomenon, and provide a definition of the event.

According to Creswell (2014), case studies are context-based and use member checks for accuracy. Gathering data about operational managers’ experiences provided insight into the variables affecting the operational managers’ relationships with team members. Data could have been gathered through documentation such as role definition (Creswell), archival feedback surveys, and formal training documentation.

However, virtual interviews and responses to requests for demographic information were used in this study. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter. To ensure confidentiality of participants, virtual interviews were uploaded using
the participants’ pseudonyms. Otter software encrypted the transcripts to further protect the data. Approval was obtained to conduct the interviews from PSMC, its ethics department, its release of information office, senior managers, and administrative managers. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, data were gathered through online Zoom interviews.

Data collection was guided by the qualitative multiple-case research approach, which, as suggested by Yin (2018), uses comparative processing both within and between single case studies to discern findings and conclusions. This approach uses a higher-level analysis across all cases to determine findings beyond the case study evidence after the data are collected and the individual case studies have been analyzed to find systemic themes and correlations within the interview data. When the individual case data about how and why the organization works were combined, a holistic view of the organization was more easily understood.

Sources of Evidence

The primary evidence was from virtual, recorded interviews. Interview and demographic questions matched to the research questions are shown in Appendices A and B. Participants were chosen from a list of current and recent operational managers provided by the Functional Excellence (FE) training department. FE provided the emails of the potential participants. FE is responsible for training all operational managers in technical skills required to lead teams effectively; however, training on soft skills is lacking.

Potential participants were first contacted via email and asked to complete a brief demographic survey to determine if they fit the criteria. If they fit the criteria, they were
moved to a contact list to determine their willingness and availability to participate. Those who fit the criteria were added to a list of potential active participants. Those not selected to be among the initial 10 participants were added to a stand-by list to replace any who may not have been able to participate. Access to the participants was virtual and during participants’ work hours with preapproval obtained from the organization’s leadership team.

The data from the interview transcripts identified the first-hand experiences of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Each participant was asked the same set of interview questions. Follow-up questions were based on the need to clarify previous statements. The interview data were analyzed to identify themes related to LMX, role clarity, and social identity.

**Interview Questions**

Following are the interview questions directly related to the research questions. Interview questions are also found in Appendix B. The interview questions created the foundation for data analysis and to eventually identify the emergent themes. The interview questions were triangulated across cases within this study.

**General Questions**

1. Please tell me about your position as a team leader.
2. What do you like about being a team leader?
3. What support do you receive as team leader?
4. What support do you not receive that would be helpful?
5. What other support and resources would help you to be effective?
The general questions were used to gather greater detail about the background of each operational manager. It provided information about the experiences, training, support, and challenges experienced by the team leaders. The information gathered provided greater depth of knowledge about why the operational manager chose their actions.

**Research Question 1**

How does a lack of role clarity contribute to task conflict? The following interview questions related to this research question and were designed to obtain details about role clarity that could be used to create theories:

1. How do you see the role definition for your team members?
2. How detailed are roles documented?
3. How often do you discuss roles with team members?
4. What actions do you take when you have team members who are confused about roles and responsibilities?
5. What actions do you take when you have team members who disagree with roles?
6. How do you address confusion about roles and responsibilities?

**Research Question 2**

How do leaders allow for constructive task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict? The following interview questions related to this research question and were designed to explore details about constructive task conflict:
1. What are some examples of actions you took when you had to confront team members with differing opinions about how to complete their work?

2. What are the most common ways that you have engaged employees when dealing with conflict relating to completing a task?

3. How do you know when to step in to address the conflict?

*Research Question 3*

What are the best ways to positively disrupt team task conflict without it turning into interpersonal relationship conflict? The following interview questions related to this research question and were designed to elicit details about positive disruption of team task conflict:

1. What is your greatest success in addressing conflict?

2. What is your greatest challenge addressing conflict?

3. What works best for you to address task conflict with team members?

4. What else do you want me to know about your experiences in properly addressing task conflict as a team leader from your experiences?

The same questions were asked for all participants during the semi-structured interviews. Responses were analyzed and used to help develop theories.

*Participants*

To qualify as participants, operational managers must have had at least 12 months of experience with team members. Participants were purposively selected as union-represented and nonunion represented to gain insights into each arena. The quota sample for the study was met by selecting eight participants who were union-represented and two participants who were not represented by a union.
Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality, and all subsequent references to participants used only the pseudonym. Access to the identities of each participant was limited to the researcher. To further ensure confidentiality, all data about participants and all interview transcripts were kept in a secure, password-protected folder.

As Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggested, the data were collected separately for each individual for later triangulation among the cases for similarities and differences. Interviews were conducted individually and virtually (Creswell, 2014; due to COVID-19 social distancing mandates) using open-ended questions, as suggested by Fowler (2014). Accuracy of the transcriptions was verified with the participants using member checking (Merriam 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

A database was created as a repository for evidence (Yin, 2018), including notes, documents, memos, preliminary narratives, and tabular materials. The purpose of the database was to maintain a chain of evidence whereby others can access the data for review. Documents were converted into PDFs, and all evidence was entered into the database. The use of a database allowed review and cross-reference of data effectively. The circumstances of data collection, such as time and place of interviews was provided.

**Instruments**

Data were collected through a demographic survey (Punch, 2006; see Appendix A) and semi-structured, virtual, one-on-one interviews (Creswell, 2014; see Appendix B). Based on information from the demographic survey, participants were purposely chosen for one-on-one interviews to elicit responses and deepen the conversation (Thomas,
2006). In cases where clarification or additional information was needed, follow-up interviews or emails with participants were conducted.

Participants

This study used a sample large enough to reach saturation, and participants were selected using a purposive approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1988) based on being experienced operational managers at PSMC. The participant selection process involved obtaining information from those who fit the criteria based on their experience. The target sample of 10 participants was achieved by contacting potential participants whose emails had been provided by the FE training organization. Cross-case analysis was based on the sample of 10 participants to identify themes and categories.

Participants were chosen from a list provided by FE. The list included current and recent operational managers within PSMC. A demographic survey was sent to potential participants to verify their fit for the study and to pre-group them into union-represented and nonunion-represented categories to satisfy the criteria for a purposeful sample. As they were interviewed, each participant’s confidentiality was maintained using pseudonyms.

Participants provided insight into their conflicts with team members and possible factors contributing to the tension. Positive experiences were also gathered to provide a fuller view of the experiences and potential elements leading to positive or negative interactions. The 10 participants each had at least 12 months of experience as a leader. This was important in obtaining information about the possibility of long-term task conflict becoming interpersonal conflict.
Data Analysis Methods

Following Patton’s (2014) case study guidelines, as much data as possible were gathered through open-ended, semi-structured interviews for analysis, coding, and identification of patterns and themes. Interviews were transcribed under the assigned pseudonym, and transcriptions were reviewed as individual cases line-by-line for open coding to identify tentative categories (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018).

Data analysis began with inductive coding (Yin, 2018)—going back and forth between the transcripts from interviews and the coding spreadsheet—until themes were extracted (Creswell, 2014). Once tentative categories were assigned for each individual case, transcripts were reviewed to find collective commonalities across all cases (Yin, 2018). It was from these commonalities that themes and subthemes emerged to provide a higher-level view. To ensure the data’s integrity, Yin suggested comparing patterns across all cases. Within the case, patterns provided preliminary conclusions. Patterns of replication or deviation were examined. Within-case queries provided insight as to why and how a person chose their strategy.

Manual color-coding was used to group data by major categories before assigning them to themes (Saldaña, 2011). Color-coding helped ensure all data were considered and included in the categories. Any data not assigned a color needed to be added to a category or have a new category defined.

A spreadsheet was used to track data. Records of the location of data were kept to provide an audit trail, and filters were added to find themes quickly. The audit trail showed where the data were originally found, the open code it was assigned, iterations as the data changed categories, and the final theme that was assigned through axial coding.
Memos and notes were retained about initial thoughts when collecting and analyzing the data.

When data analysis was complete and a rough draft of the results had been created, it was sent to the vice president of information release at PSMC for approval. The vice president verified that release of information requirements had been adhered to, ensuring no proprietary information was inadvertently released. After the dissertation process is complete, findings will be shared with organizational leaders, operational managers, and the training organization.

Throughout the process, self-reflection was used to challenge existing assumptions, biases, and worldviews. An audit trail was provided by keeping detailed records, which ensured the movement of information used to conduct the study was explicit (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Descriptions to contextualize the study situated the data into the research context and accounted for their transferability, also known as generalizability (Marshall and Rossman) using thick descriptions per Lincoln and Guba’s (1988) evaluative criteria (Merriam, 2009).

Participants’ direct quotes were used to ensure the findings were accurate and to increase credibility. Asking the same open-ended questions of each participant provided consistent, repeatable findings. Member checking also minimized deviation from the neutrality of findings and increased the study’s quality of evidence (Creswell, 2014).

Quality of Evidence

Trustworthiness is an important part of qualitative research to ensure a study’s reliability and validity. According to Lincoln and Guba (1988), trustworthiness includes (a) dependability (repeatable and consistent findings), (b) credibility (accuracy of
findings), (c) confirmability (unbiased findings), and (d) transferability (ability to use knowledge in different contexts). To demonstrate the quality of evidence, elements of internal and external validity (Yin, 2018) and the case study’s reliability were used while addressing the ability to provide analytical generalization. According to Creswell (2014), trustworthiness is based on a foundation of credibility, dependability, and confirmability, which are related to validity.

**External Validity**

External validity looks outside the study to determine how it relates to other circumstances. For Yin (2018), external validity—also known as transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1988)—is the ability to determine if a study’s findings can be applied to new settings, people, or samples. Using full and detailed descriptions and theory within single-case studies (Yin)—with replication logic to multiple-case studies—the data were validated using level two inferences, meaning the inferences were based on theory common across all case studies.

Higher-level common theory allows for analytic generalizations, which in turn apply from one setting to a different one. Creswell (2014) cautioned against the incorrect use of inference. To counter threats to external validation, analytical generalizations (Yin, 2018) were made from multiple sources of evidence instead of specific groups or individuals. Ties to the theoretical framework (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) provided the guidance of concepts and models used to show how findings were supported by data collection and analysis. Stating the parameters used for the current study provides future researchers the foundation needed to determine if they could use this study in similar circumstances or other settings and how findings relate to the body of theory.
Marshall and Rossman (2016) referred to Lincoln and Guba’s (1988) evaluative criteria as descriptions to contextualize the study, to situate the information into the research context, and to account for its transferability using thick descriptions. Thick descriptions were used to show how participants interpreted the phenomenon. Marshall and Rossman further suggested validity can be established through triangulation, knowledge of daily life, and member checking. In addition to external validity, internal validity was accounted for to add to the trustworthiness of the findings.

Internal Validity

Internal validity was focused inward to determine the relationship between data and findings. Yin (2018) defined internal validity as the confidence the relationship being tested is trustworthy and not influenced by other factors or variables. Merriam (2009) stated simply that internal validity describes how closely the findings match reality—credible findings—and how well the data present a holistic interpretation of the events. Because this case study used virtual interviews without direct observation, an event’s results were inferred based on an earlier occurrence.

Following guidelines suggested by Yin (2018), pattern matching, explanation building, addressing rival explanations, and using logic models to counter the chance of incorrectly inferring data were applied. Multiple authors (e.g., Yin, 2018) advocate searching for data that points to an alternative explanation. Member checking, according to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), minimizes deviation from the neutrality of the findings. As Merriam (2009) suggested, reflexivity was employed in this study to bring to light any biases, assumptions, or dispositions that may have affected data analysis by clarifying researcher assumptions, experiences, and worldview.
Reliability

Like internal validation, Merriam (2009) defined reliability as the ability to answer whether the collected data is consistent with the results, in contrast to another researcher conducting the study and finding the same results. If the findings match the data presented, the study can be determined as dependable. There were several steps taken to increase the reliability of the study, beginning with being transparent with the participants to ensure the information (a) was accurate, (b) instilled trust in the participants, and (c) created a holistic view of the perspectives to increase credibility.

As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2016), participants’ direct quotes were used along with member checking to ensure the findings were accurate. Asking the same open-ended questions of each participant provided consistent, repeatable findings. Self-reflection was used to challenge existing researcher assumptions, biases, and worldviews. Peer review was also used as time allowed to gain insight from other perspectives. An audit trail was provided through detailed records (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) to ensure the movement of information used to conduct the study was explicit. Accuracy of data was confirmed from the beginning of the study to the end.

As Korstjens and Moser (2018) suggested, transparency was used and each step of the research study was documented, thereby providing dependability. The accurate, timely documentation of information provided support for dependability and confirmability. The data were compared to researcher journal insights, assumptions, and preconceptions (Korstjens & Moser) to ensure it was free of bias from researcher perspectives and experiences. According to Creswell (2014), the researchers’ background may have shaped the path of the study. An account was kept of thoughts about the
development of theory, whether the data were helpful to the theory creation, and to identify potential biases.

To counter the possibility of bias, continuous reflection was used with the emerging themes to consider how they came to be and to develop a holistic view by looking at the bigger picture. As the data were reviewed, focus was placed on participants’ positionality to consider their perspectives. The viewpoint of participants was held in constant regard to limit any researcher bias. When questions arose, the transcribed interviews were returned to participants to verify the accuracy of the information. If more clarity was needed, communication was initiated with the participant. It is anticipated that the findings of this study are transferable to other companies with similar conditions.

In the current study, trustworthiness was establish using Lincoln and Guba’s (1988) indications of trustworthiness. Dependability, credibility, reflexivity, confirmability, and transferability were established to ensure validity and both external and internal reliability. The application of these dimensions of trustworthiness helped explore the PSMC’s operational managers’ perspectives and experiences and assisted in countering the limitations of the study.

**Limitations**

Limitations were defined by Hancock and Algozzine (2017) as factors that are out of the control of the researcher and may affect a study’s results. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic limited access to the participants. Permission was obtained to conduct the interviews on-site and on company time in a private conference room, but social
distancing restrictions prohibited in-person interviews. As a result, electronic conferencing was used for the interviews.

