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Affective conflicts as determinants of supervisory boards effectiveness

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Abstract: The introduction of the *upper echelons theory* by Hambrick and Mason in 1984 raised the interest in Top Management Teams (TMT) as key decision makers and in their impact on organizations' performance. As initial search for the relation between TMT structure and company effectiveness did not bring conclusive results, recently the emphasis has been put on TMT functioning and group processes. Affective conflicts defined as a disagreement between team members caused by personal dislikes are one of them. The main objective of this article is to enrich theoretical considerations with the empirical identification of the relationship between affective conflicts in supervisory boards and their effectiveness. Moreover, various determinants of affective conflicts were examined. Apart from theoretical analysis of the problem, the value of this article is the presentation of the results of own empirical study conducted among members of supervisory boards representing 46 public companies operating in Poland. The results showed that affective conflicts decrease board performance, but the relation is not statistically significant. It was also observed that the strongest determinats of affective conflicts are work organization, education level of board memebers, and team cohesiveness. Conclusions are useful for the organization and moderation of board meetings and the selection of candidates.

Keywords: Top Management Team, supervisory board, affective conflict, TMT effectiveness

1. Introduction

The introduction of *the upper echelons theory* by Hambrick and Mason in 1980s (1984), emphasizing the relation between Top Management Teams (TMT) characteristics and companies performance, resulted in thorough research on these teams as key decision makers in organizations. Initially the focus was on structural characteristics of TMT, but the results of empirical studies were inconclusive (ex. Wiersema and Bantel, 1992; Peszko,

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2006; Castro et al., 2009; Hsu, 2010; Bohdanowicz, 2010; Bermig and Frick, 2010; Bohdanowicz, 2011; Koładkiewicz, 2013; Bohdanowicz, 2017) and the relation between TMT and companies performance appeared to be more complex and indirect. The lack of coherent results initiated the search for other determinants of companies performance related to the functioning of TMT.

The revised model of the *upper echelons theory* presented by Carpenter, Geletkanycz and Sanders (2004) brought a breakthrough to the approach to TMT. The authors assumed that only structural factors impact TMT effectiveness, but also psychological aspects of TMT functioning. The original model was enriched with moderating factors such as group processes.

Growing popularity of the concept of group dynamics (Cartwright and Zandler, 1968; Forsyth, 1990; Levi, 2001) resulted in further studies on group processes at TMT, such as group cohesiveness, leadership, and intragroup conflicts (ex. Amason, 1996; Amason and Mooney, 1999; Forbes and Milliken, 1999; Van der Walt and Ingley, 2001; Atkinson and Atkinson, 2006; Carmeli and Schaubroeck, 2006; Murphy and McIntyre, 2007; Amason, Liu and Fu, 2010; Smith et al., 1994; Ensley and Pearce, 2001).

A group process that appeared to have great significance for TMT effectiveness and further for the company performance is an intragroup conflict, with an affective conflict as an example. The identification of its determinants, its mechanisms and its consequences requires including both corporate perspective and psychological approach to the functioning of a small group.

The main objective of this article is to identify the relation between affective conflicts in supervisory boards, as TMT in two-tier Corporate Governance system, and the effectiveness of these teams. Moreover, the goal was to identify the importance of structural and dynamic characteristics of supervisory boards to affective conflicts.

2. Group dynamics approach to supervisory boards

In two-tier system a supervisory board is the main responsible for Corporate Governance, not involved in operational management (Lis and Sterniczuk, 2005, p. 77). Given behavioral approach to Corporate Governance it is important to emphasize the specifics of supervisory boards as teams. Althought the participation in supervisory boards does not require daily involvement in current operations (Pugliese, Nicholson, and Bezemer, 2015, p. 3), board members perceive themselves and they are perceived by the others as parts of a particular team (Cohen and Bailey, 1997, pp. 239 and 241), operating in a certain corporate context (Vandewaerde et al., 2010, p. 366). Morover, board members are mutually interdependent because of common goals, tasks, responsibilities, and benefits (Marschak and Radner, 1958, p. 1).

