

Two Workplace Behaviors to Effectively Navigate Conflict in Today's Workplace

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Abstract

Over one-third of employees encounter workplace conflict on a daily basis (Moody, 2022), but most are not equipped with the skills to navigate these challenges effectively, ultimately costing both them and their organization valuable time and resources. While there are many dual concern models that examine conflict management styles (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983; Thomas, 1992), they do not offer strategies about how to navigate conflict well or when to approach potential difficulties. The current study explores two emergent behaviors – *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* – by asking business professionals to tell real-life stories about these behaviors at work. *Engage the Mess* is an effective means to constructively engage conflict through respectfully working toward an outcome. *Suppress the Noise* actively avoids the aspects of conflict that disrupt resolution and confuse a situation to intentionally focus on solving the problem. The results of the current study suggest that rather than pitting employees against each other to determine whether self or other's needs are more important, conflict resolution should focus on working together. We, therefore, propose a revision to Desivilya and Eizen's (2005) framework in two distinct ways. First, we retain the two original destructive styles (Avoidance and Dominating), we but add a third style of Defensive. Second, we replace the two constructive styles with *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*. To improve workplace conflict, employees should practice applying these constructive behaviors to achieve more effective outcomes.

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Introduction

Over a third of employees encounter daily conflict and managers spend four hours each week managing it – that equates to almost 10% of their time (Moody, 2022). Employees often find work-related tension uncomfortable and stress-inducing (Shaw et al., 2011) and many employees conflate “navigating” conflict with “eliminating” it due to conflict’s disruptive impact on productivity, operational effectiveness, and morale (CPP Global, 2008). While some employees may prefer to avoid confrontation, evading conflict altogether is costly (Turaga, 2015). If conflict is not resolved within the workplace, it often results in decreases in morale, increases in turnover, fissures in team functioning, and financial loss due to expensive lawsuits or dispute resolution. The most common detriment of unresolved conflict is disruption of communication between employees that can directly impact the efficiency or effectiveness of a company’s products or services (Lim & Yazdanifard, 2012).

Yet, when conflict is handled effectively, 75% of employees report that they have observed positive outcomes such as increased innovation, a better understanding of others, and improved problem solving that would not have occurred if conflict was absent (CPP Global, 2008). For decades, scholars have recognized that controversy, when navigated well, stimulates creative decision-making and empathy (Liu et al., 2022; Tjosvold et al., 2020) increased employee commitment, superior customer service (Tjosvold, 1998), and improved relationships (Tjosvold, 1984, 2006). During the mid-point of a project, high-performing teams are likely to engage in heavy debate, which allows them to expand their perspective and leverage the synergy of diverse team members working together (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Furthermore, teams perform best when there is moderate task-related conflict (Jehn, 1994; Shaw et al., 2011). While workplace conflict can feel like a nuisance to be avoided, if it is navigated appropriately, conflict can lead to profound, positive performance outcomes.

It is, therefore, imperative for employees to hone their conflict management skills so they can navigate the work environment successfully, not the least of which is due to the frequency with which disagreements surface (Raj, 2008). Studies suggest that both organizational and employee success can be directly related to how interpersonal differences are handled. Additionally, many workplace tasks inherently involve conflict such as negotiating, supervising high-pressure deadlines, and addressing unprofessional conduct (De Dreu et al., 2001; Turaga, 2015). Given the profound impact conflict has on group functioning, there is a sizeable amount of literature focused on identifying conflict styles.

In our prior research examining soft skills in the workplace (Fletcher & Thornton, 2023), two behaviors emerged related to conflict management, *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*. The purpose of the current study is to examine how and when *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* operate in the workplace. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we used an inductive, data-driven approach as this method allows for new insights to be discovered, especially related to a less studied topic since it is not constrained by an a priori hypothesis or pre-contextualized themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Thomas, 2006; Woo et al., 2017). Reflexive thematic analysis was used to code the data as it can produce “rich, complex, non-obvious themes that could never have been anticipated in the advance of analysis” through inductive methods (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 332). We begin with a brief overview of existing conflict management models followed by an examination of the two emergent behaviors and their relationship with related research.

Existing Conflict Management Models

A majority of conflict management research focuses on intergroup conflict with grids differentiating between self-interests and others' interests (Rahim & Bonoma; 1979; Wombacher & Felfe, 2017), often referred to as dual concern models. The concept of a grid or matrix was introduced by Blake and Mouton in their 1964 publication about managerial styles, which was influenced by Fleishman's earlier work related to the leadership traits of initiating structure and consideration (Molloy, 1998). The grid approach has since been applied to conflict management models. Extending their prior colleague's work, the most commonly referenced taxonomy now is the Thomas-Kilman index that maps different conflict response preferences within a matrix (Thomas, 1992). The five main modes of the Thomas-Kilman grid include Avoiding (low concern for self and other), Accommodating (low concern for self and high concern for other), Compromising (a moderate concern for both self and other), Competing (high concern for self and low concern for other), and Integrating (high concern for self and other; Zhao et al., 2019). While the Thomas-Kilman matrix helps individuals label conflict patterns, it lacks practicality in advising employees on how to navigate conflict when it arises in the workplace. For example, an employee may have preferred "style" of Integrating with a high concern for self and other, but this model provides no context on how to engage in the disagreement – or if the conflict should be addressed at all.

Another commonly referenced approach to conflict management originated by Morton Deutsch (1949), who purported that the outcome of a controversy is dependent on if individuals in conflict view their goals as linked or independent. When individuals in conflict believe their goals are related, they will act in cooperative ways that are mutually reinforcing and conducive to constructive controversy. However, when they believe their goals are negatively linked so that one person's success reduces the likelihood of the other's success, individuals in conflict are more likely to act in a competitive manner characterized by controlling and dominance-seeking behaviors that are counterproductive to effective controversy (Tjosvold, 1998). This model provides insight on how one's mindset often influences their approach to conflict, but again does not offer strategies or methods about how to navigate conflict well or when to approach potential difficulties.