In addition to social distancing, the COVID-19 pandemic affected PSMC in many ways. Layoffs occurred, which may have affected the selection of participants for the study. Personal contact information was used to ascertain whether potential participants were willing to participate in the study, despite no longer working for the organization. Although the study was based on participant experiences as an operational manager, having been released from the company could have affected their attitudes about their experiences and, therefore, the nature of their input.

Access to and available time of participants was another limitation in the study. Access to interview participants in person was granted by upper leadership in PSMC. The available time was approved by trading off 1 hour of group organizational meeting time for 1 hour of interview time. However, approval was not given for direct observation of participants. To counter the lack of observational data, triangulation of transcripts was used (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Union membership status of participants may have affected participant responses. Both union-represented and nonunion-represented participants were interviewed to mitigate these potential differences.

Findings were confined to a single organization within PSMC. Generalization is difficult on the individual case level because of the small chance another company or group would share the specific circumstances found in PSMC. For instance, the individual experience may not have applied to another organization due to specific parameters used for this study. Instead, as proposed by Yin (2018), generalization was
conducted at a higher level to provide analytic generalizability. Analysis at a higher level allowed the theories to be generalizable to other instances.

This study was a bounded snapshot in time. As suggested by Merriam (2009) participants with various perspectives were gathered to give richness to the data. However, the use of participant self-reporting may have limited the information gathered. Researcher history and experience with the organization may have also influenced participant responses. To minimize potential effects of participant hesitancy, all participants were assured the interviews were completely confidential and no personally identifiable information would be released to the organization. The purpose of the study was reinforced—to ascertain the operational managers’ point of view—and participants were encouraged to provide candid, honest responses.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) encouraged peer review and member checking to increase data validity and decrease bias. No extraneous details were added to interview data. Interviews were transcribed using Otter software with encryption and using only participant pseudonyms. Data were interpreted by categorizing the raw data and creating themes. To decrease bias in data analysis, only transcripts were used—without any modifications of words—to create categories and themes (Marshall & Rossman). However, coding could have been influenced by researcher experiences and background.

This study was qualitative, which did not lend itself to creation of numerical data. Patterns emerged through analysis and coding of raw data from interviews. Coding could have been biased because of researcher background and personal experience with PSMC. The purpose was to learn about the variables affecting operational managers and team
members through the lens of LMX, role clarity, and social identity, which did not lend itself to quantitative research methodology.

Researcher lack of experience and limited knowledge of case study methods could have influenced the findings. There was a chance the analytical process and theoretical development were confused due to a lack of experience. However, questions were asked to clarify the thought processes and strengthen case study methodology skills. The boundaries and characteristics of the study were expressed through delimitations.

**Delimitations**

Hancock and Algonzzine (2017) defined delimitations as the boundaries of a study, including the case being studied and its characteristics. This study’s delimitations included (a) a focus on including both union-represented and nonunion-represented operational managers at PSMC and (b) including only participants with at least 12 months of experience as operational managers in PSMC. Although the ability to replicate the study was a goal, it is not generalizable to other periods of time, participants, or organizations.

Generalizations were difficult due to the low chance of this study’s specific circumstances matching that of another company or group on the individual case level. Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to other periods, locations, or subjects. Generalization was conducted at a higher level, as Yin (2018) proposed, to provide analytic generalizability. Higher level generalization allows theories to be generalizable to other instances.

In addition to social distancing, the COVID-19 pandemic had other effects on the organization. Layoffs occurred, which may have affected participation in the study. The
study was based on participant experiences as operational managers. Operational manager’s being released from the company should not have affected their input, but it may have affected their attitude toward their experience.

As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2016), open-ended questioning was used with follow-up if interviews illuminated a new line of questioning or answers needed clarification. The focus of the study was limited to the interactions between the leader and employees from the leader’s point of view. Conversely, the population not included in this study were team members, executives, and participants from other industries, states, or countries. Operational managers who did not fit established criteria were not included in the study.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the disruptive effects of lack of role clarity and leader’s behaviors on team members when addressing task conflict. Experiences of 10 leaders at PSMC were examined using qualitative research with case study methodology. Chapter 3 began with a discuss about the research method, followed by the research design, instruments, participants, data analysis methods, quality of evidence, limitations, and delimitations.

Findings of data analysis are presented in Chapter 4, including findings related to the effects of role clarity, constructive task conflict, and factors affecting task and relationship conflict. Each finding is presented with the associated research question. The discussion of each research question includes findings from relevant interview questions and the designated theme related to the research question.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The intent of this research was to explore the impact of the actions of operational managers at Puget Sound Manufacturer Company (PSMC) on role clarity, leader-member exchange (LMX), team task conflict, and relationship conflict. Findings that emerged from data analysis are presented in this chapter. The design of this study helped provide explicitness in collecting data and analyzing the lack of clarity of impact of leadership self-awareness and relationship conflicts among leaders and employees. Data analysis also provided clarity of task conflicts through the lens of LMX, role clarity, and social identity. It was unclear how leader behavior may drive team member behaviors.

The data collection process included semi-structured interviews and demographic surveys. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. The narrative in this chapter addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How does a lack of role clarity contribute to task conflict?

RQ2: How do leaders allow for constructive task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict?

RQ3: What are the best ways to positively disrupt team task conflict without it turning into interpersonal relationship conflict?

This chapter begins with an overview of the research methodology, followed by a brief description of participants. The ideas and impressions of participants and the memoing process shed light on the subtlety of the data and the common themes that emerged from the data analysis stage. Data collection and analysis were conducted to identify factors affecting operational managers’ impact on team members.
Findings will provide leaders with useful information for developing leader training and awareness to mitigate negative impact on team members. The findings are presented and organized by research question to reflect the opinions and perspectives of the operational managers using their voices. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings that form the basis of the discussion presented in Chapter 5.

Methodology

According to Punch (2006), an exploratory case study helps answer why something occurred. This exploratory case study helps answer the research questions about (a) how lack of role clarity relates to task conflict, (b) how to allow for constructive conflict, and (c) how to positively interrupt destructive relationship conflict. By exploring why an action occurs, data showed how unwanted actions can be counteracted. For instance, the question “Why does relationship conflict turn into a negative occurrence from a task conflict?” could be rephrased as “How do leaders allow for constructive task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict?”

Findings from this qualitative case study were derived from the codes and themes as they emerged from interview data. The emergent codes and themes were used to answer the research questions. The data for this study were comprised of responses to 18 interview questions, five of which related to general information about being a team leader. Data was collected from semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The interview questions were described in Chapter 3 and are found in Appendix B.

Participants

The purposely chosen sample for this study consisted of 10 operational managers with at least 1 year of experience who currently or recently worked for PSMC in the state
of Washington. Participants included union-represented and nonunion-represented members. Participants were initially asked via email to complete a demographic survey to validate their fit for the study. Demographic information is highlighted in Table 4.1.

Eighty percent of participants belonged to a union, and 20% were not represented by a union.

Table 4.1

*Participant Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Union represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burt</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alisia</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average: 12.4  Yes: 8  No: 2

Stratification of the population was not part of the process; instead, single-stage sampling was followed. The first tier was the case that was studied—the impact of operational managers’ behaviors on team members at PSMC. Tier two was the sample size within the case rather than interviewing everyone within the organization. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity; no actual names were used.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began by using line-by-line coding to identify preliminary themes that emerged from the interview transcripts. According to Creswell (2014), a case study
involves an iterative process of identifying connections between data categories and refining the resulting theories. Interviews were transcribed using Otter software, and each participant’s interview was initially examined for common words, themes, and patterns.

Analysis began by reviewing the transcript. Four transcripts were initially reviewed to identify key words. Key words and phrases that appeared in multiple transcripts were written on sticky notes and placed on a wall. Commonalities led to an initial set of common codes and patterns. As each subsequent transcript was analyzed, new codes and patterns were added to the initial list.

Once all transcripts were analyzed, findings were separated by questions and placed into Excel spreadsheets. The spreadsheets included individual participants’ key words for each interview question. The master spreadsheet arranged key words by each interview question for all participants. The use of spreadsheets allowed options for sorting the data a variety of ways. Sorting the data brought to light new words, themes, or patterns common to multiple transcripts. As each interview question was individually analyzed, the process confirmed the emerging themes and patterns.

**Findings**

Findings from the interview transcript analysis are related to the three research questions. The three themes for each research question are discussed in detail in the following sections. Table 4.2 highlights the experiences described by participants that led to the themes used to provide answers to the research questions. Analysis of responses resulted in identification of themes and coded responses that were placed into conceptual categories. Except for Interview Questions 1–5, which were general questions, each interview question was affiliated with a research question (see Appendix B). When
needed, probing questions were used to gain clarity during the semi-structured interviews.

### Table 4.2

**Themes and Conceptual Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: How does a lack of role clarity contribute to task conflict?</td>
<td>Clarity, Ownership, Documentation, Operational Managers’ Actions and Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2: How do leaders allow for constructive task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict?</td>
<td>Communication, Teaming Behavior, Emotions, Operational Managers’ Communication and Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3: Factors Affecting Task and Relationship Conflict</td>
<td>Task Conflict, Relationship Conflict, Operational Managers’ Behavior, Operational Managers’ Communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next section, the emergent themes are described. Though each theme is unique, themes share some overlapping principles. The way the themes correspond to the research questions is described. Participants are referred to by their pseudonyms to protect their identity.

**Presentation of Findings: Effects of Role Clarity**

In this section, the findings of role clarity related to Research Question 1 are discussed. Role clarity is based on the premise that employees know their jobs and what is expected of them. Four themes comprising role clarity emerged from the data: (a) Information Clarity, (b) Ownership, (c) Documentation, and (d) Operational Managers’
Actions and Communication. In this section, the research question, interview questions, and findings related to role clarity are discussed.

**Research Question 1**

The themes related to role clarity were shown in Table 4.2. The focused coding was provided through responses of participants to Interview Questions 6–11 (see Appendix B). Participants agreed role clarity directly affects the effectiveness of the operational manager and team members. According to Edward, the absence of clear roles leaves room for team members to “do fun tasks instead.” Additionally, Adam offered:

> Clarity is very important. . .; otherwise, you get into my perception was this or your perception was that and it creates confusion, which can lead to. . .decreased trust across the team. They’re not bringing it up because there’s a miscommunication or misunderstanding of each other’s roles and how they contribute to the larger group and operational goals.

Adam’s comment highlights the importance of role clarity. Without role clarity, members may not be focused on team goals. Instead, they may be focused on what may benefit them individually—to the detriment of the team. When members are not focused on performing tasks beneficial to the team, their trust in each other may erode. Ultimately, lack of role clarity can affect the success of a team.

**Findings of Interview Questions Related to Research Question 1**

Six interview questions related to Research Question 1 and were asked of participants to gain an understanding of their experiences with role clarity.

**Interview Question 1**

The first interview question explored how participants saw role definition for their team members. Sixty percent of participants said employees understanding the goals and
objectives of the team is necessary to role clarity. To support the goals and objectives, Edward uses accountability and responsibility:

With the work division and category on one axis, the names on the other axis, then what role that person has on any given category, then allows them to see who’s the leader, who is the accountable one, who’s responsible for contributing to that success and that allows it to be very obvious where there’s holes. . .but the problem is overcoming lack of clarity in what the work is. This tool allows me to level set. Everyone knows the same thing about what work is out there.

By creating a spreadsheet of tasks and identifying responsible people, Edward is able to clarify roles with team members. He is thus able to convey the information easily so team members have the same understanding of expectations. This kind of clarity helps team members take initiative and look up information at their convenience.

In addition to support for the goals and objectives, Adam suggested documentation of roles for clarity is “critical. . .for conflict resolution.” Lack of documentation, according to Adam, “creates confusion which can lead to people not speaking up, which can, in turn, decrease trust across the team.” Chris described the downside to role clarity when stating, “Some [employees] only do what’s in their roles and responsibilities. Unless it’s obviously mine, I’m not going to do it. So, then I have a gap sometimes between where things are not obvious yet need to be done.”

Gregory also described a negative aspect of role clarity when relating conflict between members:

[Members may have] similar technical ability, similar interests. . .and then they may come to different conclusions. . .end up creating some slowdown. . .where multiple solutions may not work together. They have to come together and decide who is going to be the responsible party.
Interview Question 2

The second interview question explored the documentation of roles. Fifty percent of participants reported documented roles are detailed and well documented. Adam described how his team retains their documents, including a “manual that was put together by the employees with management. We felt that having the employees develop the manual would give them ownership.” Edward prefers to make his documentation visual:

I’m able to make it very clear what they do and what winning looks like. . . . They can offer help to whoever needs help. It allows them some of the ownership to level load on their own.

Conversely, Chris and Frank described their roles as not particularly detailed and lacked coverage for areas that had gaps in the role boundaries. Fifty percent of participants reported role documentation for clarity is lacking. According to Carl, his team has a lot of documentation, but it is not current and is counterintuitive. In contrast, Dave said he is a “foe for documentation. . . . If I documented everything on my projects, I wouldn’t be able to get anything done.”

Interview Question 3

The third interview question explored how often participants discuss roles with team members. Participants reported variations in the schedule for meeting with members to discuss roles. The participants meet with members at different intervals: 30% meet with members daily, 10% meet weekly, 10% meet monthly, 10% meet quarterly, 10% meet yearly, and 30% meet as needed. Adam prefers to “at least [meet in] one-on-ones with employees. It’s constant.” Betty and Carl also prefer to meet with their members daily.
Edward chooses to meet with members once per week, although he posted “the role chart, accessible anytime day or night. So, if there’s any questions, when I’m not there, the meeting’s not happening, they can go look.” Alisia also indicated she chooses to meet once a week for team meetings, “but it’s not enough time to go over the roles because the roles are so varied in the different shops.” Chris reported averaging monthly meetings to discuss “something that comes up that’s going to require some collaboration.” The remaining participants prefer to wait until conflict or questions arise to discuss roles with team members.

**Interview Question 4**

The fourth interview question asked participants about the actions they take when team members are confused about roles and responsibilities. Reviewing goals, objectives, roles, and responsibilities was reported by 80% of the 10 participants. Betty said she engages team members with a roadmap of skills for their role to

> . . . ensure they they’re meeting some of the skills that are necessary. [I] put major tasks on a spreadsheet and detailed out when they should be doing that and weaving that information in. . . . [There is] so much ambiguity in the work statement; that is why they don’t know what they’re doing. It has a lot to do with going back and redefining what are we really supposed to be doing.