Similarly to other teams, supervisory boards can be characterized with their static, structural features (ex. the number of board members, demography, group structure) and dynamics of their functioning. One of the most popular models of TMT group processes was presented by Forbes and Milliken (1999) and it relates TMT performance with board members' knowledge and skills through group processes, such as TMT cohesiveness, effort norms, and cognitive conflicts.

A great advantage of the concept of group dynamics is the focus on the relation between team structure and functioning and its effectiveness. On this basis team effectiveness can be improved, what makes the concept especially valuable for management. That is why diagnosing TMT performance is such a challenge.

In modern approach to the assessment of effectiveness various perspectives are integrated (Zięb icki, 2014, pp. 51–53): the orientation on achieving goals, system orientation, and focus on the value for stakeholders (Bielski, 2002). Multidimensional effectiveness of supervisory boards should include at least three different levels: psychological, of Corporate Governance, and organizational.

In psychological concept of group dynamics TMT effectiveness depends on task performance. The main tasks of TMT are controlling and advising (Forbes and Milliken, 1999; Levrau and Van den Berghe, 2007). According to Polish Commercial Companies Code[1], the most important task in case of a supervisory board is control (KSH, Art. 382 § 3), but its role is far more complex. Koładkiewicz (2014, p. 70) distinguishes three basics spheres of supervisory board activity: control of a management board, cooperation with a management board, and cooperation with external environment.

The effectiveness of supervisory boards as elements of Corporate Governance system traditionally refers to companies' financial outcomes. However, nowadays financial performance is less informative than the ability to meet stakeholders expectations (Barwacz, 2011).

Especially in case of supervisory boards such an approach to TMT effectiveness may raise some concerns, because of the focus on its tasks defined by the Code. In fact, supervisory board performance is only one of various factors determining companies outcomes. Still its role becomes more significant in terms of strategic management (Peszko, 2006, p. 159).

3. Affective conflicts in supervisory boards

There are two main types of intragroup conflicts in TMT: cognitive and affective conflicts (Amason, 1996; Simons, Pelled and Smith, 1999; Ensley and Pearce, 2001; Wan and Ong, 2005; Yun, 2011). An affective conflict is a disagreement between team members resulting from their personal likes and dislikes. Affective conflicts make team members feel negative emotions, irritation, suspicion, and discouragement towards other team members. Alleviating emerging conflicts is necessary for a team to continue its work, and at the same time affective conflicts are time consuming, especially in bigger teams (Mooney et al., 2007).

Affective conflicts reduce the willingness to cooperate and mutual understanding between team members (Papenhausen and Paraytiam, 2015). They decrease team effectiveness in three ways, by:

– limiting time for the discussion and thorough analysis;
– diminishing cognitive skills;
– antagonizing team memebers (Simons and Peterson, 1998).

Negative consequences of affective conflicts are as follows: decrease of motivation and satisfaction, worse team communication (Amason and Mooney, 1999; Badke-Schaub et al., 2010), and increasing will to change job (Medina et al., 2005). Moreover, a negative relation between affective conflicts in TMT and companies performance was confirmed (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003).

Buchholtz, Amason, and Rutherford (2005) claim that affective conflicts are the result of misinterpretations of other TMT members' intentions. The less structuralized work and the higher the uncertainty (like in case of TMT), the greater the risk of affective conflicts.

In Table 1 the results of some current research on affective conflicts in TMT are presented.

[1] Commercial Companies Code, Act of 15 September 2004, Journal of Laws No. 94, item 1037.

Table 1. Current studies on affective conflicts in TMT

Author (year)	Research method	Main constructs	Results
Amason and Sapienza (1997)	questionnaire		The bigger and the more diversified TMT, the more affective conflicts.
Simons and Peterson (1998)	telephone interview	– cognitive conflict – affective conflict – trust	Trust in TMT moderates the relation between cognitive and affective conflicts.
Amason and Mooney (1999)	questionnaire	– cognitive conflict – affective conflict – future company performance	Past company performance impacts TMT intragroup conflicts. There exists a relation between cognitive and affective conflicts in TMT. The effectiveness of decision making process is supported by cognitive conflicts and diminished by affective conflicts.
Mooney and Sonnenfeld (2001)	questionnaire	– cognitive conflict – affective conflict – TMT diversity	TMT diversity does not impact affective conflicts.
Buchholtz et al. (2005)	questionnaire	– control – involvment – affective conflict	Monitoring supervisory board work decreases affective conflicts. The higher involvement of board members, the greater the possibility of conflicts.
Walker et al. (2015)	questionnaire	– cognitive conflict – affective conflict – personality	There is no relation between personality differences and affective conflicts. There is a strong relation between cognitive and affective conflicts.

