Handelshøyskolen BI

GRA 19703 Master Thesis

Thesis Master of Science 100% - W

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Tittel *:	Where are you when I need you? The effect of leaders' avoidance behaviors on organizational commitment in times of conflict
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Inneholder besvarelsen konfidensielt materiale?:	Nei	**Kan besvarelsen offentliggjøres?:**	Ja

Gruppe

Gruppenavn:	(Anonymisert)
Gruppenummer:	351
Andre medlemmer i gruppen:	

Master Thesis

- Where are you when I need you? The effect of leaders' avoidance behaviors on organizational commitment in times of conflict -

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Study Program:

Master of Science in Leadership and Organizational Psychology

Acknowledgments

We would first like to thank our supervisor, Mats Glambek, whose continuous guidance and feedback have been very helpful during this process.

In addition, we would like to thank our participants for taking part in our study and sharing their perceptions with us. We very much appreciate their contributions.

Last but not least, we want to thank each other for our continued support, collaboration and friendship during this time and the last two years of studying.

Maren Raß & Catriona Stohlmann

Oslo, 03.07.2023

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Abstract

Interpersonal workplace conflict is an eminent part of organizational life and affects employees at all organizational levels. Previous research on the topic supports the notion that leaders play a particularly important role in managing such conflicts, and further suggests that leaders' conflict management behaviors affect important individual and organizational outcomes. In light of this, the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment was investigated within the framework of the present master thesis. Secondly, the master thesis examined a potential moderating effect of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior on the described association. Thirdly, it explored a potential three-way interaction between interpersonal workplace conflict, leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior, and employees' need for leadership. The findings of this quantitative, cross-sectional study were only partly consistent with previous theoretical assumptions. While confirming the significant negative effect of interpersonal workplace conflict on organizational commitment, the hypothesized negative moderating effect of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior was not significant. When including employees' need for leadership as an additional moderator, the hypothesized three-way interaction was significant. In our implications, we point to the necessity to assess individuals' need for leadership which offers a reflection of the value of leadership as a resource for them. We further highlight that the effect of leaders' avoidance behaviors is contingent on the discrepancy between leadership needed and leadership supplied. Based on this novel insight, we call for an extension of the literature on third-party conflict management and laissez-faire leadership to reflect the relevance of assessing need for leadership.

1. Introduction

Studies on conflict offer a relevant contribution to the work of organizational behavior scholars and practitioners as empirical findings show that leaders, on average, spend 20% of their time at work managing conflict (Thomas, 1992a). Research in the field shows that conflict, and its management, critically impacts individual, group, and organizational effectiveness (De Dreu et al., 2001). As Tjosvold (2008) posits, a large body of work suggests that conflict permeates all features of organizational life, and managing workplace conflict is crucial to enable organizational members to perform their work effectively. When characterized by little harm, low intensity, and relative simplicity, conflicts can often be managed by involved parties themselves (Nugent, 2002). In other cases, however, conflicts can become highly complex and can have far-reaching, often negative, effects on individual, group, and organizational outcomes (Behfar et al., 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Raeve et al., 2009; Römer et al., 2012).

A particularly important outcome of interpersonal workplace conflict will be investigated within the framework of this master thesis: impaired organizational commitment. As a concept, organizational commitment refers to the degree to which employees identify and engage with their organization (Mowday et al., 1979), which transcends passive organizational loyalty and is linked to future behavior (Fishbein, 1967). It is further assigned importance due to its linkage to multiple indicators of organizational performance such as employee turnover (e.g., Somers, 1995), job performance (e.g., Thomas et al., 2005), and financial results (e.g., Mowday, 1998).

There is a large body of research that supports the notion that leadership behaviors have a profound influence on how conflict affects employees (Meyer, 2004; Römer et al., 2012; Trudel & Reio, 2011). Leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior, in particular, is of research interest due to employees' expectations of leaders' role responsibilities, which include taking action when conflict arises. Drawing on theoretical foundations such as the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), it becomes apparent that leadership can be perceived as a resource by employees (Halbesleben et al., 2014). If leaders avoid providing such resource in times of conflict, in other words, fail to meet employees' expectations and needs, such avoidance could have negative effects on employee-related outcomes such as organizational commitment.