Finally, a third model is proposed by Desivilya and Eizen (2005), who adapt the axes of the dual concern model. Instead of focusing on self and others, Desivilya and Eizen utilize two spectrums from destructive to constructive and conflict engaging to conflict avoiding. This model examines intra-team conflict management patterns and offers four categories including Dominance (destructive, engaged conflict), Avoidance (destructive, avoided conflict), Integrating (constructive, engaged conflict), and Obliging (constructive, avoided conflict). This model most closely relates to the current study and will be further addressed in the discussion.

The existing literature on conflict management provides distinct understandings of conflict styles and their impact on organizations and employees, but often lacks a practical approach of how to navigate conflict well. To complement the research on conflict styles, the current study explores two emergent, constructive workplace behaviors that enable employees to know how and when to address workplace conflict. By utilizing an inductive approach, the stories provided by the participants can be utilized to understand broader themes (Soiferman, 2010) of how the two behaviors, *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*, can be practically used in the workplace to engage in conflict effectively.

Defining *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*

Engage the Mess and *Suppress the Noise* are two conflict management behaviors that emerged in a replication study by Fletcher and Thornton (2023) examining soft skills in the workplace. These two behaviors were distinct in the 2022 study compared to the original 2012 research and describe a person's posture in relation to conflict management. *Engage the Mess* relates to an employee's choice to engage intentionally in conflict rather than to avoid or escalate differences. For example, if a colleague sends a rude retort to an email, the recipient may choose to address the differences respectfully and promptly in a private conversation to find common ground. *Suppress the Noise* pertains to an employee's ability to get to the heart of the matter by minimizing the static interference that complicates or distorts situations. For example, an individual may step away from political maneuvering or overlook offenses to focus on the central issue. The proposed benefit of *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* is that they provide a straightforward approach to conflict resolution in the workplace that complements research related to conflict styles.

While these two behaviors evidenced strong potential to be practical tools to facilitate effective workplace conflict, there is limited research outside of the original study. Additionally, there is a dearth of research on how and when to enhance versus minimize conflict engagement within an organizational context (Rahim, 2002). Given the need for effective tools to facilitate productive workplace conflict, we decided to conduct an exploratory study to understand how and when these behaviors could be applied practically. In the next section we examine parallel research for both constructs followed by the current study to further examine these behaviors.

Engage the Mess

Engage the Mess describes an individual's willingness to participate healthfully in conflict rather than avoid it. While there is limited research on the exact phrase "engage the mess" as it pertains to navigating conflict, there is a body of research concerning how to constructively engage in interpersonal conflict. Effective resolution begins with an individual's willingness to approach conflict. By leaning into uncomfortable conversations and addressing differences both employees and organizations benefit. For example, workplace teams need to strike a balance between consensus and dissension to perform effectively (Carton & Tewfik, 2016). The health of a relationship, therefore, depends not on if conflict arises, but if it is resolved in a mutual and respectful manner (Havasi et al., 2017). The conflict resolution process creates a culture where employees learn from each other (Lim & Yazdanifard, 2012) and task performance improves (Carton & Tewfik, 2016).

Central to navigating conflict well seems to be "how" individuals enter into the interaction. Many researchers agree that it is important to maintain a non-threatening disposition toward the other person by staying focused on problem solving when resolving disagreements (Coutu, 2007; Tjosvold, 1998); rather than criticizing or attacking the other person's character, which is counterproductive to solving conflict (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Krisnaveni & Deepa, 2011; Lim & Yazdanifard, 2012). It is the way in which employees work through conflict that defines the quality of their relationships and the effectiveness of the outcomes for both individuals and organizations. Individuals who manage conflict effectively often utilize assertiveness to clearly articulate strategy, provide thoughtful and honest responses, garner respect from others, politely disagree with other's opinions when necessary (Chakraborty, 2009), and are perceived as more competent and capable leaders (Gross & Guerrero, 2000).

Nonviolent communication (NVC) is one approach to engaging in conflict that focuses on problem solving rather than blaming or judging a person as the culprit of the disagreement (Rohlf, 2012). The goal of NVC is to establish genuine connection between two parties, even opponents, to help individuals express and meet needs (Arieli & Armaly, 2023). Rosenberg developed a practical approach to navigate conflict as he believed that all violence stems from unmet needs such as the need for belonging, safety, respect, or understanding. It is through stating needs and dialoging (rather than judging each other) that people begin to see each other as vulnerable human beings rather than enemies, and begin to move toward resolving conflict (Arieli & Armaly, 2023). The four steps of NVC include 1) naming the problematic behavior, 2) naming the emotion that is experienced when the behavior takes place, 3) naming the need that is not being met, and 4) requesting a new behavior for the other person to exhibit in the future (Rohlf, 2012). NVC is a constructive approach to entering into conflict using respect for the other person.

The overarching goal within an organization should be to maintain a healthy level of constructive conflict rather than eliminating conflict altogether (Carton & Tewfluk, 2016). This all begins with an individual's willingness to participate in conflict. *Engage the Mess* is characterized by the choice to intentionally and respectfully lean into rather than away from conflict. But stepping toward the discomfort can be complicated when context blurs or confuses the situation.

Suppress the Noise

Compared to *Engage the Mess*, there is less research available related to *Suppress the Noise*, which refers to minimizing unnecessary conflict to focus on the task at hand. Constructively navigating conflict means not reciprocating the harm that has been experienced (Hicks, 2019). Rispen and Demerouti (2016) demonstrated that the more employees can redirect their focus onto work responsibilities rather than focusing on the "culprit" of an offense, the more they are able to reduce the amount of anger and contempt felt during the workplace disagreement. It is through focusing on the task rather than ruminating on negative emotions that conflict is handled productively. *Suppressing the Noise* during conflict may begin by minimizing aggressive or angry emotional outbursts as these reactions often spur a negative, cyclical pattern of destructive conflict.