Twenty percent of participants reported using soft skills such as active listening. As Edward described it:

> It all comes down to relationships. . . . What’s really bothering you. . . .take time to understand who they are, what they’re afraid of. . . .build a bridge that later on, we can cross whenever there’s conflict. Let them have the floor. It becomes the only winning strategy I’ve ever found.

Similarly, Frank suggested, “Listen. . . . I’m serious; if you don’t listen, then yet be compassionate back, you lose them.”
Interview Question 5

Interview Question 5 explored actions participants take when they have team members who disagree with roles. Seventy percent of participants suggested talking with the employee about their roles and responsibility. One participant uses soft skills to recognize the behavior and talk with the members, one measures the skills of the individual and mentors them to help them improve, and one stated he works around the member. Gregory said he likes to bring the team together to “make sure everybody understands their roles, or at least we understand where the confusion is coming in.”

Interview Question 6

The last interview question about role clarity examined how participants address confusion about roles and responsibilities. Seventy percent of the 10 participants felt it was important to bring the team together to clarify roles and identify the source of confusion. One participant indicated they were not aware of the confusion. Another suggested it is important to acknowledge the confusion and determine the cause, and one suggested reminding team members of “why we do this. . .how it’s set up and ask for suggestions.” Adam uses transparency to “look at everybody’s roles and responsibilities in the organization. . . . I think having that visibility, and transparency is key because everybody’s not aware of roles and responsibilities.” Burt offered, “If you have any other suggestions on how we can make that role better or how we can approach it a different way, I’d always ask for feedback.”

Research Question 1 Themes

Themes relating to Research Question 1 emerged from the data from Interview Questions 6–11 (see Appendix B). The themes identified were (a) Information Clarity,
(b) Ownership, (c) Documentation, and (d) the Operational Manager’s Actions and Communication. Findings of the analysis begin with Information Clarity.

**Information Clarity**

Responses from participants about information clarity fell into two categories: clarity and transparency. Transparency is used for sharing information and giving visibility. Clarity offers understanding within the context and exactness of communication with the expectation of the recipient taking action.

Participants suggested using both transparency and clarity depending on the information being shared and the intent of sharing the information. Multiple participants reported using visual aids such as matrices to transparently clarify the identity of the leader responsible or accountable for getting tasks completed. Although transparency is helpful in sharing information with team members, clarity aligns with taking actions to change substandard processes or role definitions.

Participants also reported using formal techniques of information clarity to allow members to come to a common understanding of the processes. They use value stream mapping, which shows each step in the process, the role assigned to each step, and the supporting information. Carl suggested transparency is useful to increase precision of the details for the roles and boundaries between disciplines while making it apparent when confusion exists. According to Burt and Chris, transparency may lead to clarity, as in the case of a mapped-out process that shows gaps in roles to be addressed. After the process is mapped, the participants are expected to take action to address the gaps in the process.

Several participants clearly saw the benefits of clarity to convey goals and objectives and how members’ tasks contribute to the achievement of organizational goals.
By using clarity, operational managers highlight actions needed to support the goals, making it easier for operational managers to lead in alignment with the company mission. Several operational managers heralded the benefits of clarity using visible information with the intent to act.

When data are made visible by using clarity, it is easier to see gaps (Gregory), convey expectations via a task chart (Edward), and share who is accountable for answering questions (Burt) through an accountability matrix, which gives detailed descriptions of how to complete jobs. As Adam observed, a handbook for new employees was created by existing members so new members could take action to access company systems and information.

When gaps are discovered, information clarity is addressed by the roles. According to Edward, the task chart allows members to understand the workload and adjust as needed to complete the tasks. An accountability matrix shows the names of those who can act when needed. The new employee handbook creates an expectation for new members to independently look up necessary information, access data online, or submit data to the company systems.

Relationship clarity is a term used to describe interactions between operational managers and team members. Relationship clarity describes expectations and actions in much the same way as Adam uses it to refocus a member by reminding them of the boundaries of their job, the expectations to fulfill the requirements associated with it, and how they fit within the group. Relationship clarity among participants appeared to focus on larger team goals and how individual actions affect the entire team. Relationship
clearly provides the expectation to take the expected proper and autonomous action that increases one’s sense of ownership.

**Ownership**

Responses from participants indicated, when a team has a sense of ownership, they are more likely to (a) go beyond their assigned tasks to get the job done, (b) include all perspectives to come up with the best process and solutions, and (c) act autonomously. Carl indicated ownership is apparent in his team members and that clear roles help them “get the job done.” This finding was also expressed by Fred who observed, “Most people do more than their assigned roles.” Alisia said her team members show ownership by “doing extra things . . . to make the customer happy.” However, Fred indicated his team experiences the downside of too much ownership when they “do things they shouldn’t be doing” outside of role boundaries.

Participants gain a feeling of increased ownership, as indicated in their answers about job roles, when individual perspectives have been considered. As Gregory said, “They’re looking for validation to their solution.” In support of Gregory’s experience of team members working together across roles to find the best solution, Burt thought it is important to give encouraging feedback to gather “any other suggestions on how we can make the role better.” Betty found bringing members together to discuss processes and roles promoted autonomy: “[They] get together to talk about [the problem] and come up with how they’re going to work out the problem.” Dave prefers the use of a problem-solving workshop to gain “everybody’s input from their perspectives.” Dave also espouses the value of gathering outside input to create the best solution.
Thirty percent of the 10 participants alluded to the negative side of autonomy such as choosing to do their favorite work—or as Edward stated, “doing the fun work instead.” Gregory mentioned another negative aspect of autonomy when he said, “Everything is dropped to fight a fire,” which results in role conflict. Another downside of autonomy, according to Chris, is doing only the perceived assignment, which may result in gaps. On the opposite end of the spectrum are members doing more than their assigned roles, which Fred suggested may cause confusion in role clarity.

**Documentation**

Although clear, concise documentation was generally seen as a vital aspect of role clarity by operational managers, there was disagreement about the return on investment for completing documentation. Several reasons appeared for this divergence: (a) documenting processes take time from already constrained resources; (b) the documents are seldom referred to; (c) multiple documents conflict, creating confusion and frustration; and (d) documents are difficult to understand. Chris alluded to the large number of documents that are “sometimes conflicting” and “out of date.” Adam considered documentation as critical, but Doug felt it “gets in the way” of getting the work completed.

Answers to interview questions related to themes about transactional and transformational mindsets appear to suggest operational managers who use transactional skills are opposed to documenting processes. Operational managers who exhibit transformational skills acknowledged the value of documenting processes. Doug sets the expectation to complete work first, thereby setting the norms of the group and guiding the team’s culture for meeting the schedule instead of documenting processes. Conversely,
from Adam’s perspective, documentation is essential. Adam sets the expectation for members to create and update documents as improvements to the process are made. The norm Adam instills in the team is that documentation is an asset instead of an inconvenience.

These differences show the impact of different mindsets among operational managers. Managers either set aside time to document processes or forego documentation in favor of performing transactions. Role clarity allows for autonomy. When roles are clear, according to Gary, team members know what needs to be done, and team members are open to external ideas as they execute their roles.

**Operational Managers’ Actions and Communication**

The most common response from participants when interacting with team members is the importance of de-escalating conflict using emotional intelligence (EQ), teambuilding, emphasizing common goals, and communication. According to participants, the behaviors and communication style of the operational manager are instrumental in moderating the behaviors of team members.

**Emotional Intelligence.** EQ relates to role clarity for managers by allowing them to moderate their emotions in service of team members. EQ helps the operational manager defuse conflict by positively managing emotions. When operational managers practice EQ, they model desired behaviors and connect with team members.

A recurring topic in the interviews was the use of “we” instead of “you” to create alignment when interacting with team members. Betty and Chris use “we” as a de-escalation technique. This technique seemed particularly helpful to Adam when dealing with union members, which comes with a unique set of challenges. An important aspect
of de-escalation of difficult situations is the use of EQ, which is the ability to manage emotions in a positive way.

According to Adam, a culture of distrust exists among union members. As Burt said, “There are conflicts and wars that had started long before most of us. . .were even born.” Burt found the use of “we” promotes inclusivity and cohesiveness within the team. It gives team members the opportunity to be heard and have their perspective considered. Burt deemed it a useful tool when confronting a preexisting conflict.

Another aspect of EQ is the way operational managers approach issues with their members. Adam stressed the importance of giving members grace, having an open heart, and empathy for their situation. He found offering grace—such as allowing a union member to make up their time when they arrived late for work instead of writing a corrective action to go on the employee’s record—increases the understanding and positive reaction from the union representative. When the union representative learned the reason behind asking an employee to stay 5 minutes later, the trust and understanding grew, according to Adam. Sharing the reason why an action was taken illuminates the requests of the operational manager to the members, resulting in improved communication and understanding.

According to Burt, sharing the reason for taking an action is not only applicable to relationships but is useful in sharing why members must perform a task. Multiple participants reported using the same method of information sharing to increase trust and de-escalate conflict by using transparency. Both Doug and Gregory felt transparency facilitates teambuilding.
**Teambuilding.** Teambuilding relates to role clarity by focusing the team on solutions that benefit the team instead of the individual. Operational managers can influence the focus of the team, thereby influencing team norms. When team members direct their attention toward team goals, they are more likely to exhibit organizational change behaviors (OCB). Operational managers can alter team norms by modeling the acceptable behaviors to be followed by team members.

Operational managers suggested multiple methods of teambuilding. Some methods are administrative in nature, such as removing roadblocks, while other suggested methods are more relational, such as promoting the use of “we.” Others suggested teambuilding methods related to leadership styles such as servant and transformational leadership. Betty suggested constant communication and setting clear expectations are also important teambuilding elements.

Adam and Burt found a strong stance was needed in teams with strong personalities such as those with a history of conflict. Participants espoused the importance of staying calm and “holding my ground” (Burt). Alisia emphasized the ability to “think on your feet” and be flexible to respond to the needs of members. For Edward, “getting to know your members up-front” is important, which gives him insight into changes in their behavior if an issue arises.

For participants, soft skills—in addition to administrative skills—are also important in teambuilding. These soft skills include active listening, empathy, and mentoring members. The ability to listen to members came up in several interviews, both in terms of operational managers seeking out team member or team members seeking out the operational manager. Edward suggested managers should make themselves available
through an open-door policy to better serve their members. Edward went further by saying, “Listening is the only winning strategy I’ve found.”

Participants prefer the use of servant leadership. Servant leadership is an approach by which leaders set aside their self-interest and altruistically work for the benefit of their followers. Servant leadership can positively affect OCB through LMX relationships. For Carl, stepping in to help a team member is a form of servant leadership. Dave uses servant leadership to help focus team members on positive OCB through doing what it takes to support their customer. Alisia encourages her members to focus on creating “happy customers.”

If teambuilding efforts have failed with a team member, operational managers must sometimes escalate the issue to be addressed by the administrative manager, though escalation appears to be a rare occurrence among participants. Before escalation, operational managers reported using their skills to attempt to mitigate the problem. Operational managers reported focusing team members on why they were performing their tasks or why relationships were far-reaching with common goals.

**Common Goal.** Use of a common goal is like teambuilding and relates to role clarity by focusing the team on the goals of the team instead of the individual. The topic of common goals was prevalent in multiple participant interviews. Carl and Alisia use “why” and “we” for focusing the team on a common goal. Edward suggested allowing team members to “have the floor” to promote “bridge building” and better understanding of the team’s common goals. Focusing on common goals enhances the efforts of team members and helps them shift their focus from individual to group goals. For Fred, changing the perspectives of members to what is best for the group allows members to
determine the best solution to reach organizational goals rather than remaining focused only on goals that benefit an individual member.

Common goals also help operational managers focus on the best option for team members in support of organizational goals. As an operational manager, Adam sees “the ultimate goal is to help employees.” Along with promoting common goals, operational managers help team members understanding the bigger picture and how they fit into organizational and corporate goals. Adam takes the opportunity to communicate with his team members both in group settings and individually to increase understanding of how the members’ efforts relate to organizational goals. All operational managers alluded to the importance of effective communication with team members.

**Operational Managers’ Communication.** Communication relates to role clarity and helps operational managers convey the expectations associated with employee job titles. Based on the interviews, operational managers’ communication falls largely into four categories: (a) expectations, (b) reviewing information and role clarity, (c) balance workload, and (d) conflict. Expectations are related to both individual and team performance and were reflected in the opinions and perspectives of operational managers based on their experiences with team members.

Data showed operational managers perceive team members have the following communication expectations from operational managers: (a) provide adequate resources, (b) remove roadblocks, (c) resolve conflicts, and (d) provide information. According to Dave, providing adequate resources refers to more than just needed resources; it includes removal of members who do not fulfill the requirements of the position making the team
less effective. For Adam, clearing away roadblocks increases the trust of members due to the effective communication and actions of operational managers.

Adam further emphasized constant communication reinforces the perception operational managers will follow through on promises. Similarly, members expect the operational manager to intervene in conflict when it cannot be solved by the members. When trust is high, according to Adam, “other employees bring up conflict.” As with follow through, operational managers reported increased trust from members when information was shared.

From the operational managers’ perspectives, their communication about expectations with team members includes (a) assigned tasks, (b) how they will support the member, (c) conflict resolution, (d) job performance, and (e) mentoring. For Fred, his responsibility is to “assign tasks and support them.” Edward acknowledged the nuances of assigning tasks, feeling it is his responsibility to “balance workloads.”

Chris mentioned the difficulty she has experienced helping members when a question came up about their assigned tasks. The documentation is sometimes difficult to understand, and multiple documents sometimes offer conflicting information. Some documents are 5 years old and outdated, making proper support difficult. An aspect of support mentioned by several participants is the importance of removing roadblocks for team members. Burt described it as a goal to “get them what they need.”