S o u r c e: Author's own elaboration based on literature review.

TMT effectiveness is the problem requiring further analysis with the reference not only to structural aspects, but also to TMT psychological and sociological functioning. Affective conflicts appear to deteriorate TMT performance, and that is why the conclusions on how to avoid or moderate them in TMT are of a great significance.

4. Research

The main objective of this study was to identify the relationship between affective conflicts in supervisory boards and the effectiveness of these teams. Moreover, structural and dynamic determinants of affective conflicts were examined. The main hypothesis (H1) assumed that affective conflicts reduce the effectiveness of supervisory boards. The next two hypotheses (H2 and H3) assume that accordingly structural features and group processes determine the level of affective conflicts.

Research variables covered three areas: structural characteristics of supervisory boards, group dynamics and boards' effectiveness. The following independent variables were used to describe the structure of supervisory boards: the size of the supervisory board, the share of women and men, gender diversity of the board (Blau Index), the share of board members with specific education (four areas of specialization were distinguished, i.e. technical, economic, legal and other), the diversity of fields of education (Blau Index), the share of board members with professional and academic titles / degrees, and the share of board members with experience in work in top management teams. In addition, the number of board meetings held per year was included as an organizational factor (the information was available in the case of a limited number of companies only). Data on the structure of supervisory boards was based on the studies of the resumes of board members (nearly 3,000 resumes were under scrutiny).

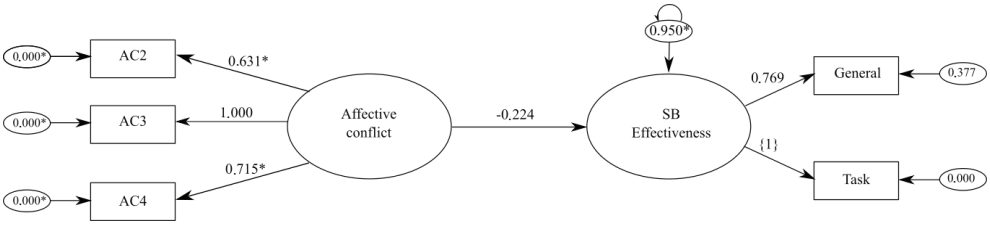
The examination of the group dynamics of supervisory boards covered the following group processes: affective conflicts, cognitive conflicts, group coherence, effort norms. Due to the lack of research methods available, own Group Dynamics Questionnaire for Supervisory Boards based on five-point Likert scale was used (Anonymity). The same Questionnaire was applied to collect data on the effectiveness of supervisory boards, including overall assessment of boards' effectiveness and quality of its decisions, as well as detailed assessments of the performance of particular tasks related to the supervisory and advisory role of the board.

The research was conducted among 46 out of 291 companies listed on the main market of the Warsaw Stock Exchange (Poland) from 2010 to 2013. Given low accessability of supervisory board members, the selection of the sample was not random what must be taken into account at the stage of the analysis of the results. At the same time, it is worth noting that the size of the research sample does not differ significantly from the research samples used in other studies on TMT group processes.

5. Results

Given high complexity of the relations between the variables, structural equation modelling (path analysis and confirmatory factor analysis) was applied. The models presented in the article were selected from many tested models according to their fit to the real data. Goodness of fit was assessed based on the value of chi square, followed by descriptive indicators based on the theory of non-central distributions (RMSEA and adjusted Gamma index of the population) and the Akaike information criterion (AIC). Results that are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) are marked with an asterisk (*).