John Gottman is a researcher most widely known for his studies on marital relationships, but many of his findings about relational conflict have applications for the workplace as people typically manage their work and personal relationships similarly (Coutu, 2007). *Suppress the Noise* shares qualities with the conflict style Gottman coined as a validating style, which displays self-control and remains calm while trying to find a compromise through the conflict resolution process (Busby & Holman, 2009). The validating style is the least likely to stonewall or allow a relationship to deteriorate due to a conflict arising. Counterproductive and sabotaging behaviors (the opposite of *Suppress the Noise*) most often occur in conjunction with conflict when employees do not feel relationally close with one another. Conversely, when employees experience a high level of relational closeness, they also feel psychologically safe and are more likely to suspend judgement of one another (Rispen & Demerouti, 2016). When there is a high level of respect among team members and individuals are not taking conflict personally, they focus on overcoming disagreements together and conflict is more productive (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Lastly, *Suppress the Noise* may share characteristics with the construct of forgiveness, the ability to overlook an offense and work through resentment. Forgiveness allows individuals to focus on core issues rather than being distracted by their anger toward an offender (Greenberg et al., 2008). Forgiveness includes both reducing negative feelings such as anger about the injury incurred as well as increasing positive emotions for the perpetrator (Rizkalla et al., 2008). *Suppress the Noise*, similarly,

may also facilitate effective conflict management by driving clarity and focusing on the heart of the matter rather than becoming fixated on negative emotions.

While there is complementary research that bolsters the notion that engaging in healthy conflict and minimizing unnecessary confusion in conflict is beneficial, these two behaviors warrant further exploration to improve the experience of conflict in the workplace. The following sections outline the current study, method, results, and discussion.

Study Purpose

The purpose of the current study is to examine two emergent conflict management behaviors, *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*. While there are many studies that examine conflict management within the workplace, these two behaviors merit investigation to understand how and when they can be best utilized to facilitate healthy conflict in the workplace as well as their relationship with existing literature. To effectively explore these new conflict management behaviors and obtain a deep understanding of how they present themselves in the workplace, we decided to use an inductive approach as we did not have an a priori hypothesis (Soiferman, 2010). The two research questions explored within this study are:

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RQ1. How are *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* used in the workplace to address conflict?

RQ2. When are *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* used in the workplace to address conflict?

The method is outlined next followed by the results.

Method

In the current study, we employ an inductive approach to delve into how and when *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* are used to navigate conflict effectively in the workplace.

Procedure

Fifty undergraduate business students enrolled in *Organizational and Management Theory* and *Organizational Behavior for Managers* at two different universities in the Pacific Northwest each invited a minimum of two business professionals to participate in a research study. The participants were sent a survey that provided a brief definition of *Engage the Mess* as “an individual’s ability to engage in healthy conflict rather than avoid it in the workplace” and *Suppress the Noise* as “an individual’s ability to minimize unnecessary conflict and focus on the matter at hand in the workplace.” Participants were

then asked to provide a short, real-life story of when they had experienced each workplace behavior in the workplace. While the provided basic definition would offer context to the participants of the type of behavior we were interested in knowing more about, each participant was free to select any story from their work experience that situated these behaviors within the work context.

Participants

A total of 105 business professionals completed the survey who met the three study requirements: 1) are over 18 years of age, 2) live in the United States, and 3) have a minimum of 5 years of professional experience. Participants represented eight industries (i.e., Business and Information, Health Care, Retail and Manufacturing, Education, Entertainment and Hospitality, Non-Profit and Religious, Government, and Finance, Legal Services, and Insurance), had an average of 17.6 years of work experience, and an average of 9.7 years of management experience. Participants were 56% male and 44% female, and their age range was almost evenly dispersed between 20-29 (19%), 30-39 (23%), 40-49 (30%), and 50-59 (19%) age brackets with 10% of participants aged 60 or above. Participants were racially diverse with 58% identifying as White/European American, 12% Black/African American, 10% Ethnically of Hispanic/Latino origin, 10% Asian, 5% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 2% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 4% as other.

Data Analysis

Because the purpose of this study is to understand how employees describe their lived experience in navigating workplace conflict through utilizing *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*, we chose to use reflexive thematic analysis to analyze the participants' stories. This approach provides "reliable" and "as-objective-as-possible" knowledge due to each researcher working independently while still utilizing intercoder agreement to gain a richer interpretation and understanding of all assigned codes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We began by both researchers independently familiarizing themselves with the data by reading and rereading all survey responses and making notes to document initial insights. Next, codes were developed by engaging with the data and allowing the data to drive an inductive categorizing approach (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Codes were developed to provide short and meaningful categories to capture the meaning of themes from the participants' stories.

Initially, both researchers reviewed the narratives looking for explicit behaviors or techniques within the participants' stories that showcased how *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* were demonstrated in the workplace. For example, the code, *Aware of Others*, was showcased in participants' stories as they described instances of "listening to understand before responding," "engaging in respectful conversations," and "trying to understand [the other person's] point of view." Once both researchers coded the initial stories separately, we met to discuss and generate preliminary codes that would be used and applied to the remaining data set. After coding the entire data set, we met again to collaboratively align on all codes and develop a more complex and nuanced understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The data were next rearranged into clusters to explore patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This step of the analysis helped to refine the codes and develop main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) as well as ensure that coded extracts were consistent across the full dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These themes are described in the results section, along with frequency codes. While calculating frequency codes is an uncommon practice for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), we deemed it important for understanding the similarities and differences between the two conflict management constructs.

This coding process was repeated by both researchers to answer the question of when *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* were demonstrated in the workplace. This required reviewing the data for both the timing of when the conflict was addressed (i.e., immediately vs. ongoing) as well as what type of conflict the story entailed (i.e., task conflict vs. interpersonal).