When conflict occurs, Adam feels his responsibility is to “walk members through conflict resolution.” Adam further offered, “There’s always conflict.” Adam was the only participant to allude to “positive conflict” and “healthy tension:”

I think there’s a positive conflict. . .[and] that diversity of thought is so critical. If everybody thought exactly the same way. . .you might not get the best optimal
result, and sometimes that can lead to disagreements, again, lead to arguing. We’ve got all the inputs; let’s take the emotions aside. . .and talk about it.

Role clarity improves the effectiveness of collaboration and leads to constructive task conflict.

**Presentation of Findings: Constructive Task Conflict**

In this section, findings related to constructive task conflict are discussed, the focus of Research Question 2. Task conflict is disagreement on the method for completing a task or which task is within the employees’ job role responsibilities. This section includes a discussion of the research question, interview questions, and findings related to constructive task conflict.

**Research Question 2**

Themes about constructive task conflict as they related to Research Question 2 were shown in Table 4.2. Focused coding was used to analyze responses of participants to Interview Questions 12–14 (see Appendix B). Participants offered insight into task conflict.

**Findings of Interview Questions Related to Research Question 2**

Three interview questions were asked of participants to gain an understanding of their experiences with task conflict. Findings of the analysis of answers provided by participants are discussed in this section. The questions related to operational managers’ awareness and actions about task conflict.

**Interview Question 1**

The first interview question asked participants to share some examples of actions taken when they had to confront team members with differing opinions about how to complete their work. Collaboration was mentioned by 70% of the 10 participants as an
action they implement to address conflicting opinions on how to complete the work. Consensus is not necessary, according to Alisia, who encourages her members to “agree to disagree and move forward.” Thirty percent of participants suggested being flexible about how to complete the work within the established boundaries. Adam suggested the use of positive conflict can promote diversity of thought, which he found to be “so critical. . .to get optimal results.”

**Interview Question 2**

The second interview question explored the most common ways to engage employees when dealing with conflict related to completing a task. Reiteration of goals with employees is used by 50% of participants. As Frank said, “Communicate, communicate, communicate. You have to listen to them. You have to show them the process.” Empathy is used by 30% of participants. Chris reported a preference to “keep things light. . .let them vent. . .then get to business.” Gregory suggested using patience in supporting his team members: “I don’t care about schedules so much anymore; I care about what’s right.”

**Interview Question 3**

The last interview question related to Research Question 2 asked operational managers how they know when to step in to address the conflict. Fifty percent of participants indicated behavioral changes among team members are indicators of when to step in to address conflict. Thirty percent of participants felt team member body language is an indicator. One participant shared he was not very good at knowing when to step in: “I’m bad at it. . . . There were things that were happening in the meeting that people [who] were more in tune with other people were picking up that I would find out after
their meeting had transpired.” Alisia relied on her “gut feeling that something’s in conflict; then I’m going to talk about it.” Adam expressed a belief in the concept of healthy tension in conflict, where “the employees can work through it on their own.”

**Research Question 2 Themes**

The first theme to emerge related to Research Question 2 was Communication. Other themes related to task conflict included Teaming Behavior (OCB), Emotions, and Operational Managers’ Behaviors and Attitudes. The theme Operational Managers’ Actions and Communication, derived from answers to questions about the effects of role clarity, also appeared in the data related to constructive feedback. Data addressing conflict constructively was analyzed from responses to Interview Questions 12–14 (see Appendix B). The emergent themes were intertwined and may address multiple research questions.

**Communication**

One aspect of communication offered by participants was keeping members informed to keep them focused on higher-level goals. Fifty percent of operational managers reported reinforcing team and individual goals helps resolve conflict arising from different perceptions of tasks and goals. Edward suggested restating shared goals and “ask them to decide the best way” to accomplish them. Chris suggested adapting the message to include the bigger picture of “why we are in business” and ensuring “community goals were clear.” The ladder of inference (see Figure 3) opened the door for Edward to discuss perceptions. Edward uses the ladder of inference to remove bias in communication by clarifying, “I say this, but you assume I mean a bunch of other things.”
Burt steps in to mitigate miscommunication. He uses paraphrasing to clarify “this is what he meant.” Participants spoke about the importance of sharing perceptions to clarify the meaning in the message. Chris stressed the importance of understanding communication styles. She is open when she has a member who feels they are being attacked repeatedly over email. Chris speaks with the other person and their manager. As Chris shared, “Their style of communication was not coming across in a constructive way. We needed to find a resolution.”

Chris’s experience was highlighted when Adam stressed that perceptions are not only within the team but can include the “consequences of negative perception of others.” Except for Adam and Chris, operational managers focus their responses internally about communication and the perception of team members. Forty percent of operational managers suggested getting to the root cause of the conflict to constructively solve it.

Discussing the cause of conflict, clarifying the message, and drawing out the issue sets the environment for constructively solving the issue. Supplementing the effort to communicate is the use of active listening, which nearly all operational managers reported using with their team members. Gregory uses it to understand why conflict exists. According to Edward, communication “takes a lot of listening.” Listening allows Fred to clue into changes in personality or behavior that suggest a miscommunication has occurred. For Carl, bringing members together, whether in a dyad or as a group, helps to “clear the air” and decrease the conflict constructively. The data indicated clear communication not only promotes constructive conflict, but it also enhances teaming behaviors.
Figure 3

Ladder of Inference

Note. The ladder of inference cycle begins with reality and facts and moves upward to actions. This figure demonstrates the ladder of inference as an iterative approach to perceptions applicable to manufacturing and leadership. From The Ladder of Inference: How to Avoid Jumping to Conclusions, from MindTools, n.d. (https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_91.htm). In the public domain.
Teaming Behavior

Eighty percent of participants indicated they support the use of team collaboration to develop the best ideas and solutions to move team members forward. A component of collaboration is the use of compromise to help the team change the focus from the individual to the group. Carl asks the group directly “How can we work on this and compromise together?” Burt focuses members on the bigger picture, the constraints imposed on the team, and how he aligns with them. Burt stated, “This is the hand we’re dealt. We got to play it. We get paid to do this job.” This tactic directs the members to their common goals.

Edward focuses his team on shared goals; however, he gives team members greater autonomy in his expectations. He stated, “We have a shared goal here, and how we get there doesn’t matter to me because I’m not doing the work.” His expectation is for the experts performing the work to determine the solution. Burt’s approach emphasizes individual members alignment as a team using “we,” where all perspectives are heard.

Edward recommended the use of bias awareness to help team members remove bias by using the ladder of inference (see Figure 3) to increase understanding of other perspectives and decrease biases. Adam detailed the benefits of diversity of thought along with the consequences of not allowing diversity.

I think there’s a positive conflict. . .that diversity of thought is so critical. If everybody thought exactly the same way. . .you might not get the best optimal result, and sometimes that can lead to disagreements, again, lead to arguing. We’ve got all the inputs, let’s take the emotions aside. . .and talk about it.
Adam emphasized the importance of positive conflict. He values and encourages debates about differing opinions among team members. His goal is to have members share their perspectives calmly to determine the best path forward.

*Emotions*

Participants mentioned how emotions affect communication and relate to conflict. When referring to constructive conflict, participants shared how they deal with emotions in themselves and among team members. Edward indicated operational managers need to “understand personality types to understand what the warning signs are.” When behaviors change, operational managers step in to determine what the situation is. The operational manager needs to be supportive, according to Carl, and keep their emotions and behaviors in check. Burt remains relaxed and calm so he does not add “fuel to the fire” when confronting a member on their behavior. Active listening was mentioned by 30% of participants as a tool for constructively finding solutions to conflicts. Realizing the employee may “not be thinking right” allows Burt to approach conflict with an “open heart and empathy.” Being able to read the emotional states of team members allows the operational manager to act proactively to turn destructive conflict into constructive conflict.

Although many operational managers alluded to noticing subtle changes in behavior, Doug acknowledged the challenge of not being able to “read the room.” The reason, Doug offered, is because sometimes he is “both busy about schedule of the agenda and trying to keep the meeting moving. . .not being aware of the group dynamic. It’s one of my short points.” Consequently, Doug understands he may be “rubbing people the wrong way,” which could impact the perception of others.
When operational managers tend to the emotional needs of others, it either improves or degrades their relationship with team members. Gregory suggested the act of making members feel heard increases the success of “dealing with the best decision that we have given the constraints that we’re working on.” In addition, bringing the conflict to him decreases the chance of the conflict being “disruptive of the work statement. . .deal with it before to becomes an issue.” Adam’s experience shows how actions or inactions of the operational manager affect communication and trust with team members:

   It all comes down to trust. If the employees do not trust their manager to take disagreement, take input, take criticism, take off the wall thinking and look at it objectively, they won’t even bring it forward. So, you won’t even know that there’s a conflict of thought. . .there’s a conflict of roles and responsibilities amongst the team unless they have trust to bring it for to the manager.

   Adam clarified how communication and trust can decline based on the behaviors of the operational manager. Operational managers need to be able to receive and take action on constructive feedback to foster trust among team members. The more trust the team members perceive, the more likely they will bring up issues that need to be addressed.

**Operational Managers’ Communication and Behavior**

   Operational Managers’ Communication and Actions appeared as a theme for all three research questions. Operational managers’ communication quality and type were reported to positively affect team members’ ability to constructively address task conflict before it escalates to relationship conflict. Participants suggested several methods for addressing conflict, including use of transparency, clarity, and operational managers’ behaviors.
**Transparency and Clarity.** Both transparency and clarity were used by operational managers for constructive conflict. In contrast to those who use transparency to share information, those who use clarity do so with the expectation of actions occurring as a result of the discussion. Adam gave an example of transparency when discussing information sharing:

> I like to do it to get that transparency. Do that as a group. . . . It’s got to be open. If the conflict can’t be dealt with publicly, you have to deal with it privately. . . . There’s always healthy tension.

Adam uses questions with members to help with clarity: “Why am I asking you to do it? What is the importance of it? How will it benefit the organization?” Such questions help clarify expectations for team members to take action to complete the request.

In contrast to using clarity, some operational managers advocated using transparency to promote constructive conflict by providing additional discussion to relay other perspectives, constraints, or intentions. Chris said she allows the members “5 minutes of venting about what’s not going well. . . . There’s a lot of tension about deadlines and unreasonable expectations. Let’s just vent it and put it out there, and then we can get on to business.”

**Operational Managers Behaviors.** The behavior of operational managers affects how members react. Edward suggested observing and staying awake to members behavior changes. Betty seeks to actively create safety in interactions with her members by “continuously listening really carefully of what the intention is, and not who’s right, . . . always going back to the intention is safety. That is the number one thing . . . and repeating back what you’re hearing.” Betty builds relationships ahead of time “so people can trust me. . . . I tend to want to make them feel better and take on their cause.” The
downside of Better’s behavior, as she described it, is “sometimes you don’t give them what they want to hear. . . . It’s not what they’re expecting, and that is a big challenge. And it has kind of burned me sometimes, because I’m too trusting or too close.”

Edward raised the subject of mentoring when he said, “There’s a lot of coaching that I’ve had to accidentally learn to get people to integrate with their teams. . . . We’re making sure the community goal is clear.” Carl described similar coaching opportunities when he said, “All I can do is be someone there who is supportive, and try to help them through it, and make suggestions on how we can get from point A to point B.” Alisia reported proactively supporting her members by sharing, “I’m going to make sure we’re going to start the conversation, even if I think it’s a conflict.”

Participants described the benefits of (a) exhibiting patience when dealing with conflict, (b) being an unbiased referee, (c) being aware of the behaviors of team members, and (d) reinforcing the positive aspects of the conflict. If none of these behaviors is successful, and the operational manager cannot find a way to solve the conflict constructively, they bring in management support. Fifty percent of participants reported using another manager to emphasize the need for constructively solving the issue before elevating it. As Fred said, he brings in someone “within the confines of the issue, not just anybody, but somebody of like manner to listen and express . . . requirements better than I can.” When bringing in support does not result in a resolution, fifty percent of participants suggested changing team members to make the team operate more efficiently.
Presentation of Findings: Factors Affecting Task and Relationship Conflict

The findings of factors affecting task and relationship conflict as related to Research Question 3 are discussed in this section. Task conflict is a difference of opinion about how a task should be completed. Relationship conflict is based on the relationship between team members on a personal level. Data analysis of task and relationship conflict resulted in three themes: (a) Operational Managers’ Behaviors, (b) Communication, and (c) Team Effectiveness. The themes are intertwined and may appear in different categories.

Research Question 3

The themes about the best ways to positively disrupt team task conflict without it turning into interpersonal relationship conflict as related to Research Question 3 were shown in Table 4.2. Focused coding of the responses of participants to Interview Questions 15-18 (see Appendix B) resulted in these findings. The responses to the interview questions are reviewed in this section.

Findings of Interview Questions Related to Research Question 3

Four interview questions were posed to participants to gain an understanding of their experiences with task and relationship conflict. Answers to these questions provided clarity about the successes and challenges of operational managers dealing with task and relationship conflict.

Interview Question 1

The first interview question asked participants to describe their greatest success in addressing conflict? Collaboration was reported as the greatest success by 40% of participants. Chris stressed the importance of using collaboration when she said, “We
needed to find a solution.” Improved relationships through collaboration were reported as the greatest success by 50% of participants. Adam described his experience with a union member who had strong animosity toward the company. Adam received feedback from the union steward who told him, “You’re really trying to help the employees.” After that, Adam said, “The union became on my side.” Twenty percent of participants reported preventing animosity and injury of the members as their greatest successes in collaboration. One participant identified success with improved self-awareness and learning from feedback from the members as their greatest success in collaboration. Maintaining respect and still being friends was reported by one participant. Another participant suggested his greatest success was dealing with conflict before it became an issue.