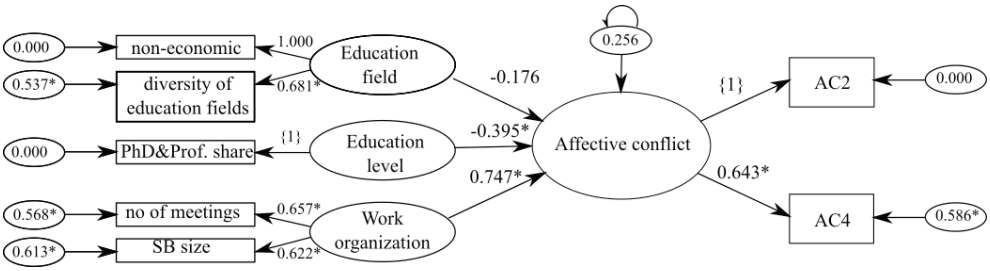
The first hypothesis (H1) was tested with model H1. The goodness of fit of the constructed model is satisfactory (Chi square 3.921; P-value 0.417; df 4; RMSEA 0.000; IC 0.665; Adjusted Population Gamma Index 1.000) and the model was interpreted (Figure 1). Affective conflict negatively impacts supervisory board effectiveness, however the relation is statistically insignificant (P-value is equal to 0.140). Although hyphotesis H1 was not confirmed, a clear trend of how affective conflict deteriorates supervisory board performance was identified.



Symbols: AC2, AC3, AC4—questionnaire questions regarding affective conflicts

Figure 1. The relation between affective conflicts and supervisory board effectiveness (H1)

S o u r c e: Author's own elaboration.



Symbols: AC2, AC4—questionnaire questions regarding affective conflicts

Figure 2. Structural determinants of affective conflicts in supervisory boards

S o u r c e: Author's own elaboration.

In the next stage the impact of organizational and structural characteristics of supervisory boards on the occurance of affective conflicts was examined. The model with the best goodness of fit (Chi square 15.156; P-value 0.298; df 13; RMSEA 0.000; AIC 1.737; Adjusted Population Gamma Index 1.000) is presented in Figure 2.

The analysis revealed that supervisory board work organization is the strongest determinant of affective conflicts (regression coefficient is 0.747). The larger the board and the more frequent the meetings, the higher the level of affective conflict. In other words, in more numerous teams and in teams sitting long hours together, the risk of discussing matters not relevant to the enterprise is higher.

A factor that significantly alleviates affective conflicts is the presence of board members with a PhD degree and higher academic degrees (regression coefficient is –0.395). This may be due to the fact that academics are more likely to avoid out-of-subject conversations. The relation was also confirmed with the Chi-Square test of independence (Figure 3 and Table 2).

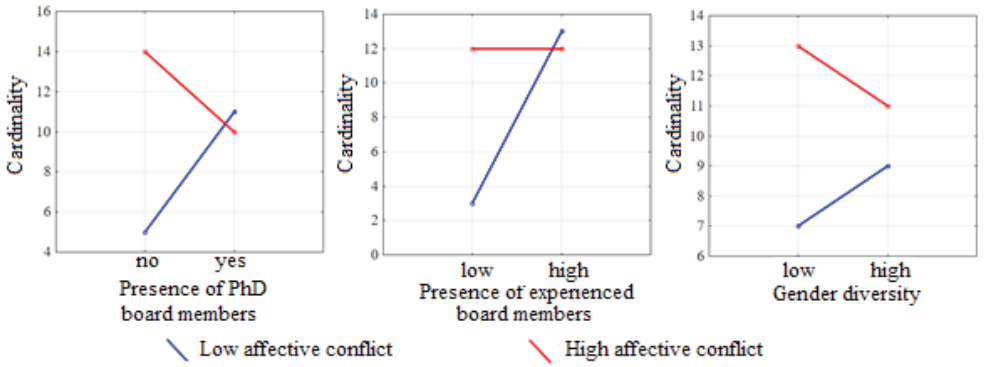


Figure 3. Relationship between affective conflicts and selected structural aspects of supervisory boards

S o u r c e: Author's own elaboration.