As we analyzed the data, we had an unexpected discovery. In addition to our research questions related to how and when these constructs were utilized, participants also explicitly identified what *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* were not. The researchers met and agreed that this topic was indeed important due to the frequency of mentions and that it was relevant to the understanding of how and when to effectively navigate conflict. In addition to coding for how and when, both researchers coded for participant responses related to what each construct was not.

Results

The 105 business professionals who completed the survey provided real-life examples as to how *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* occurred within the workplace. At the outset of this study, we sought to understand how *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* practically showed up in the workplace and when these two conflict management skills should be applied to workplace situations. Through the coding process, we examined participants’ definitions of *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* related to how and when each was constructively applied. What was unexpected was the discovery that participants also articulated what each behavior was not and the related negative outcomes. In the subsequent section, we describe the results related to how and when each construct is observed in the workplace and then examine what each construct is not.

How to *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*

After coding, we discovered 186 behavior codes for *Engage the Mess* and 136 behavior codes for *Suppress the Noise* related to how they practically showed up in real workplace examples. The codes are grouped into six and seven categories respectively, and are briefly described next.

Table 1. Code Frequencies

	Engage the Mess	Suppress the Noise
Being Aware of Others	46 (24.7%)	15 (11.0%)
Communicating Clearly	31 (16.7%)	11 (8.1%)
Applying Teamwork	18 (9.7%)	14 (10.3%)
Taking an Action Step	45 (24.2%)	20 (14.7%)
Finding Common Ground or Workable Solution	30 (16.1%)	16 (11.8%)
Adapting or Being Open to Influence	16 (8.6%)	2 (1.5%)
Focusing on What is Important	-	58 (42.6%)
Total Codes	186 (100%)	136 (100%)

For the *Engage the Mess* data set, there were six themes that represented how this behavior was exemplified in the workplace. The themes include Being Aware of Others, Communicating Clearly, Applying Teamwork, Taking an Action Step, Finding Common Ground or Workable Solution, and

Adapting or Being Open to Influence. The *Suppress the Noise* data set included the same six themes plus an additional code entitled Focusing on What is Important.

The first theme of Being Aware of Others encompassed trying to understand another person's point of view, listening, and being respectful. There were 46 codes (24.7%) that described *Engage the Mess* and 15 (11%) for *Suppress the Noise*. Participants described this code as "inviting different opinions and perspectives in a respectful manner," "seek[ing] to understand before seeking to be understood," "try[ing]to hear both sides," "expressing the pros and cons of each approach from their perspective," and "listening to understand and demonstrating genuine empathy." One participant succinctly stated, "humility and awareness of identity are such important attributes when it comes to this." It is apparent that engaging conflict healthfully incorporates an individual's ability to understand how conflict impacts all parties involved.

The second theme was Communicating Clearly, which encompassed employees sharing information openly and honestly, with 31 codes (16.7%) for *Engage the Mess* and 11 (8.1%) for *Suppress the Noise*. Examples of this code include "clearly defining expectations, duties, goals and positive communication," "being direct using simple language and 'I' statements," "explain[ing] your reasons on why," and that "clear is kind." Particularly for *Suppress the Noise*, participants mentioned the importance of boundaries and steering the conversation appropriately. For example, one participant talked about a leader who would interject on a call to say "we can talk about that later offline, but right now I'd like to discuss..." and then quickly move forward" with the meeting's topic. The results of this theme clarified that stating expectations or intentions clearly is another important theme in addressing conflict.

Third, Applying Teamwork had 18 codes (9.7%) for *Engage the Mess* and 14 (10.3%) for *Suppress the Noise*. Participants described employees using collaboration to "develop a working relationship and some basic level of trust" and to "come together to work on the issues." At other times, Applying Teamwork was a tactic for employees to actively remind each other that "we all need each other to do the job" and that success depends on being a team. This focus on collective need served as the impetus to work through the conflict. One participant mentioned using the phrase "how might we be great together?" as a way to encourage a team to creatively think how they can collaborate through a tough moment and make it successfully through to the other side.

Fourth, Taking an Action Step had 45 codes (24.2%) for *Engage the Mess* and 20 (14.7%) for *Suppress the Noise*. While each action step described by participants varied, this code described taking initiative to address the issue head-on. For example, initiating one-on-one conversations or raising concerns was a key differentiator for this theme. The stories included proactive behavior if another employee was not doing their job or speaking up to "ask the person if they need help or point out that they are not doing what is expected." It was noted that many people prefer to avoid confrontation, but addressing poor behavior is what led to resolution and "preventing it from worsening." One participant mentioned that instead of avoiding conflict altogether, it is better to take a break and come back in five minutes to re-address the situation at hand so that it does not devolve into a bigger issue.

Fifth, Finding Common Ground or Workable Solution accounted for 30 (16.1%) of the *Engage the Mess* codes and 16 (11.8%) of the *Suppress the Noise* codes. One participant described this as "working with other departments to problem-solve and think of creative solutions to an existing problem." Another participant described this as "debate in a healthy way to resolve problems and challenge each other." It was often stated in the workplace stories that it is better to focus on the problem rather than the person so that the narrative can be challenged in healthy ways. Participants identified the need to believe the best about other people's intentions and put aside personal differences. Finding a resolution seemed to bring employees together to find common ground that produced even better results than they originally thought possible.

The sixth code, Adapting or Being Open to Influence, had 16 (8.6%) for *Engage the Mess* codes and 2 (1.5%) for *Suppress the Noise*. This theme had the fewest codes but played an important role in healthful conflict. Participants described that part of addressing conflict is being open to “admit your own mistakes,” “receive constructive feedback,” and being “willing to change and accept the new direction” rather than being defensive and clinging to the desire to be “right.” Oftentimes conflict can be seen as a contest of wills, but in this code it was evidenced that conflict was seen as an opportunity to learn and grow, and be open to other people’s influence.