**Interview Question 2**

The second interview question explored participants’ greatest challenges in addressing conflict. The responses largely fell into the category of relationship conflict as reported by 60% of participants. Betty said, “You can’t always be their friends. . . . I’m too trusting, . . . too close in the relationship.” Burt said, “Animosity is higher in blue collar members.” Alisia expressed discomfort with addressing relationship conflict, saying, “I don’t think you can always fix it. . . . Concentrate on helping . . . them move to another job.” Of the remaining participants, Edward said his greatest challenge is overcoming bias. Gregory felt his biggest challenge is finding out about conflict early, and Frank said his challenge is conveying to a member that they are not a failure, that “it’s a learning [opportunity]” for both the member and the leader.
Interview Question 3

The third interview question asked participants to share what works best for them when addressing task conflict with team members. Participant responses varied. Documentation was suggested by 40% of participants. Adam suggested everyone should understand all roles and responsibilities of all members. Forty percent of participants suggested communication to address task conflict, including listening, feedback from team members, and clear expectations. Carl prefers approaching conflict as a team, and Chris prefers meeting “in as small a group as possible so they don’t feel reprimanded.” One participant suggested delegating tasks at a finer level to improve understanding. Frank suggested “removing roadblocks, . . . reassigning tasks, . . . or do[ing] it myself.”

Interview Question 4

The last interview question was open-ended and allowed participants to offer additional information about dealing with conflict they thought was important. Sixty percent of participants mentioned a desire to help people as important to being an operational manager. Alisia said, “I know that it’s $2 an hour; . . . it’s not about that. It’s about whether or not you enjoy people [and] helping with conflict.” Burt suggested helping members by enabling them: “Don’t think of yourself as the boss. Don’t think of yourself as the overlord. You’re a team, you work with them, and you also work for them to an extent.” Twenty percent of participants acknowledged the unavoidability of conflict. Carl said, “There’s always going to be conflict between leaders and members. . . . Keep the team involved, . . . be part of the team, . . . lead by example.”

Participants also identified shortcomings in the organization. Betty suggested the organization is more focused on schedules “instead of cultivating relationships.” Chris
suggested a menu of training should be created for members, saying, “There’s always room for improvement.” Dave recognizes personality conflict is a blind spot for him, saying he is “focused more on product than the process.”

**Research Question 3 Themes**

Themes relating to Research Question 3 emerged from the data analysis of responses to Interview Questions 15–18 (see Appendix B). The themes identified were Types of Conflict, Operational Managers’ Behavior, and Operational Managers’ Communication. The discussion begins with Types of Conflict.

**Types of Conflict**

Participants reported both relationship and task conflict. Relationship conflict occurs between members and may or may not be related to performing a task. Task conflict is disagreement about the methods used to complete a task. Task conflict may lead to relationship conflict.

**Relationship.** As Adam succinctly stated, “Offering grace and understanding in overcoming emotional roadblocks [is important].” Chris stated:

People have personal lives. . . . They might be having relationship problems at home or health problems with a family member. There are lots of things that people bring to work. . . . Sometimes the person you’re having an issue with has other things going on in their life that is impacting their attitude at work, and you have to be mindful of that.

Gregory said, “People have emotional investment, either. . . positive or negative investment in what’s going on.” To counter potential conflict, Gregory chooses to recognize his team members to “keep people a little bit more relaxed. . . . [so] that they are getting what is expected of them completed.” For Gregory, speaking with team members has the additional benefit of members feeling heard. However, Gregory continued:
Our job as leaders is to make sure certain things don’t happen. That becomes a problem for me, emotionally so I have to take that time and step back and say, “this person is really emotionally over the top, we need to just settle down so I don’t get drawn in” and then give them the opportunity to cool down. I don’t mind letting people vent, but it can’t affect me emotionally because that affects my ability to lead the team.

Burt uses an open-door policy—allowing his members to come to him and “get things off your chest, tell me what’s wrong”—before the situation spirals into a larger conflict. An unexpected aspect of conflict that came out in the interviews was the interaction between the operational manager and members of a union, particularly those working blue collar jobs. These relationship conflicts do not appear to be caused by an existing task conflict. Burt has experience with both the shop floor (blue collar) and engineering (white collar) team members. According to Burt, in the office environment “nobody jumps up and screams.” However, that is not the case on the shop floor. Burt identified long-standing animosity between union members and the company as a source of conflict. Burt sees his responsibility as “preventing injury and fights.” He relayed:

There are conflicts and wars that had started long before most of us down there were even born. I really don’t see a need for it, and it just keeps going and going... Negativity in the workplace and toxicity and hearsay is another big thing here. Saying rumors—that starts a lot of it right there.

Consequently, several operational managers have tailored their approach to leadership to create bridges with union members. Doug focuses team members on the process instead of the individual to set aside emotions and gain agreement on the best way to work together.

**Task.** Task conflict can lead to relationship conflict when there is continuing confusion and disagreement about boundaries, tasks, or process. For Gregory, conflict within his team arises from members being frustrated “when relying on others to get their
job done in a timely fashion.” Participants were proponents of solving task conflict as a team because it allows team members to (a) get grievances out in the open to understand the root cause of the issue, (b) gain clarity about why a task is not being completed, and (c) determine the best path forward for the team. Carl advocated approaching task conflict as a team and cautioned again “finger pointing.”

Participants recommended several solutions to task conflict, including (a) collaboration to share perspectives, (b) reframing the experience to a positive view, and (c) clarifying boundaries. Frank emphasized using conflict or failure as an opportunity to grow, saying, “When they feel a failure, they’re not a failure. Their idea wasn’t accepted for whatever reason, but it’s learning” for both parties. When conflicts of opinion appear Dave brings the team together to “let people see what the results could be from one point of view to the other.” Chris implores her team to share “their perspective. . . . Let me understand the big picture, and then let’s figure out how we can make progress.” Fred encourages his members to honor the opinions of others, even when an agreement cannot be reached. In addition to relying on the team to work through task and relationship conflict, there are activities participants suggested operational managers can lead to help team members.

**Operational Managers’ Behavior**

Participants reported several aspects of operational managers’ behaviors that affect team members. Thirty percent of participants identified hesitation to confront by operational managers as a problem. Participants encouraged the use of positive reinforcement to facilitate conflict resolution.
Behavior. Seventy percent of participants indicated they seek to resolve conflict by evaluating the relationship conflicts before task conflicts to find the cause of the conflict. However, 50% of participants said they do not like confronting conflict. Several operational managers indicated they use empathy when resolving conflict. Adam found operational manager behavior and attitudes positively affect team members when he approaches them with what he considers to be the “right reasons:”

You’ve got to love the people. . .be in it to help people grow and understand that people make mistakes. . . . If you go into it with the right reasons, an open heart, empathy, and truly wanting to work through those conflicts for the betterment of the organization. . .you’ll be more successful.

Adam felt it is important to understand that people make mistakes; therefore, “there’s always going to be conflict.” Chris described using empathy to appeal to the higher good of members when she stated, “We all want the best thing. Let me hear your perspective” Chris believes in showing empathy for personal matters affecting members’ lives. Other participants reflected similar ideas when addressing conflict.

Reinforcement. Participants use positive reinforcement to encourage conflict resolution. Betty encourages her team to work through conflict by saying things like, “I know you have the skills needed to get the job done.” Doug encourages members not to give up, saying, “It’s all about perseverance. . . . If you keep at it, you’ll get there. . . . People see what the results can be from one point of view to another.” Betty described the challenges of cultivating relationships between the operational manager and team members:

We always jump to trying to just list the tasks and make the schedule, that we never spend any time in cultivating the relationships. The only way you get your job done is through networking. I think it’s really about spending that time knowing who your team is and what they need.
Frank suggested getting involved. “Yes, you did something wrong, but here’s how you can correct it. Tell the truth.” Edward offered:

I check in to make sure it’s not my approach or my personality or my bias that’s showing. . .that’s preventing things. You are only half of the relationship, or maybe less if you’re a manager, so that gets into forgiving yourself when things fail. . . . Learn from it and just move on.

While interacting with members, Adam suggested using de-escalation techniques to defuse a conflict by “working through it without overreacting, without escalating it, trying to get to the root cause of where the aggression is coming from” to build trust and rapport.

Data related to factors affecting task and relationship conflict were linked to the quality and type of communication. All participants’ agreed communication is a strong influence on their relationships with team members.

**Operational Managers’ Communication**

Open two-way communication was evident in the data. Fifty percent of participants referred to the importance of relaying the message of why (bigger picture) in the context of team and organizational levels. As Betty stated, “A lot of times, it’s all about expectations, . . . removing roadblocks, . . . [and determining] why tasks aren’t getting done.” Similarly, when conflict occurs among Chris’s team, she invites members to “share the reasons why . . . [and] let me understand the big picture. Let’s figure out how we can make progress.”

**Why.** Dave uses “sharing the why” with the team members to solve conflicts of opinions. Dave said, “I try to show them. . .what the results could be from one point of view to another.” Frank uses the bigger picture to solve conflict with external groups that is affecting his own team. He conveys his understanding of the conflict and shares the
impact of the conflict with the group. Once they understand the impact of the conflict they are creating, Frank leaves it up to the group to determine a solution. Frank says to his team, “You need to fix this.” Once the group understands the conflict they are creating for Frank’s team, they can create the most suitable solution for everyone’s benefit.

**Perspectives.** Chris said it is important to gain the perspective of team members when attempting to understand the cause of conflict. Gregory said his preference is to have the members “bring it to me as soon as it becomes apparent. . . . I can’t help you if I find out. . . after the conflict is over” to prevent work disruption. In addition to gaining perspective, participants agreed about the importance of using feedback to increase the quality of communication in conflict resolution. Chris prefers to keep the conversation “in as small of a group as possible so that people feel like they’re not having to be reprimanded” to encourage sharing. Conversely, Gregory prefers group feedback, “Communication is probably the best thing for me, . . . getting feedback from team. . . [to] determine what’s the best way to go forward. It also helps us immensely when we do have the conversation.”

**Feedback.** Although Edward advocates for instant feedback and external advice, he feels it is important to limit advice from friends. Edward said, “Nobody’s perfect at everything, so even your friends can only give you so much advice. Look inside yourself (to determine) what you can do to grow.” A growth opportunity for Edward came when he became aware of the impact of his behavior on others.

I had to really think about my words and think about my personality. Frankly, it’s easy for me to scare people. I pulled out that card “I need to be scary to get my point across” while never making it personal.
Edward once got immediate feedback from a team member who said, “I’ve never seen you like that. It’s good to know you can be like that.” For Edward, it was a growth opportunity and “not a card I would play very often” to keep it impactful. Adam alluded to growth when he described the differences between a manager and a leader about conflict resolution.

According to the data, an aspect of being an operational manager is giving feedback while challenging the status quo. Alisia experienced a challenge when she was promoted to operational manager for the team she worked with, sharing, “There was some conflict up front. I just went right up and sat down and started the conversation. . . . We didn’t have any problems after that.” The conflict due to the change in status quo was resolved with “level setting with her and letting her know. . .this is what it was.”

**Manager versus Leader.** Adam was the only participant to clarify his perspective on being a manager versus being a leader and how it impacts the team members:

There are managers, and there’s leaders. I would say our company prefers managers over leaders. What I mean by that is the managers is tactical. They can step in and do the work. . . . They can guide and coach versus a leader thinking strategically. As a leader you need to love people. If you don’t love people, you’re not going to inspire them. . . .[and]get them to do their work. You’ve got to build that trust and rapport.

Adam advocated for inspiring members to “help them find their passion, do the best job” as a leader versus as a manager “beating them up.” According to Adam, knowing the members’ passions can increase trust and the teams’ effectiveness.

**Summary**

This chapter began with a discussion of the methodology chosen for this study. The methodology used for this study was exploratory case study with a purposeful
sample from a list of potential participants provided by the training organization. Data gathered from participants led to the emergence of themes by analyzing individual case studies that corresponded with the research question.

The individual case studies were cross analyzed to create the systemic themes and correlations among interview data. The derived themes for Research Question 1 were (a) Clarity, (b) Ownership, (c) Documentation, and (d) Operational Managers’ Actions and Communication. Themes for Research Question 2 include (a) Communication, (b) Teaming Behavior, (c) Emotions, and (d) Operational Managers’ Behaviors. The themes for Research Question 3 were (a) Types of Conflict, (b) Operational Managers’ Behaviors, and (c) Operational Managers’ Communication. The themes presented in Chapter 4 are applied to the research questions in Chapter 5 where the findings are reviewed and summarized. Conclusions are presented and discussed with clarification of the problem statement of this study. Finally, recommendations for further action are described along with recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore factors impacting employee turnover among operational managers without formal relationships, a factor thought to increase uncertainty with team members. Based on the findings, lack of awareness of operational managers’ behaviors appeared to lead to lack of role clarity, task and relationship conflict, and low-level leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships. This lack of awareness was found to induce task and relationship conflict. This study was designed to explore the disruptive effects of lack of clarity and leaders’ behavior on team members when addressing task conflict by examining the experiences of 10 leaders at Puget Sound Manufacturing Company (PSMC).

The methodology used for this study was exploratory case study using a purposeful sample chosen from a list of potential participants provided by the company’s training organization. Participants were selected if they met the criteria of having at least 1 year of experience as an operational manager with PSMC. The participants were members of both union- and nonunion-represented teams. Participants were interviewed via Zoom (due to COVID-19 restrictions), and the interviews were transcribed. As a result of conceptual coding, three themes emerged: (a) Effects of Role Clarity, (b) Constructive Task Conflict, and (c) Factors Affecting Task and Relationship Conflict.

Chapter 5 is structured using five key areas related to operational managers’ behaviors: (a) discussion of the findings and conclusion for each research question explaining the details of the findings and contrasting the findings to current literature, (b) discussion of the application of findings and conclusions, (c) discussion of the application
of findings to leadership, (d) recommendations for academic research and business leaders, and (e) a concluding statement.

**Discussion of Findings and Conclusions**

Three research questions guided this study. Responses to each question and relevant conclusions are based on themes that emerged from data analysis. Although the themes are described as unique and independent, some themes overlap.

**Research Question 1—Role Clarity and Task Conflict**

Role clarity means employees have a clear understanding of their job and the associated expectations to complete the work. The first research question explored how a lack of role clarity contributes to task conflict and was aligned with Interview Questions 6–11 (see Appendix B). Interview questions were designed to gather data about (a) role definition for team members, (b) clarity of roles through formal documentation and discussions, and (c) resolving role confusion and conflict. This study was conducted to identify factors affecting clarity of roles. The crucial factors that can affect the relationships between team members and operational managers included (a) Clarity of Information being shared, (b) Ownership by Team Members, (c) Documentation, and (d) Operational Managers’ Actions and Communication.