Third-party avoiding behavior is reflected in leaders' withdrawal, denial, or disengagement patterns (Skogstad et al., 2014; Trudel & Reio, 2011). This non-response to employees' needs, in other words, avoiding to satisfy their needs, is indicative of a low supply of leadership. According to COR theory, individuals value the resource of leadership to differing degrees (Halbesleben et al., 2014), which reflects varying needs for leadership. Need for leadership is a characteristic of employees and indicates how much employees wish their leaders to support them in their goal achievement (De Vries et al., 2002). Therefore, it can be assumed that the severity of the negative effect of a low supply of leadership is contingent on the extent of leadership needed. In this master thesis, we want to investigate the impact of such mismatch between leadership needed and leadership supplied on employee organizational commitment. We plan to do this by assessing leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior and employees' need for leadership separately.

Based on a review of the literature, we have identified an opportunity to offer important implications for theory and practice with this master thesis. The separate assessment of leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior and employees' need for leadership allows us to paint a more nuanced picture of the effect of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior on employee organizational commitment.

This quantitative, cross-sectional study empirically examines three hypotheses to answer our general research question 'How does the moderating role of leaders' perceived third-party avoiding conflict management behavior, further moderated by employees' need for leadership, affect the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment?' First, the theorized association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment will be tested. Second, the moderating effect of leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior on the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment will be tested. Third, additionally taking need for leadership into account, a potential three-way interaction (moderated moderation) will be tested.

2. Theory & Hypotheses

In this section, we will review existing literature on the topics of conflict, organizational commitment, conflict management, need for leadership, and laissez-faire leadership to gain an understanding of the current state of knowledge in these areas. In the first part of this section, we examine perceived interpersonal workplace conflict, our independent variable, and outline the theoretical basis for the common distinction between different conflict sources. Because previous research has highlighted the importance of perceived conflict intensity, our study will focus on employees' perceptions of conflict independent of its possible source. We further make use of the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to establish a link between exposure to conflict and experiencing a potential threat to or real loss of resources.

In the second part of this section, we examine organizational commitment, our dependent variable. We have chosen to investigate the relationship between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment because the literature on these constructs suggests that both low- and high-intensity conflicts are negatively related to commitment (Leather et al., 1998; Pearson et al., 2002; Pooja et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2005; Trudel, 2009). We again draw on COR theory to support the notion that workplace conflict is often experienced as a threat to or an actual loss of employees' resources.

In the third part of this section, we examine the potential moderating role of leaders' perceived third-party conflict management behavior. We first present the theoretical basis underlying several taxonomies of conflict management, then elaborate on leaders' role as third-party conflict managers, whose support function is viewed as a resource from a COR theory perspective, and finally establish avoiding conflict management behavior as our moderating variable.

The fourth part of this section explores a potential three-way interaction between the moderating variable and an additional moderator, need for leadership. Because leadership is considered a resource from a COR theory perspective (Halbesleben et al., 2014) for which employees have varying needs (De Vries et al., 1999, 2002), we hypothesize that need for leadership could moderate the moderating effect of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior. The section further addresses laissez-faire leadership, as this type of leadership is built on the assumption of a discrepancy between individual employees' needs for leadership

and the extent of leadership actually received. In the final part of this theory section we present our research model.

2.1 Interpersonal conflicts at work

2.1.1 Definitions of conflict

Scholars offer several different definitions of the construct conflict, many of them referring to it as a process resulting from the interaction between two or more individuals during which real or perceived differences are encountered (De Dreu et al., 1999; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Römer et al., 2012; Thomas, 1992a; Wall & Callister, 1995). Other researchers argue that this definition is too broad and refer to conflict more narrowly as a "perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously" (Pruitt et al., 2004, p. 4). Yet again others introduced emotional affect as an important addition to the existing definition, calling conflict "a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals" (Barki & Hartwick, 2004, p. 234). Defined "[a]s a type of low-quality interpersonal interaction, workplace interpersonal conflict can interfere with employees' normal organizational life and result in negative affective and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2007; Spector & Jex, 1998)" (Liu et al., 2015, p. 796).