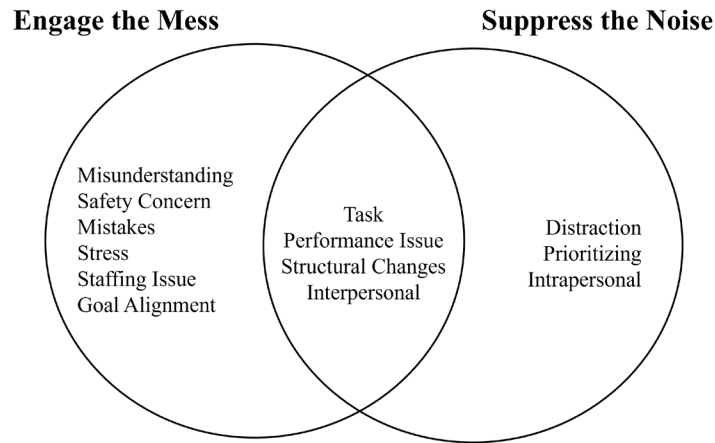
The seventh code was only found in the *Suppress the Noise* data set. It was entitled Focusing on What is Important, which accounted for 58 codes (42.6%). There seemed to be two parts to this theme. First, participants described choosing to avoid distractions by “ignoring smaller” or “unnecessary conflict,” and choosing to not participate in gossip. One participant described it as “overlooking an offense” especially if it was not a pattern of behavior of the offender. Second, participants mentioned focusing on what was most important for their particular position or “what the team needs most” based on the situation. Several participants noted that there is a required skillset to “prioritizing and sequencing” or “weigh[ing] the importance of possible activities and choos[ing] only the most important.” Three participants specifically mentioned it as “choosing battles wisely.” This distinct code evidenced prior research collected on *Suppress the Noise* such that it focused on minimizing or avoiding the extraneous in order to focus on what is central to the present conflict.

Within the *Engage the Mess* stories, there were 7 real-life examples where participants specifically described an employee initiating an uncomfortable conversation with their supervisor. All of these stories mention the importance of approaching the situation constructively by handling it “diplomatically and professionally.” Some of the comments focused on not dominating, such as “without being confrontational” or “instead of an argument,” while other comments focused on not being defensive, by saying that it was better to take the information to the source than “talk behind their backs.” Participants mentioned the importance of not avoiding the conversation as well by saying “they could have just gone along with the orders given” but chose to speak up instead. When it comes to approaching authority figures, constructive conversations are highlighted as important. In contrast, only 2 of the 16 (13%) stories of supervisors having conflict management conversations with their employees specifically highlighted the constructive nature of the conversation.

When to Engage the Mess and Suppress the Noise

Through the coding process, we identified the types of conflict addressed within participants’ real-life stories of *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* to understand when to apply each conflict management behavior. Participants described 13 distinct types of conflict (see Figure 1). *Engage the Mess* was the main method to approach six types of conflict (i.e., goal alignment, misunderstanding, stress, safety concern, staffing issues, and mistakes). These stories exemplified active engagement as the main course of action when seeking resolution. *Suppress the Noise* was applied to three forms of conflict (i.e., distraction, prioritizing, and intrapersonal). Participants’ narratives indicated that reducing or avoiding confounding information was essential to manage these difficulties. Finally, there were four conflict situations (i.e., task, performance, structural changes, and interpersonal) that employed either or both constructs. These results suggest that each construct serves a distinct purpose in conflict management but can also be used in tandem for specific types of conflict.

Figure 1. When to *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* based on Type of Conflict



Participants rarely indicated a specific timeframe in which to approach each type of conflict (i.e., hours, days, weeks, etc.). However, they often mentioned that *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* could establish trust when applied consistently to manage difficulties. Stories described applying these behaviors “on a daily basis,” “continuously,” and “a priceless process worth spending time building” as it developed a culture where employees could work together effectively, solve problems, and overcome challenges. Additionally, the narratives highlighted the preventative quality of these behaviors to stop conflicts before they even started.

What *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* are Not

In describing *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*, participants defined the characteristics of the behaviors as well as how and when they were utilized constructively in the workplace. *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* each reflect a desire for both parties involved in a controversy to work together toward a solution. *Engage the Mess* was discussed as a behavior to actively and respectfully provide insight to others, while *Suppress the Noise* was mentioned as a method to minimize unnecessary or confounding information so that both parties could focus on working toward a solution.

Participants went beyond defining how the behaviors function constructively as they voluntarily and consistently defined what each behavior was not. After coding for this discovery, both *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* were defined as not being dominating or defensive. *Engage the Mess* was also described as not avoiding. *Suppress the Noise*, however, appears to incorporate avoidant behaviors strategically to mitigate confounding or confusing information that heighten conflict. The contrast of what these behaviors are and are not enable us to better apply them to existing research to extend and enrich our understanding of conflict management. In Table 2, we present how participants described what each construct is and is not.

Table 2. Participant Differentiation of What is and is not *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*

Descriptions	Example Quotes
<i>Engage the Mess</i>	
Is Constructive	“Openly talk with me about it,” “respectful conversations with others that often begin with statements such as ‘help me understand,’” “listening to understand before responding,” “they spoke kindly although their evaluation may have been painful to hear,” “open to offering and receiving honest criticism”
Is Not Dominating	“aggressive,” “creating more tension,” “arguing,” “getting into an argument” “yelling and causing a scene,” “confrontational,” “holding onto own agenda or fiefdom,” “making aggressive/disrespectful remarks” “attacking,” “people attacking your intelligence”
Is Not Defensive	“defending,” “taken personally,” “want to have the ‘right answer,’” “fear of retribution or people attacking your intelligence,” “disrespectful remarks”
Is Not Avoiding	“sugar coat or dance around the bush,” “not saying anything,” “keeping quiet,” “could have just gone along with orders given,” “avoiding it” “waiting until they become bigger issues,” “groupthink” “not knowing the questions and concerns that employees had about the new program,”
<i>Suppress the Noise</i>	
Is Constructive	“working together to find a solution,” “choosing to ignore smaller conflicts,” “put aside personal differences,” “extend grace to smaller issues,” “agreeing to disagree about minor points or agree to discuss them at a later date if they still need a resolution”
Is Not Dominating	“demanding,” “reacting,” “heated argument,” “compare and complain,” “arguing,” “finger pointing and not-my-jobbing,” “getting angry”
Is Not Defensive	“need to look for a scapegoat or someone to blame,” “rumor mill,” “gossip,” “negativity,” “watercooler talk,” “getting sucked into negativity and rude sarcasm,” “focusing on negativity or mistakes,” “complaining,” “arguing about things that don’t matter,” “lamenting on past incidents”