Table 2. Relationship between affective conflicts and selected structural aspects of supervisory boards

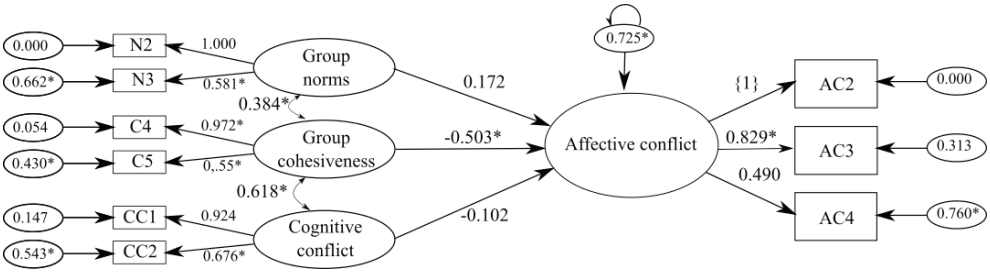
	Gender diversity			Presence of PhD board members			Presence of experienced board members		
	Chi square	df	p	Chi square	df	p	Chi square	df	p
Pearson's Chi square	0.417	df = 1	p = 0.52	2.824	df = 1	p = 0.09	4.000	df = 1	p = 0.05
Chi square ML	0.418	df = 1	p = 0.52	2.876	df = 1	p = 0.09	4.212	df = 1	p = 0.04
Yates's Chi square	–			–0.266			2.778	df = 1	p = 0.10
Phi for 2×2 tables	–0.102			–0.412			–0.316		
Tetrachoric correlations	–0.162			0.257			–0.505		

S o u r c e: Author's own elaboration.

Another factor under scrutiny was the experience in working in TMT. The results show that the presence of experienced board members decreases affective conflicts (the tetrachoric correlation coefficient is equal to –0.505). Moreover, given huge interest of researchers and practitioners in the problem of gender parity in TMT, the relation between affective conflicts and gender diversity was diagnosed. Neither the analysis of SEM models, nor of a twofold contingency table did not bring any insights to such a relation.

Summarizing, hipothesis H2 was confirmed as it is possible to distinguish structural characteristics of supervisory boards impacting affective conflicts.

In order to verify hypothesis H3, a model of relations between affective conflicts and other group processes was designed. The model meets minimal requirements, such as RMSEA < 0.08 (Chi square 24.489; P-value 0.178; df 19; RMSEA 0.070; AIC 1.912; Adjusted Population Gamma Index 0.952), and it was taken for interpretation (Figure 4).



Symbols: N2, N3, C4, C5, AC2, AC3, AC4, CC1, CC2—questionnaire questions regarding group processes

Figure 4. Dynamic determinants of affective conflicts in supervisory boards

S o u r c e: Author's own elaboration.

The level of affective conflicts largely depends on supervisory board cohesiveness (regression coefficient is –0.503 and it is statistically significant). The decrease of team cohesiveness leads to more affective conflicts. It means that a strong sense of belonging to the team and positive relationships between supervisory board members reduce the risk of affective conflicts. The identification of such a relation confirmed hypothesis H3, as there is a group process that impacts affective conflicts.

To sum up, the conducted research partially confirmed the main hypothesis and fully confirmed supporting hypotheses. However, it must not be forgotten that the sample was small and not representative. Hence, the conclusions must be limited to the identification of trends, not of strong cause and effect relationships.

6. Discussion

The results of the presented study suggest that affective conflicts decrease supervisory boards performance (these conclusions are in accordance with the results by Amason and Mooney, 1999; Mooney et al., 2007). However, the relation was not verified as statistically significant.

Among determinants of affective conflicts, supervisory board work organization occurred to have crucial importance for affective conflicts. Big size of a board and high number of board meetings per year significantly increase the risk of affective conflicts. As this type of conflicts may deteriorate board's performance it is worth reducing them in advance by moderating the meetings and making breaks during the discussions or postponing the discussion on contentious issues (Brockmann, 1996). The lack of reaction to affective conflicts may result in serious consequences for the team's durability (Eisenhardt et al., 1997). Moreover, the number of supervisory board meetings should be limited to minimal time required to deal with substantive

problems (Murphy and McIntyre, 2007). For moderation of supervisory board functioning it is also important to build sense of belonging to a team as high team cohesiveness reduces affective conflicts. Another method is training and raising board members' awareness of this issue.