Studies have shown relationships between leaders and members are affected by multiple variables (Newman et al., 2017), including lack of role clarity and communication, which create complexity in interactions resulting in task and relationship conflict. According to González-Romá (2014), when not addressed, task conflict may result in relationship conflict, thus decreasing team performance and effectiveness. The link between lack of role clarity and increased task conflict should prompt the leaders to
increase clarity and improve relationships between operational managers and team members.

**Clarity**

Participants in this study agreed role clarity directly affects the capabilities of the operational managers and team members. According to participants, when teams experience high levels of role clarity, they (a) are more efficient, (b) have better relationships with other members, and (c) collaborate more effectively. Although all participants alluded to the importance of clear roles, approaches varied according to each participant’s preference. Some participants preferred, as Gregory suggested, to “discuss roles only when there appears to be role conflict or . . . team internal issues where members of the team . . . are having interpersonal conflicts.”

Conversely, other operational managers preferred the proactive approach. Edward and Betty prefer to present their teams with a matrix listing each person and their roles and responsibilities. Edward stated,

I make it clear what they do and what winning looks like, . . . that [it] comes down to relationships, . . . what’s really bothering you? Taking the time upfront . . . to build a bridge that later on we can cross whenever there’s conflict.

Betty prefers to use a roadmap for new employees “to ensure they’re meeting some of the skills that are necessary. . . . Ambiguity in the work statement . . . is why they don’t know what they’re doing,” which Betty thinks causes conflict with other team members.

Data also revealed most participants prefer to bring team members together to discuss roles and processes before a conflict causes interpersonal conflicts. The action of bringing members together is encouraged by Rusticus and Justus (2019), who posited the use of established clear roles decreases conflict by guiding team members in setting clear
roles and encouraging collaboration. Rusticus and Justus suggested collaboration prevents members from disengaging and pulling back. In her work as a manager, Alisia chooses to “outline what the team member’s role was” when there is conflict. Adam suggested “constant communication through the year.”

Participants described instances where a group setting is either inappropriate or is not optimal when discussing roles. Adam advocated “bringing some people behind closed doors” to clarify role boundaries, the team member’s goals and objectives, and how they fit into the picture. Participant data were congruent with the work of Hjerto and Kuvaaas (2017), who found team performance could be degraded with the presence of task conflict, which may escalate into relationship conflict if not addressed by the leader.

More specifically, Guenter et al. (2016) suggested escalation of conflict may be due to a lack of role clarity and members defending their positions on the team. When relationship conflict occurs, it degrades team performance and cohesiveness. Addressing role clarity to focus on task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict can productively promote relationships between team members and operational managers, thereby increasing team members’ ownership.

Ownership

According to participants, the relationships between the operational manager and team members can be stronger when members have a sense of ownership. The quality of the relationship can be related to LMX. LMX relationships are not strictly positive or negative, according to Kauppila (2016), although using it properly affects followers’ behaviors.
According to Newman et al. (2017), proper use of LMX and empowerment is significantly related to organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). When leaders use a servant leadership style (Newman et al., 2017), it results in relationships with high-quality LMX followers’ exhibiting higher OCB levels. When operational managers set aside their self-interests and altruistically work for the benefit of their followers, as Newman et al. (2015) advised, they exhibit servant leadership.

According to Newman et al. (2015), when leaders practice servant leadership, members show a higher level of LMX, which may appear as ownership due to “concern for the welfare of the other party (and) return of the favor . . . out of gratitude to the leader and the organization.” Members with higher-quality LMX relationships will go beyond the minimum requirements of their job roles. Participants indicated members tend to act autonomously and include all perspectives to craft the best process and solutions when they have a sense of ownership. This ownership encourages members to clarify roles through collaboration. However, some participants felt too much ownership can create negative consequences such as members going outside their roles and doing too much to support the customer. Although the intention to use intrinsic behaviors to contribute to organizational efficiency fits role theory, crossing role boundaries causes conflict. Most participants agreed the negative effects of crossing role boundaries could be alleviated by using documentation.

Documentation

Participants in this study agreed documentation is a vital aspect of role clarity; however, participants did not all agree that the investment was worth the gains. Newman et al. (2015) suggested role clarity needs to include the approved approach for reaching
goals and expectations. Although most participants prefer to have up-to-date, clearly
documented roles, they identified several drawbacks: (a) documenting roles and
processes takes time, (b) multiple conflicting documents may exist for the same role, or
(c) documents are seldom referred to because they are difficult to understand.

Based on the data analysis, it appears one reason why some operational managers
use documentation while others prefer not to may relate to the use of transactional versus
transactional leadership styles. Transactional leadership is focused on near-term
requirements—the schedule in this case—but transformational leadership is directed
toward the future. According to Bass (1997), transformational leadership helps the team
advance from a position of self-interest to doing the best for the group by enabling,
envisioning, and empowering team members. Seltzer and Bass (1990) suggested
transformational leadership inspires team members to create outcomes exceeding those of
transactional leadership.

Operational managers such as Doug, who focus on completing tasks by schedule,
believe documenting roles “got in the way” of completing work. Conversely, Adam
described documentation as essential. Although Doug sets the expectation to meet the
schedule, Adam sets the expectation of members to create and update documents as
improvements are made in the processes. Adam sets the norm with his team that
documentation is an asset instead of an inconvenience.

Clear, accurate documentation allows for autonomy of team members. According
to Gary, when roles are clear, team members know what they need to accomplish. The
data confirmed how the mindsets and actions of operational managers impact team
behaviors.
Operational Managers’ Actions and Communication

Several categories emerged when analyzing the data about operational managers’ actions and communications: (a) emotional intelligence, (b) teambuilding, (c) use of common goals, and (d) communication. As stated by Segal et al. (2021), “Emotional intelligence . . . is the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in a positive way” (para. 1). The most prevalent example of emotional intelligence comes from conflict resolution techniques, specifically de-escalation of emotions during an encounter. According to several participants, behaviors and communication style are imperative to moderating the behaviors of team members.

Communication. Use of “we” instead of “you” was the most common communication technique identified by participants to promote teambuilding and common goals and to calm team members. Although many participants found this technique simple to employ, Adam has a unique environment with additional challenges in working with union-represented employees. To counter long-standing animosity among team members, Adam uses empathy, grace, and an open heart to defuse a situation.

Adam’s approach allows him to create unique relationships with each member as suggested by Graen et al. (1995) and Grean and Uhl-Bien (1995), who proposed the use of dyadic partnerships. As suggested by Hogg et al. (2005), Adam attempts to encourage members to adopt shared values, attitudes, and goals to create cohesion. Use of empathy builds a bridge that allows the member to see that Adam is not only focused on what the member can do for the company but on the welfare of the member as well. As a result, he
has been able to improve his relationships with representatives of the union and their members.

According to participants, communication expectations of team members include resources, removal of roadblocks, conflict resolution, and sharing information. Hogg et al. (2005) suggested effectively used LMX encourages members to adopt shared values, attitudes, and goals. Participants generally agreed that clearing away roadblocks increases the trust.

Communicating expectations to team members also helps with task clarity, according to the operational managers in this study. As Adam pointed out, conflict always exists, but it can be healthy conflict with “positive tension”—meaning Adam uses conflict to gain multiple perspectives that help members communicate with each other and clarify roles. For Adam, the goal of the operational manager is to allow constructive task conflict and address it before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict.

**Actions.** Operational managers’ behaviors also influence their ability to de-escalate conflict. Burt approaches conflict by “staying calm . . . and holding my ground.” Other participants said they advocate for flexibility to respond to members’ needs and forge relationships upfront. By knowing members’ typical behaviors, operational managers can clue into nonverbal communication and behavioral changes that may indicate conflict.

Several participants said they use servant leadership to support members. According to Newman et al. (2015), servant leadership happens when leaders suppress their self-interest and work altruistically to benefit their members. Newman et al. also identified the positive effect of servant leadership on OCB through LMX relationships.
Multiple operational managers use servant leadership and focus on OCB to support customers and the common goals of the organization.

**Research Question 2—Constructive Task Conflict**

The second research question was aligned with Interview Questions 12–14 (see Appendix B). Interview questions were designed to gather data about how leaders allow constructive task conflict before it becomes destructive relationship conflict. Factors that affect relationship conflict were also examined in this study. The pivotal areas that affect the relationship between team members and operational managers included (a) communication, (b) teaming behaviors, (c) emotions, and (d) operational managers’ behaviors.

Studies have shown task and relationship functions are interrelated. According to Northouse (2016), task and relationship functions can affect each other positively or negatively, depending on the team member’s attitude. The leader sets the expectations through their skills and the use of an appropriate function that changes depending on the group’s needs (Northouse). Conflict will not resolve itself. According to Chang and Zelihic (2014), conflict must be attended to in a non-self-serving manner before it erodes the team’s success and camaraderie. To facilitate conflict resolution, operational managers need to be aware of high task conflict situations and adjust their communication accordingly.

**Communication**

The amount and clarity of communication can impact the behavior of members, as evident from the data of this study. According to operational managers in this study, reinforcing goals helps resolve conflict by focusing on higher-level goals. Edward
suggested using the ladder of inference (Mindtools, n.d.; see Figure 3) to remove communication bias. The ladder of inference shows the factors affecting a person’s perceptions.

The ladder of inference illustrates how perceptions affect the information received by team members. Sharing the ladder of inference with members gives the operational manager the opportunity to explore any biases or differences in perception among members. Several participants spoke about the importance of clarifying the meaning in a message.

All participants agreed setting expectations and allowing for feedback improves communication with team members. According to Northouse (2016), norms need to be clear and concrete standards that include set expectations and feedback. Operational managers should lay a foundation for changing norms by setting expectations of openness to experience and conflict resolution to reduce team conflict (Bradley et al., 2013).

Participants identified active listening as important when allowing constructive feedback. According to Blanchard (2010), the use of high-supportive, low-directive behavior promotes two-way communication and active listening by the leader. Active listening promotes understanding each other’s perspectives by using paraphrasing, among other actions, to clarify the meaning of statements. DeChurch et al. (2013) concluded conflict can be either positive or negative depending on the context. The desire for personal gain may drive negative conflict. When everyone is open with each other and exhibiting respectful behavior, team efficacy increases (Rusticus & Justus, 2019).

Unaddressed task conflict can become relationship conflict if the focus of the conflict moves from the process to the individual performing the task. According to
Hjerto and Kuvaas (2017), the leader should focus conflict on the process or task instead of the individual as soon as possible. According to Guenter et al. (2016), if left unaddressed, members who attempt to protect their position or ego will likely escalate the conflict. Data from this study indicated clear communication promotes constructive conflict and enhances teaming behaviors.

**Teaming Behavior**

Overwhelmingly, participants believed the most important factor leading to positive teaming behavior is the use of collaboration and compromise. Collaboration helps the team refocus from conflict with the individual to team goals. For Hogg et al. (2005), social identity theory can be useful in collaboration because it focuses on the strength of identification with the group. To strengthen individual relationships, Marstand et al. (2017) encouraged the use of LMX to influence members’ social identities within the organization. Being aware of the emotions of both individuals and the team can increase the quality of communication.

**Emotions**

Participants described their experiences with their own emotions and with those of team members. As emotions change and conflict arises, the operational manager needs to know the typical behavior of team members to be able to determine whether to intervene. Lam et al. (2018) emphasized the quality of the LMX exchange is in the dyadic nature of the relationship based on resources and emotional quality. Being aware of the emotional change in members gives operational managers an opportunity to use active listening to constructively find conflict solutions. Burt described the importance of remaining relaxed and calm and realizing the member may “not be thinking right.”
Awareness of behavior changes gives the operational manager time to act proactively to constructively address conflict before it becomes destructive. Many operational managers described their awareness of subtle behavior changes among team members, but some reported having difficulty reading others. Doug suggested his lack of awareness of behavior changes among team members is the result of his focus on running the meeting and meeting the schedule instead of observing the group dynamic.

Such lack of awareness may be a result of transactional leadership (focus on tasks) rather than transformational leadership (focus on soft skills). According to Malos (2012), by focusing on the emotions, being inspirational, and modeling the desired behavior, the operational manager can help shift the perspectives of members away from a focus on individuals to a focus on the larger vision. As Bass (2017) concluded, transformational leadership is likely to emerge in times of uncertainty or turbulence. According to participants in this study, much of the success or failure in constructively addressing task conflict results from the operational manager’s behavior.

**Operational Managers’ Behavior**

Operational managers may not be aware of their behaviors as they attempt to forge relationships with new team members (González-Romá, 2014). For Biddle (1986), the operational manager sets the norms for other members of the social system to follow and encourages team members’ constructive behaviors. The causes of conflict often arise from a lack of self-awareness in the leader (Mo & Shi, 2017).

When operational managers are unaware of their behavior, they confuse incongruence between espoused standards and behaviors and actual behaviors. Several participants suggested operational managers should be aware of their behaviors and
proactively build relationships to counter conflict. By building relationships, Betty can actively listen to concerns and determine the intention of members instead of jumping to a conclusion about “who’s right.” Due to her proactive relationship building, Betty believes her team members trust her.

According to Hogg et al. (2005), relationship building instills trust, respect, and internalization of the operational managers’ goals. Betty described the difficulty of becoming too close or too trusting with team members. To counter the influence of trusting a member’s opinion, Northouse (2016) suggested these actions for leaders when conflict arises: (a) systematically define the issue, (b) determine the root cause, (c) identify the correct course to solve it, and (d) check to see if the solution worked as expected. This process is known as the Deming (1986) plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle (see Figure 1). Following this process allows the operational manager to remove their bias from the conflict. For participants in this study, following through on communication and actions of operational managers increases trust.

Participants described ways they moderate their behavior to decrease emotions during conflict. The use of emotional intelligence (EQ) was described by Segal et al. (2021), who stated operational managers can moderate their emotions to (a) decrease stress, (b) empathize with others, (c) increase effective communication, and (d) “overcome challenges and defuse conflict” (para. 1). By managing the emotions present in conflict, operational managers can address the cause of an existing task conflict before it becomes relationship conflict.
Research Question 3—Positively Disrupting Team Task Conflict

Research Question 3 was aligned with Interview Questions 15–18 (see Appendix B). Interview questions were designed to gather data about methods to positively disrupt team task conflict and prevent it from becoming interpersonal conflict. Identifying underlying factors that affect task conflict—that may appear as relationship conflict—was desired in this study. The pivotal areas that affect relationships include (a) types of conflict, (b) operational managers’ behaviors, and (c) operational managers’ communication. Studies have shown task and relationship functions are interrelated. According to participants in this study, conflict appearing as relationship conflicts are based on unaddressed task conflict.