What these results suggest is that these two behaviors may offer a simpler framework to help employees know how and when to participate in healthy conflict. Next, we will discuss how the results translate to theoretical and practical contributions.

Discussion

In asking business professionals about their workplace experiences of *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*, we wanted to understand how these two behaviors function in the workplace as well as when to apply each behavior to facilitate healthy conflict management. Based on the results, these two conflict management behaviors offer a straightforward framework to help employees constructively engage in productive workplace conflict. We begin by discussing the theoretical

implications and propose a revision to Desivilya and Eizen's (2005) research. We then address the practical application to the workplace to inform employees and managers how to best apply these findings (Marin et al., 2022).

Theoretical Contribution

As noted at the outset of the paper, there are several dual concern models that examine conflict management styles (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983; Rahim & Magner, 1995; Thomas, 1992, 2008) based on matrices distinguishing concern for self and concern for others (Rahim, 2002; Thomas, 1992). These models suggest that individuals should evaluate conflict by first determining which party's concerns are more important (i.e., self or other). A critical downside of this approach is that the individuals involved are established as combatants from the outset, which often leads individuals to justify implementing a dominating style when time is constrained or issues are deemed as trivial (Rahim, 2002; Thomas, 2008). In these tense situations, there is additional complication as individuals fail to recognize the harm incurred by the other party when they are attacked or poorly treated, such as amplified employee stress levels (Römer et al., 2012). Instead of engaging in conflict, Rahim (2002) supports obliging when "you believe you may be wrong" instead of encouraging individuals to speak up to voice their hesitations. However, what this suggestion negates is that moderate task-related conflict can drive team performance (Jehn, 1994; Shaw et al., 2011). When individuals are set up as enemies and must choose between their needs or others', conflict is unlikely to find an effective resolution.

Recent research has challenged the assumption that concern for self and concern for others should be the core tenants of a dual concern model (Davis et al., 2023; Sorenson et al., 1999). By cooperating, rather than competing, conflict de-escalates and allows compromises and problem solving to happen more naturally (Janssen & Van de Vliert, 1996) rather than focusing solely on concern for self versus others. Existing conflict management models refer to five conflict styles including dominating, obliging, avoiding, compromising, and integrating. In Sorenson's (1999) research, dominating and obliging conflict management strategies correlated with concern for self and concern for other while the other three did not. Davis et al. (2023) reported that the integrating style relates to other-concern, but not self-concern. This suggests that it is time to explore other avenues related to conflict management models.

The results of the current study align with the evidence that effective conflict management is more complicated than a single axis evaluating concern for self and concern for others. Rather than pitting employees against each other struggling to determine whether my needs or their needs are more important, Desivilya and Eizen's (2005) conflict management framework operates on the premise that conflict should be handled constructively by working together rather than operating from competing interests. Their model and the results of the current study reinforce Deutsch's (1949) conflict management theory that focuses on individuals finding interdependent goals and working cooperatively with others to achieve them. In Desivilya and Eizen's (2005) framework, the axes span from destructive to constructive and conflict avoiding to conflict engaging.

While we retained the axes of Desivilya and Eizen's (2005) framework, our proposed theoretical model diverges from the original in two important ways. First, we propose a third category of destructive controversy that we have labeled as Defensive, which derails problem solving through negativity or personalizing conflict. Desivilya and Eizen's (2005) model incorporates only two destructive conflict management styles, Dominating and Avoidance. However, results from the current study indicate that Defensive is different from a dominating response that is combative or an Avoidant response that chooses not to engage at all. Defensive is a self-protective act that is not

focused on resolving the conflict, but rather complains, finds someone to blame, or defames someone through gossip. Consistent with prior research, Defensive is often used by employees during conflict to deflect against embarrassment or judgements of incompetence and is destructive to the workplace (Rahim, 2002). While highly damaging, this approach to conflict management neither fully avoids nor fully engages the conflict directly. Therefore, we have added a new conflict category to capture the destructive conflict management style of Defensive.

The second difference is that this study updates the framework by providing two different constructive approaches to conflict management, *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*. The original model labels the constructive-engaging behavior as “compromising” or “integrating,” which focuses on outcomes that may not be mutually satisfying through a process of “give-and-take.” The results of the current study indicate that there is an effective way to engage constructively in conflict that enables effective resolution through working respectfully toward the outcome. This was evidenced in the participant’s stories when they described “taking the time to de-escalate the situation so we can fix what went wrong in a timely manner,” “understand[ing] the challenges of each team to align goals that bring success to the plant,” or “asking honest, valid questions about [X] and what it means for our organization without being confrontational.” The spirit of *Engage the Mess* even enables two people who do not like each other to work together effectively despite their differences because they are focused on working toward a solution rather than fixing the person. This study demonstrated that to effectively *Engage the Mess* it is important to not only Take an Action Step in addressing the conflict, but it is equally important to Be Aware of Others in the process. Constructive controversy does not happen in a vacuum, and therefore steps taken need to be thoughtful and respectful of the other party.