Finally, the results of the research can be used to design criterias for candidates for board members. It was observed that affective conflicts are alleviated by high diversity of board members educational background, the presence of board members with academic degrees and huge experience in TMT. Such a profile of board members is related to their greater focus on corporate problems discussed by a board. Contrary to common beliefs, gender does not impact the level of affective conflicts.

7. Conclusions

Identifying and shaping factors determining companies' performance related to the structure and dynamics of TMT becomes one of the key issues of Corporate Governance. The presented research is an example of interdisciplinary approach to TMT, and its main objective was to identify the relation between affective conflicts and the effectiveness of supervisory boards of public enterprises operating in Poland.

As the result, the importance of affective conflicts to supervisory boards performance was partially confirmed, as well as the significance of structural and functional determinants of these conflicts. Affective conflicts depend on a supervisory board size, the frequency of board meetings, the diversity of educational background, the presence of board members with academic degrees, the presence of board members experienced in TMT, and on team cohesiveness.

The main limitation of this research is the size of a sample. However, the reluctance of TMT members to participate in surveys is a common problem, and the size of samples is similar in case of other studies (ex. Amason and Sapienza, 1997; Amason and Mooney, 1999; Simons et al., 1999; Mooney and Sonnenfeld, 2001; Buchholtz et al., 2005).

The problem of affective conflicts was a side topic in a broader PhD dissertation project (Anonymity), and some of the directions of further studies have been already explored. Namely, the analysis of different types of conflicts showed that cognitive conflicts are of the greatest significance to TMT functioning and effectiveness. However, in future studies new factors could be included, for example the independence of supervisory board members.

The applied triangulation of research approaches and methods enabled indepth analysis of affective conflicts in supervisory boards. This provided the basis for practical tips regarding selecting candidates for supervisory boards, the organization and moderation of supervisory boards meetings, raising awareness of mechanisms of TMT functioning, and further directions in TMT studies.

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Konflikty afektywne jako determinanty efektywności rad nadzorczych

Abstrakt: Wprowadzenie „teorii wyższych szczebli" (ang. *the upper echelons theory*) przez Hambricka i Masona w 1984 roku wzbudziło zainteresowanie zespołami naczelnego kierownictwa jako kluczowymi decydentami w przedsiębiorstwie i ich wpływem na wyniki organizacji. Początkowe poszukiwanie relacji między strukturą tych zespołów a efektywnością spółek nie przyniosło jednoznacznych rezultatów, dlatego coraz więcej uwagi poświęca się funkcjonowaniu rad dyrektorów, zarządów i rad nadzorczych oraz procesom grupowym w tych zespołach. Jednym z takich procesów są konflikty afektywne rozumiane jako brak zgodności między członkami zespołu spowodowane osobistymi antypatiami. Głównym celem tego artykułu jest wzbogacenie rozważań teoretycznych o empiryczną identyfikację związku między konfliktami afektywnymi w radach nadzorczych a skutecznością rad. Ponadto zbadano różne determinanty konfliktów afektywnych. Oprócz teoretycznej analizy problemu wartością tego artykułu jest prezentacja wyników własnych badań empirycznych przeprowadzonych wśród członków rad nadzorczych reprezentujących 46 spółek publicznych działających w Polsce. Wykazano, że konflikty afektywne obniżają efektywność rady nadzorczej, ale relacja ta nie jest istotna statystycznie. Zaobserwowano również, że najsilniejszymi determinantami konfliktów afektywnych są organizacja pracy, poziom wykształcenia członków rady oraz spójność zespołu. Wnioski wynikające z badań mogą być wykorzystane przy organizacji i moderacji posiedzeń rad nadzorczych oraz przy doborze kandydatów do rady.

Słowa kluczowe: rada nadzorcza, konflikt afektywny, efektywność