Task Conflict

Literature indicates conflict is an ongoing issue that needs to be addressed from both a team and an organizational perspective (Lee et al., 2017; Northouse, 2016). A source of conflict, suggested by Chris, is members not being able to express themselves. According to Chris, when members do not feel as if they have been heard, they will be less likely to move forward. Chris’s assertion is supported by González-Romá (2014), who concluded, when not addressed, task conflict may result in a relationship conflict that decreases team performance and effectiveness.

Other factors impacting task conflict included (a) unclear role definition, (b) conflict of opinions, and (c) clarity about the cause of conflict. According to Adam, conflict arises from ambiguity in role definition. Yadav and Kumar (2017) suggested conflicts derived from unclear roles that promote apathy. To counter apathy and conflict of opinions, Dave chooses to bring people together with the intent of seeing the
perspectives of others. To reduce the chance of task conflict developing into relationship conflict, Fred encourages his team to “honor the opinions of others” even when they cannot agree on a solution.

Adam suggested starting with understanding the background of the conflict. For Adam, conflict can be positive, such as bringing to light diversity of thought. Gregory extended Northouse’s (2016) emphasis on determining a conflict’s root cause a step further by sharing conflict details with his team members so everyone has knowledge of the various perspectives and can help identify the best solution. When the operational manager does not address task conflict, the conflict can evolve into relationship conflict.

**Relationship Conflict**

Most managers agree relationship conflict is more difficult to address than task conflict. Hjerto and Kuvaas (2017) recommended the operational manager focus on the process or task rather than on the individual members as soon as possible during a conflict. Guenter et al. (2016) cautioned against the risk of unaddressed task conflict, which can lead to a personal conflict if not approached early on. Participants offered multiple ways to encourage members to engage with them and help identify the cause of relationship conflicts. Burt uses an open-door policy for members to come to him and share their frustration before it becomes a larger conflict.

Other operational managers described building bridges with their members. Doug said he finds bridge building to be particularly helpful with union members who have heightened emotions and relationship conflict due to long-standing animosity with the company. Doug has found success redirecting the focus from the individual relationship
to the process. As a result, he finds a way to get the members to work together successfully for the benefit of the team.

**Operational Managers’ Behavior**

As evident from Doug’s experience, the operational manager’s behavior can influence team members. As Mo and Shi (2017) concluded, leader awareness and communication styles drove members’ behaviors. According to Hajela (2015), operational managers can set the expectations for team members to positively influence team behaviors.

Adam described his experience with team members as positive when he approaches them with the “right reasons— [that is] helping them grow . . . and truly wanting to work through those conflicts for the betterment of the organization.” Conversely, when organizations ignore how operational managers’ behavior impacts members, they experience negative results in the quality of relationships. According to Bradley et al. (2013), operational managers set expectations for openness to conflict resolution that sets the foundation for changing the norms, which, in turn, reduces team conflict.

For Gregory, it is important to exercise self-control so as not to be drawn into the relationship conflict. Instead, Gregory gives “them the opportunity to cool down. I don’t mind letting people vent, but it can’t affect me emotionally because that affects my ability to lead the team.” Once emotions calm down, participants said the quality of communication improves.
Operational Managers’ Communication

Participants agreed communication is a strong influencer of their relationship with members. According to Todorova et al. (2014), when task conflict is high, managers and leaders are perceived as more confrontational. As the level of task conflict decreases, team members more readily accept information from leaders (González-Romá, 2014).

Task conflict increases with the application of nonuniform messages from leaders. However, when members, including managers, are open with each other with respect, team efficacy increases (Rusticus & Justus, 2019). Frank’s response echoed the conclusion of Rusticus and Justus when he said, “You need to . . . maintain respect. I disagree . . . but I still honor your opinion.”

Sharing the bigger picture and reason why members need to perform tasks enhances communication. By sharing the bigger picture, the operational manager puts the request into context. As Zeugner-Roth et al. (2015) advised, seeing the big picture allows members to see their position in the context of the larger organization. Dave encourages sharing the “why” in the context of a conflict by first understanding the conflict and then pointing out the impact of the conflict on the team members. Once team members understand, he gives the team control to devise the solution.

Ruvoldt (2016) differentiated transparency and clarity:

Transparency is to provide visibility, knowledge and information. When the goal is transparency, its purpose is to give the other party a full set of information. It does not seek to make that information actionable or to expect the person to whom the visibility is given to do anything other than to receive the information. (para. 4)
In comparison:

Clarity is to provide context, understanding and precision in the communication. When the goal is clarity, its purpose is giving the other party a full context in which to grasp the information and make it usable. It does not seek to provide information for the purpose of providing it, but rather to deepen the comprehension of the person to whom the context is given often allowing them to change their approach. (para. 5)

The use of transparency was observed in the data as matrices were created to convey schedules, tasks, and who is responsible to complete the tasks. Participants used clarity to help identify gaps in processes or points where the process could use improvement. Participants also used clarity to help members achieve common understanding through formal methods like workshops. Carl uses clarity from workshops to prompt team members to increase precision of the details for roles and boundaries, which reduces confusion. According to participants, sharing business goals and objectives shows members how their tasks support organizational goals.

As Hjerto and Kuvaas (2017) concluded, data from this study also suggest team performance decreases when related to (a) lack of leader awareness and communication and (b) task and relationship conflict. Findings related to role clarity, social identity, and LMX are reviewed in the following sections.

**Application of Findings**

The general problem addressed in this study was how employee turnover among operational managers creates uncertainty within the team. Other issues that appeared throughout the study were the impacts of lack of role clarity, destructive task conflict, and the behaviors of operational managers on team members. Theories related to this study include role clarity, social identity, and LMX.
**Role Clarity**

Lack of role clarity was shown to have a direct negative impact on team members, causing frustration, confusion, and decreased efficiency. Conversely, high levels of role clarity indicated better relationships with other members, greater collaboration, and efficiency. In this study, barriers to high-quality role definition included (a) time constraints, (b) too few or too many documents, (c) out-of-date documents, and (d) documents that contained conflicting information.

Yadav and Kumar (2017) suggested role clarity aids in defining priorities and training related to a task. Determining processes and sharing them at PSMC is accomplished using formal role definition documentation. Adam suggested documentation of roles for clarity is “critical . . . for conflict resolution.” The lack of documentation, according to Adam, “creates confusion which can lead to people not speaking up, which can in turn, decrease trust across the team.”

**Task and Relationship Conflict**

According to Guenter et al. (2016), an escalation from task conflict to role conflict may be due to lack of role clarity. Role conflict creates an environment in which the work cannot be completed as desired. As Hjerto and Kuvaas (2017) concluded, when task conflicts are not addressed, over time they can morph into relationship conflict, further eroding the efforts of team members. When task conflict is ignored, it can lead to relationship conflict. To sufficiently address conflict, operational managers should converse with those involved in the conflict to determine the cause, assess whether it is task or relationship related, and determine a solution accordingly.
It is beneficial for operational managers to understand the factors that may be affecting members and causing conflict. By knowing the outside influences, the operational manager can offer empathy and compassion. The operational manager may be able to share, with the members’ permission, details of the conflict that will influence other team members to offer understanding and empathy instead of anger. As Chris shared:

I have to remind other team members, without divulging confidences . . . the person you’re having an issue with has other things going on in their life, that is impacting their attitude at work, and you have to be mindful of that . . . so they can offer the other person a little bit more grace.

Participants suggested the use of collaboration when the conflict is task related. Collaboration allows all perspectives to be considered and the best solution to be created. Participants described collaboration in multiple scenarios: (a) a dyad, (b) a small group, (c) an informal group setting, or (d) a formal workshop. The choice is according to the operational managers’ preference. Discussing task conflict as a larger group promotes understanding and empathy. As Gregory suggested:

It helps us immensely when we do have the conversation. . . . They are relying on other people to get their job done. . . . It’s making people understand why they’re not getting what they need . . . and not being held to . . . things outside their control.

**Operational Managers’ Behavior**

Operational managers’ behavior can directly affect team members. Having self-awareness, self-control, and empathy suggests to the member that the operational manager has their best interest at heart. Burt advocated for use of servant leadership: “[Don’t think] of yourself as the boss. Don’t think of yourself as the overlord. You’re a team, you work with them, and you also work for them to an extent.” Betty alluded to
servant leadership, suggesting “taking on their cause” is important. According to Hogg et al. (2005), effective use of LMX encourages trust, respect, and obligations. By following through on commitments and being consistent, the operational manager can achieve trust from the members and lead them to success.

Findings in this study related to the themes are: (1) role clarity was affected by the quality of defined roles, ownership by team members, quality of the documentation, and operational managers’ actions and communication; (2) the factors affecting constructive task conflict were the operational managers’ communication styles and quality, team behaviors, emotional intelligence, and operational managers’ behaviors; and (3) task conflict could be mediated before it escalates to relationship conflict by being aware of the types of conflict, operational managers’ behaviors, and communication. González-Romá (2014), stated, when not addressed, task conflict may result in relationship conflict, thus decreasing team performance and effectiveness.

This qualitative study was designed to explore the impact of the actions of operational managers at PSMC on role clarity, LMX, team task conflict, and relationship conflict. Data from participants were used to answers the research questions and to help address the problem. Specific recommendations are presented later in this chapter.

**Application to Leadership**

The specific leadership problem was directly addressed by findings from this study. The problem of this study related to PSMC, where relationship skills and task clarity were lacking among operational managers, leading to confusion about roles and interpersonal conflict. It is unclear how leaders’ behaviors may have driven team members’ behaviors. All participants described the importance of effective
communication using transparency and clarity. Participants also suggested the use of relationship building to increase trust with members. The theories of role clarity, social identity, and LMX were evident in the data.

**Role Clarity**

According to participants, lack of role clarity directly affects team members, not only by creating task conflict but by increasing relationship conflict when task conflict is not addressed. Using role theory, Yadav and Kumar (2017) concluded intrinsic behavior, apart from explicit rewards, contributes to organizational efficiency. Accordingly, data from this study indicated poorly defined roles and lack of boundaries negatively affects team members. Contributing to lack of role clarity is insufficient documentation. One participant reported he is a “foe” of documenting roles, stating, “If I documented everything on my projects, I wouldn’t be able to get anything done.”

According to participants, as task conflict is allowed to continue, it leads to relationship conflict. It would serve leaders in general to address task conflict early. Operational managers can use the Deming cycle to (a) identify the cause of a conflict, (b) collaborate to determine the solution, (c) implement the solution, and (d) revisit the process to ascertain whether it solved the issue. As a follow-up, the operational manager should communicate with those involved to assure the relationship aspect has not deteriorated.

The operational manager can leverage the knowledge of existing task conflict to resolve it before it turns into destructive relationship conflict by enhancing role clarity. By shifting the culture of operational managers—from seeing the time invested in role
clarity from an interruption in their day to a current and future benefit—the organization can set the foundation for a more efficient workforce in the near and distant future.

**Social Identity**

Although this study did not explicitly address in-group and out-group behaviors, it did relate to social identity because participants described how their identity with the group could be affected by role clarity, task, and relationship conflicts. As Hogg et al. (2005) emphasized, with social identity, individuals experience a sense of oneness. The sense of oneness benefits the organization when members want to do what is best for the organization in conjunction with transformational leadership (Bass, 1997). Although the sense of oneness was beneficial to most participants, negative aspects were also reported.

Adam described his experiences with the negative side of social identity when relating to some union members. This result was surprising, due to a lack of similar negative experiences reported by other participants. In the case of Adam’s work group, the social identity of members indicated they were the in-group and those who did not belong to the union were members of the out-group.

Similarly, Burt said, “There are conflicts . . . that started long before most of us . . . were even born.” Consequently, Both Adam and Burt experienced high levels of animosity from the union members. To counter the animosity, the operational managers built dyadic relationships that appear to have been helpful. Approaching members with an attitude of cohesiveness and inclusivity allowed members the opportunity to have their perspectives recognized.

Awareness of the social identities of the team members allows the operational manager to reinforce the positive identity by focusing members on the common goals of
the group. As some participants suggested, targeting the process instead of the person allows members to, as Chris said, “move past emotional roadblocks.” Segal et al. (2021) supported the use of emotional intelligence to “manage . . . emotions in a positive way.” By focusing on the bigger picture of the team goals, the operational manager can mitigate individuals’ emotional attachments.

**Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)**

LMX was apparent in the responses from participants. Forging dyadic relationships contributed to the emotional quality of the exchange. As Betty suggested, by fostering individual relationships, operational managers can more fully understand their members provide the necessary resources and emotional support.

Newman et al. (2015) described servant leadership as leaders suspending their self-interest to altruistically work for the benefit of members. According to Chris, when leaders use servant leadership, members respond by acting in the best interest of the operational manager and, therefore, the organization. By building high-quality LMX relationships, operational managers have an opportunity to use servant leadership with LMX, as suggested by Newman et al., to create high-level LMX relationships with followers, resulting in higher OCB levels.

In this study, the elements of role clarity, social identity, and LMX are clearly interlaced. Although the full impact of the combination on operational managers needs to be more fully studied to be understood, this study revealed some of the factors affecting the relationship between operational managers and members.
Recommendations for Action

After reviewing interview transcripts, more opportunities emerged to explore other potential aspects of the study. The first recommendation is that operational managers should be more aware of the impact their behavior has on members, both positive and negative, so they can mitigate the effect. An initial avenue of exploration, not included in this study, is the effect of formal relationship training for operational managers. While gathering resources before the study began, the training organization communicated that operational managers were all given formal, standard, consistent relationship training from the Functional Excellence training organization, which was followed by mentoring and recurring meetings where operational managers could discuss their issues with other managers.