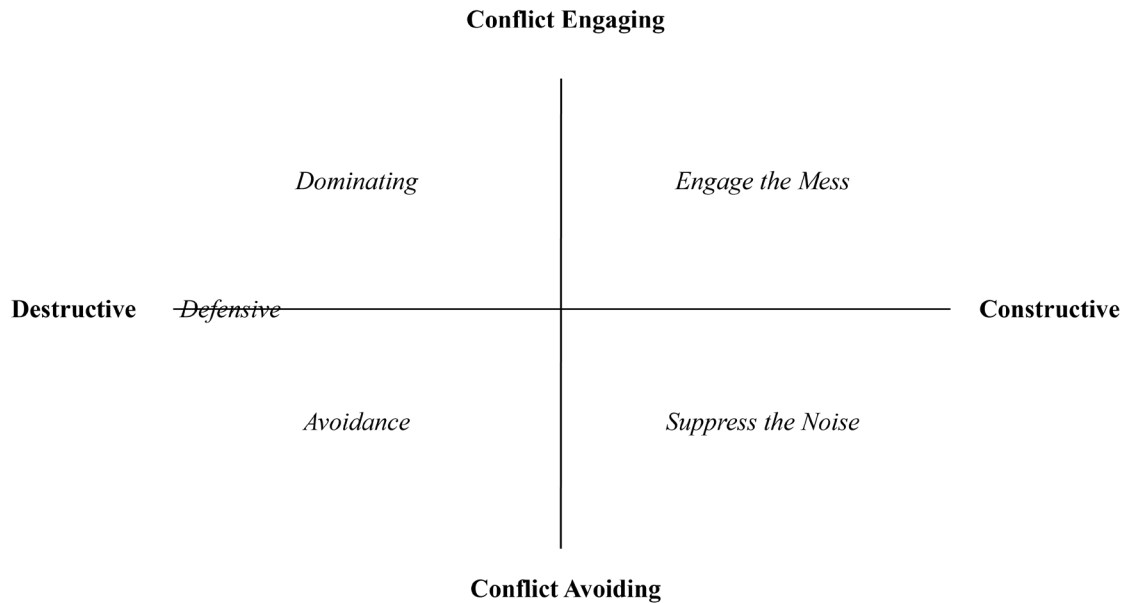
The other category revision is to the constructive-avoidant behavior labeled “obliging,” which is based off Rahim’s Organizational Conflict Inventory – II (ROCI-II). Rahim (1983) used “obliging” to describe a conflict management behavior that has a low concern for self and a high concern for others and is often expressed by going along with or conceding to someone else’s preference or decision. In the current study, however, results indicated that avoiding conflict does not automatically diminish concern for self and amplify concern for others. Rather, we propose the constructive-avoidant conflict behavior is actually *Suppress the Noise*, which is an intentional avoidance of confounding information and actions that can derail or complicate situations, yet demonstrates concern for both parties involved.

Suppress the Noise is distinctly different from complacently avoiding conflict as this behavior is actively aware of participants’ concerns and purposefully directs their attention to what is most important. It is seen by “set[ting] aside differences while working on the request together,” “staying away from unnecessary distractions,” “continuing to work hard, regardless of what is happening around them,” and “extending grace to minor issues or frustrations.” *Suppress the Noise* actively avoids the aspects of conflict that disrupt resolution and confuse a situation to intentionally focus on working toward problem resolution. For this reason, conflict avoiding was not evidenced as concession but a constructive choice to focus on what matters.

This new, separate category for constructive conflict avoidance (*Suppress the Noise*) may be the reason that at times previous studies have found avoidance behavior as constructive to team functioning. For example, when examining relational conflict, De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) found that avoidant responses compared to contending or collaborating responses led to better team performance because it allowed participants to focus on task behavior. This constructive conflict management behavior seems to describe a willful act similar to *Suppress the Noise* rather than a resignation to engage or pure avoidance. Similarly, Davis et al. (2023) found that avoidance was positively related to concern for others during a conflict. Participants in their study who avoided

conflict also inhibited hostile emotional responses toward others, displaying respect for the other party. Perhaps, *Suppress the Noise* is the phenomenon these studies are actually referring to as a constructive means to avoid conflict in order to advance team goals and respect all parties involved.

Figure 2. Revision to Desivilya and Eizen’s (2005) Conflict Management Framework



Together, *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* create an actionable framework for employees to constructively address workplace conflict.

Practical Contribution

Conflict is a natural part of conducting business as controversies arise when teams work together to combine ideas, brainstorm, work toward goal attainment, and correct errors (Tjosvold, 1985). While conflict has the potential to catalyze teams to be more effective and benefit the organization (Tjosvold, 2008), many employees avoid conflict altogether because they struggle to know how and when to effectively navigate conflict and drive toward productive outcomes. Instead of determining at the outset of a conflict whose concerns are most valued (self or other), it is more important to focus on minimizing destructive approaches to conflict (i.e., Avoidance, Defensive, and Dominating) and enhancing constructive approaches to conflict (i.e., *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*). The current study offers practical behaviors that employees can develop to improve their conflict management skills.

The results of this study emphasize that at the center of constructive controversy is demonstrating respectfulness toward others by not blaming or getting defensive, which is consistent with previous literature (LaGree et al., 2023; Tjosvold, 1985; Yungbluth & Johnson, 2010). In particular, results from this study indicated an even greater importance of implementing constructive conflict management techniques when *Engaging the Mess* with a supervisor. As formerly discussed, *Engage the Mess* shares characteristics with non-violent communication as both suggest that instead of getting stuck in the “anger-blame loop” to find a culprit of wrongdoing (Rohlf, 2012), conflict management

should focus on communicating openly about what is needed and staying focused on the facts. A respectful disposition creates an environment where employees feel their perspective matters and they have “permission to have opposing opinions.” In turn, people willingly explain their ideas, concerns, and reasons for their behavior, which transforms enemies looking for someone to blame into partners trying to solve problems. Demonstrating respectfulness is key to keeping lines of communication open so that a resolution to the conflict can be found. The outcomes of the current study combined with the theoretical contributions provide a practical application for the research to improve conflict management in the workplace.

To unlock the potential of effectively navigating workplace conflict, we recommend that employees participate in a practice-oriented training where they can evaluate their conflict management behaviors, learn the differences between destructive and constructive conflict resolution, and practice how to productively resolve difficulties when they arise. In the training, participants would be provided with vignettes of common conflict-inducing workplace scenarios and examine their own reactions and how they would respond. In this way, participants would start to cultivate self-awareness to identify when they would naturally lean toward destructive or constructive behaviors. The training facilitator would walk through a specific vignette, such as a product launch running behind schedule, to demonstrate destructive and constructive responses to the situation.

The facilitator would give examples of Dominating behavior (e.g., attacking a different department for their deficiencies, yelling profanities, or demanding everyone work significant overtime), Avoiding behavior (e.g., sitting back and not saying anything about the product delay or sugarcoating the facts), and Defensive behavior (e.g., constant worrying about the situation or trying to prove innocence for the delay). Participants would be reminded that both Dominating and Avoiding have been demonstrated to be damaging to conflict resolution as well as harmful to interpersonal relationships (e.g., Friedman et al., 2000; Tjosvold, 1985; Trudel & Reio, 2011), and Defensive can be equally detrimental. Employees should avoid trying to be right, defend, or find someone to blame for the mishap as it hinders resolution and understand that a destructive approach spurs rumination, negative thinking, and typically pits employees against one another (Argyris, 1994). All of these responses inhibit resolution.

The facilitator would then walk through two constructive responses to prepare employees to practice responding productively. Definitions of *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise* should be provided as well as practical applications of how to implement each. While conflict is often uncomfortable to initiate, *Engaging the Mess* provides employees a means to respectfully bring up their concerns and take action steps toward productive resolution. While a large part of *Engage the Mess* is being courageous to voice concerns, it is equally important to be aware of others in the process. Productive controversy must begin by understanding others’ concerns through curiosity and listening before bringing one’s own concerns forward. Communicating clearly and finding common ground are also highly valued in constructively addressing conflict, which reinforces that articulation of needs must be balanced with coming to a mutual understanding. Teamwork and being open to influence are also aspects of addressing conflict healthfully. In the workplace vignette, employees could address the product delay by taking ownership, asking for help, inquiring of others on what happened, and collaborating to find creative solutions.

The other constructive response, *Suppress the Noise*, reminds employees to intentionally avoid unnecessary distractions and frustrations. While focusing on what is most important is a core element to this behavior, deliberately avoiding confusing information is a critical skill to develop. This may look like refusing to engage in negative self-talk that wastes time and promotes disengagement from actual problem solving or not gossiping about who is to blame. Once participants understand the

constructive approaches, it is important they have an opportunity to practice implementing them through role playing and applying them to personal, daily work scenarios.

Through practicing, employees will learn when to apply each behavior individually or in combination. *Engage the Mess* equips employees with the ability to courageously and respectfully address a dispute (e.g., when goals are misaligned, a misunderstanding takes place, or when there is a safety concern) while *Suppress the Noise* helps everyone stay focused on the core issues (e.g., by removing distractions or prioritizing what is most important). Furthermore, there are scenarios that are more effective when both behaviors are applied to address the conflict (e.g., when interpersonal differences arise). This is when employees will find that they need to actively participate through *Engage the Mess* while also staying razor focused on what matters through *Suppress the Noise*. Employees should practice identifying real workplace situations and applying the behaviors to create a habit of constructively responding to conflict.

Limitations and Future Research

Before addressing future research, there are two distinct limitations to the present research. First is the method to collect data through a convenience sample. While this approach is a common practice and there were specific participation requirements, it would be remiss to acknowledge there may be bias in the sample. To evaluate the potential biases, we could collect additional workplace stories and evaluate the alignment or divergence with the discovered themes. The good news for the current sample is that multiple demographics were represented, which helps mitigate natural bias. Second, we utilized an inductive approach to explore real workplace stories based on the definitions provided of *Engage the Mess* and *Suppress the Noise*. While this approach provided us with a rich opportunity to analyze stories and draw categories and themes from patterns found within the data to contribute new ideas and theories to the body of academic research, it provides an opportunity for further research to confirm these findings using deductive methods. The limitations also open up new avenues of research related to effective conflict management.

There are two additional insights from the data that inform future research related to how these two workplace behaviors address purpose and mutuality. First, participant stories evidenced a theme of meaningful work. In describing these behaviors, employees did not seem to be trying to fulfill an insecurity or stroke their ego, but rather to achieve a higher goal, vision, or purpose. This directional effort was referenced both for individuals as well as teams. It is worth exploring if this intentional focus could prevent conflict or be used to effectively manage conflict once it begins. The second theme was that participants who spoke of productive ways to manage conflict addressed a mutual respect for both self and others. Neither the task at hand nor people were diminished in how these workplace behaviors were described in the data, but instead focused on positive benefits for both the individual initiating and the individual receiving the behavior. Collectively, these insights indicate an opportunity to better understand the innerworkings of conflict and behaviors that could mitigate conflict or better manage the experience.

Conclusion

While interpersonal conflict is inevitable in the workplace (Deutsch, 2008) and can foster effective outcomes, it is often a source of discomfort and individuals lack the skills to effectively navigate the challenges. This study highlighted two workplace behaviors that can assist employees in overcoming these difficulties to navigate toward a healthy resolution. Initiating healthy conversations, or *Engaging the Mess*, may be one way to bring clarity and mutually beneficial outcomes as involved

parties can actively participate to address and resolve the issue. At other times, the workplace behavior of *Suppress the Noise* may be more appropriate to redirect or bring focus to a conversation rather than diverting into debates about tangential frustrations. Both of these workplace behaviors operate as approaches to effectively manage workplace conflict and provide a simple, actionable framework to address inherent workplace conflict either individually or in tandem.

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