Once the study began, however, the training organization indicated they did not provide formal classroom training. Instead, Functional Excellence provides a list of classes from which operational managers can choose depending on their preferences. Participants indicated they were not given mentors. Instead, some participants sought out mentors, but others did not. This line of inquiry was not pursued with participants because it was outside the scope of this study. The available training classes offered some relationship (soft skills) training; however, this training was optional for operational managers. Participants also indicated recurring meetings were inconsistent, which was an important aspect of the study because the factors of formal training that may have led to potential impact on the effectiveness of the team and operational manager were not included. The relationship between operational managers using knowledge from formal
training and their actions about how operational managers use LMX, roles, and social identity is not known.

The expectation of the organization, according to participants, is the ability to move operational managers to any team within PSMC. When a new operational manager enters the group, there is an adjustment period when team members acclimate to the style and expectations of the operational manager. The expectation at PSMC is for operational managers to quickly adapt to the new team without interrupting their productivity. With standardized training, it is speculated operational managers could adjust to a team more quickly, due to team members knowing what to expect with each new manager.

As a result of the information provided by Functional Excellence, the scope of the study was modified. The lack of formal, standardized training was suspected to affect the abilities of operational managers due to inconsistent knowledge and approaches to new teams when the operational manager is moved within the organization.

It would be interesting to explore how the lack of training affects operational managers and, ultimately, their team members. With the lack of training, operational managers rely on their experiences and knowledge to lead teams. The result of the inconsistencies may cause team members to take longer to align with an operational manager as they adjust to a different style of leadership. These inconsistencies may lead to confusion and insecurity among team members.

Being able to follow this line of questioning would have contributed to a clearer understanding of how the lack of formal training affects the relationship between the operational manager and team members (LMX). The additional information could have also lent clarity to how the inconsistency affects the roles of team members and their
social identity. The roles may be muddied when operational managers’ expectations change the status quo of the team members. The social identity of the members may experience flux with the introduction of a new operational manager. If the incoming operational managers’ approach is not consistent with the previous operational managers’ approach, the team may feel fragmented, causing confusion among members and decreasing their efficiency. Obtaining additional information in this area would have enriched the analysis of this study.

Another area that could have fortified this study is the impact of varying cultures within the organization, specifically the union culture. The impact of the long-standing union culture in some groups, as reported by participants supporting a union-represented team, is unknown. It became evident the union culture impacts the ability of operational managers’ efforts. It is unknown how operational managers can use the aspects of leadership to positively enhance relationships with union members. The union culture is unique with its own history, tendencies, and norms. Delving further into this topic would have provided a more detailed understanding of how operational managers can use their skills to positively disrupt conflicts and improve relationships with union members.

Additional questions that could have been asked include the following: How did the union culture impact your ability to lead? Did relationship conflict with the union members lead to task conflict? What actions were helpful? What actions were not helpful? What would you have done differently when dealing with conflict with a union represented team member? Understanding the dynamics between union members and the operational manager would not only have added richness to this study, but it would have
also set the foundation for a future study to delve more deeply into factors affecting LMX, role clarity, and social identity.

In addition, it would serve the organization to investigate how operational managers interact with the team members. One union’s members exhibited debate as their form of confrontation, while the other was reported as the members threatening physical harm. In order to get past the resistance, the operational managers need to gain skills in de-escalation techniques to find the root cause of the issue which may be rooted in the process.

The next recommendation relates to the impact of role clarity on team members. Role documentation was shown to have both positive and negative impacts on team members. To increase the positive impact, operational managers should determine the return on investment for the time spent writing and updating roles for clarity. A balance can be struck between enough time and details in the documents versus too much time taken away from completing work.

It would also serve the organization to review documents to determine what needs to be kept and what can be discarded. With the information being kept, a determination should be made about what needs to be updated, consolidated, or left as is. Updated roles could guide members to better complete their work and have clearer boundaries for their responsibility. By having clear roles, task conflicts should decrease, thereby reducing the chance of relationship conflict.

While this study was focused on the perspectives of the operational managers, it would be beneficial to analyze the perceptions of the team members to see if they differ from those of the operational manager. By analyzing both the operational manager and
the team members perceptions, the organization will be able to determine the differences in perception and the cause. Data from this study will indicate whether the differences are due to the current environment, or if it is engrained in the culture.

The last line of questioning explored in this study was how the leadership style and preferences of the operational manager affected the team. Multiple avenues could have been explored: How do the organizational and group cultures affect the decisions of operational managers? Why do some managers lean toward servant leadership and transformational leadership, but others focus on task and transactional leadership? How likely is the operational manager to change their style from task to relationship focused? What resources would the participants need to increase their capacity to use both transformational and transactional leadership? Why does it appear the participants who used transformational leadership were more likely to embrace conflict resolution?

There is one final recommendation for the organization. Relationship conflict needs to be investigated to determine whether it is an unrelated personal conflict or a task conflict so it can be addressed appropriately. Relationship conflict can have many causes. Social identity may be a factor in relationship conflict. Strong social identity will appear, as suggested by Hogg et al. (2005), as individuals possessing a sense of oneness. Strengthening the teams’ social identity will prompt them to resolve conflict constructively in the best interest of the group before it becomes destructive task conflict. Team members will be more willing to collaborate and create solutions if they have a deep sense of social identity.
Recommendations for Further Research

Although suggestions for future research are related to PSMC, several suggestions could be applicable to other organizations and industries. A comprehensive, long-term study within this company could identify factors about union relations and how they affect LMX, role theory, and social identity. As data were analyzed, the impact of union culture on members was a surprise. Behaviors of members based on union culture interfered with the effectiveness of the operational manager. Union culture is unique. It appears to be based on long-standing animosity between union members and company leaders. The animosity is said to be based on past grievances that have been perpetuated through the decades, factors that may or may not be currently valid.

An expanded study with union members, union leaders, and the company’s leadership to understand each faction’s culture would provide clarity. Increasing the study to include different geographical locations and nonunion-represented members would provide insight into the differences among cultures within the company that may be leveraged to create a comprehensive plan to improve relationships throughout the company. Comparing union-represented and nonunion-represented members may give clues about how to repair the relationship between the company and union members by leveraging solutions from other groups.

In addition, a study can be conducted to understand the differences between operational managers who lead union-represented teams, and those who lead non-represented teams to analyze how operational managers’ approach conflict and relationship building. The study will illuminate the existing challenges and may clarify if
they are no longer relevant. If relevant, determine how can it be addressed so it is not conflicting with the members.

Studying the cases from the perspective of the individual could increase understanding of the drivers behind their beliefs and behaviors. Such a study could illuminate the causes and validity of the animosity so it can be addressed. Findings from this case study may provide a roadmap for providing information with which to build a bridge between union members and leadership. By analyzing geographical locations, union-represented, and nonunion-represented team members, focused solutions may be created for each distinct environment.

Another topic for future study is the use of formal training. A study could be conducted with groups outside PSMC who have received formal training. Such a study could show how formal training changes the effectiveness of operational managers, how well they move between groups, how quickly the groups become comfortable with the new operational manager, and how to better acclimatize team members to the operational managers to minimize disruption in productivity.

A study to broaden the knowledge of leadership styles would add to the body of knowledge about how an individual’s leadership style affects LMX, roles, and social identity. This study asked rudimentary questions about how operational managers approach conflict, but it was not in-depth enough to match preferences of operational managers with the efficacy of the approach to conflict resolution. In this study, most participants chose either transactional or transformational leadership styles and have used the single style throughout their careers.
A future study may verify the alignment—reported in this study—among those who use transactional leadership, their aversion to relationship conflict, and their use of in-group and out-group behavior. Understanding the drivers of operational managers’ chosen styles may offer insight into why some operational managers are more comfortable with relationship conflict than others. Avoidance of relationship conflict may lead to creation of in-groups and out-groups seen in social identity. Although it was not a focus of this study, future studies would benefit by more thoroughly researching how the use of in-group and out-group attitudes affect LMX and role clarity in addition to social identity.

**Concluding Statement**

At the inception of this study, the goal was to identify factors related to role clarity, constructive task conflict, and destructive relationship conflict through the lens of role clarity, social identity, and LMX. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the impact of the actions of operational managers in PSMC on role clarity, LMX, team task conflict, and relationship conflict. Based on the analysis of findings from this study and a review of relevant literature, role clarity, social identity, and LMX were found to affect team members. The factors contributing to negative effects related in this study were complex and overlapped among the theories and themes.

The lack of role clarity led to task conflict among team members. Incomplete, out-of-date, conflicting documentation, and unclear boundaries all were found to contribute to task conflict. When left unattended, task conflict was shown to intensify to relationship conflict. Analysis showed clarity of boundaries and expectations was helpful in decreasing task conflict.
Ownership by team members was beneficial. Ownership appeared as autonomy in some cases, whereby members collaborated to determine how to solve task conflict before it became destructive relationship conflict. Team members who possessed current, clear documentation appeared to have lower levels of task conflict. Those who did not have accurate documentation were more likely to experience relationship conflict.

The factors contributing to constructive task conflict were found to be high quality communication, team behaviors (OCB), emotions, and the operational managers’ behaviors. All participants agreed the quality of communication directly affects the level of constructive feedback. Communication between operational managers and team members increases the level of OCB. As members are brought together to discuss issues, all perspectives are openly discussed with the intent of understanding each other’s views.

Typically, relationship conflict was addressed by the operational manager with those involved. Attending to emotions related to task conflict allows operational managers to decrease destructive emotions and actions and encourages members to find constructive solutions. Further, when relationship conflict is related to an outstanding task conflict, operational managers reported finding greater success by changing the focus from the individuals to the broken process.

Overshadowing the behaviors of team members was the influence and impact of operational managers’ behaviors. Operational managers’ behaviors and communication were found to have a positive effect when managers use transparency and clarity. When team members have a clear understanding of the bigger picture, how they fit in, and the expectations, they are more likely to work through conflict constructively to the benefit of the organization. While working through the conflict, operational managers reported
increased success with the use of emotional intelligence. By moderating their emotions, they are better able to connect with members, model the desired behaviors, and defuse the situation.

Analysis of the collected data was intended to answer the three research questions from the operational managers’ perspective:

RQ1: How does a lack of role clarity contribute to task conflict?

RQ2: How do leaders allow for constructive task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict?

RQ3: What are the best ways to positively disrupt team task conflict without it turning into interpersonal relationship conflict?

Data showed the importance of clear, concise, and accurate roles, a positive social identity, and high-quality LMX relationships. Leaders must be nimble to modify their behavior and guide the team through conflict positively. Without the use of role clarity and constructive task and relationship conflict, the potential of the operational managers will not be realized.

In a competitive, dynamic environment where operational managers are moved to different teams, formal, standard training becomes imperative. With the use of standard training, operational managers will possess similar knowledge and skillsets. The skillsets will be useful to the managers as they interact with new team members. Team members will experience the same principles with different operational managers.

With increased training, members’ efficacy should increase because team members will not be spending as much time level-setting with new operational managers. New operational managers will be able to approach members with the same skillset, even
though they will need to modify the usage depending on team members’ needs. Using formal training for operational managers, accurate role clarity, precise communication, operational managers’ behaviors, and conflict resolution, the organization will be able to resolve task and relationship conflict before it becomes destructive relationship conflict, thereby improving the teams’ efficacy and ensuring continued success for the organization.
REFERENCES


https://doi.org/10.35808/ERSJ%2F679

https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843(91)90016-U


Development of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25
years: Applying a multi-level, multi-domain perspective. *Leadership Quarterly,*

Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical
framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your house.
*Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting education, practice, and research,*
4(2), 12–26. https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.9


Guenter, H., Emmerik, H. V., Schreurs, B., Kuypers, T., Iterson, A. V., & Notelaers, G.
(2016). When task conflict becomes personal. *Small Group Research, 47*(5), 569–
604. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496416667816

Güney, S., & R. Taylor, J. (2014). Rethinking the role of roadmaps in strategic planning:
A close-up analysis from project development in corporate R&D. *Qualitative
Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal,* 9(4),
308–331. https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-08-2012-1090

Hackman, J. R. (2012). From causes to conditions in group research: Causes and
https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1774

https://doi.org/10.1108/ICT-04-2015-0031


https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206317741190

https://doi.org/10.5465/255511


https://doi.org/10.7748/ldp.18.8.28.e1664

https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=78c1abc6-45fa-4edb-96b7-13831a7b07e7%40redis


Ruvoldt, M. (2016, April 29). *Is your goal transparency or clarity? Because they are not the same.* LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/your-goal-transparency-clarity-because-same-margaret-ruvoldt


Young, G. R., II. (2019). *Training staff’s experiences, perceived needs, and suggestions for professional development in a military training organization* (Publication No. 13901718) [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida]. ProQuest One Academic.

APPENDIX A

Demographic Questions

1. Are you currently a team leader?

2. If not currently in the position, how long ago were you a team leader?

3. How long have you been a team leader?

4. With which group(s) do you work?

5. Is your group represented by a union?

6. How many team members did you lead?
APPENDIX B

Participant Interview Questions

General questions

1. Please tell me about your position as a team leader
2. What do you like about being a team leader?
3. What support do you receive as team leader?
4. What support do you not receive that would have been helpful?
5. What other support and resources would help you to be effective?

Research Question #1: How does a lack of role clarity contribute to task conflict?

6. How do you see the role definition for your team members?
7. How detailed are roles documented?
8. How often do you discuss roles with team members?
9. What actions do you take when you have team members who are confused about roles and responsibilities?
10. What actions do you take when you have team members who disagree with roles?
11. How do you address confusion about roles and responsibilities?

Research Question #2: How do leaders allow for constructive task conflict before it becomes a destructive relationship conflict?

12. What are some examples of actions you took when you had to confront team members with differing opinions about how to complete their work?
13. What are the most common ways that you have engaged employees when dealing with conflict relating to completing a task?
14. How do you know when to step in to address the conflict?

Research Question #3: What are the best ways to positively disrupt team task conflict without it turning into interpersonal relationship conflict?

15. What is your greatest success in addressing conflict?

16. What is your greatest challenge addressing conflict?

17. What works best for you to address task conflict with team members?

18. What else do you want me to know about your experiences in properly addressing task conflict as a team leader from your experiences?