Central to all these definitions, however, is the awareness of the significance of perception which impacts the development of conflicts (Trudel & Reio, 2011). Frequent interaction and communication of individuals, groups, and teams in the workplace inherently leads to differing (and sometimes perhaps contrasting) perceptions and interpretations of what was said, done, and intended, in some cases evolving into conflict.

2.1.2 Conflict sources

Research has focused on two types of conflict sources, namely relationship and task conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; de Wit et al., 2013; DeChurch & Marks, 2001; Jehn, 1997; O'Neill et al., 2013; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Römer et al. (2012) define the two types in the following way: "Relationship conflict occurs when parties disagree about personal issues that are not work-related, such

as clashes of personality, political views, hobbies, and social events. Task conflicts occur when employees disagree about the task being performed, such as what is causing a work-related problem and how they should solve it" (Römer et al., 2012, p. 255).

This common differentiation of conflict types is supported by several empirical studies which have indicated that task and relationship conflicts lead to different outcomes and require different conflict management strategies. Research has shown that team effectiveness can benefit from task conflict under specific conditions (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). One explanation offered for this is that conflicts about task issues ensure higher cognitive understanding, leading to improved quality of decisions made (Simons & Peterson, 2000). On the other hand, relationship conflict is assumed to have disruptive effects in almost all instances because of its highly personal and thus emotional nature, demanding considerable attention and resources, likely impacting individuals' sense of identity and self-esteem (De Dreu et al., 2004; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Römer et al., 2012).

Contrary to these findings, a meta-analysis by De Dreu & Weingart (2003) showed that both task and relationship conflict have significant negative effects on team performance. This can be explained by the information-processing perspective which builds on the notion that a low-intensity conflict may be helpful initially, but once it becomes more intense, cognitive load increases to levels that hinder information processing, thereby adversely affecting team performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Following this line of reasoning, it is questionable whether a strict differentiation of conflict types independent of conflict intensity is particularly useful.

The central assumption that task and relationship conflicts lead to different outcomes does not hold when different task types in teams are considered. In line with the above-mentioned information processing perspective, De Dreu and Weingart (2003) found that the impact of conflict on team performance was less negative depending on the type of task to be completed by the team. In teams working on highly complex tasks, e.g., project, decision-making, or mixed teams, conflict had a more negative effect on performance than in teams working on less complex tasks, e.g., production teams. Contrary to the finding that relationship conflict typically has more detrimental outcomes than task conflict, meta-analytic

research findings by De Dreu and Weingart (2003) suggest that this seems to be the case in decision-making teams only.

Furthermore, as studies have shown, the various conflict types can be related to each other in many instances, which leads to the hypothesis that individuals can misattribute one type of conflict for another (Rispens, 2012; Simons & Peterson, 2000). For example, if a colleague repeatedly disagrees with oneself about certain tasks, at some point this may no longer be perceived as a task-related disagreement, but rather as a personal attack (Römer et al., 2012). Misattributions such as these seem to make the sheer applicability and practicality of differentiating between the various conflict types questionable.

Besides this possibility of misattributions, research on perspective-taking in teams has found evidence that the perception of conflict is contingent on teams' average perspective-taking capacity. Teams with lower average perspective-taking capacity are more likely to perceive a conflict as people-oriented and less likely to perceive it as task-oriented, whereas teams higher on average perspective-taking display opposite perception patterns (Sessa, 1996). This is because team members who employ low levels of perspective-taking are less tolerant of conflict and more likely to assume that conflict is about personal differences rather than task-related issues. People with a highly developed ability for perspective-taking often do not reach the same conclusions, as a prerequisite of perspective-taking is increased understanding and anticipation of differences (Sessa, 1996). The finding that perception of conflict type is, among other factors, partly dependent on the level of perspective-taking further underlines that the frequently made, explicit distinction between relationship and task conflict is too simplistic in its categorical approach.

2.1.3 Conflict intensity

There are several reasons to use conflict intensity to research conflict situations. As previously discussed, the information-processing perspective can be defined by the central empirical finding that "little conflict stimulates information processing, but as conflict intensifies, the cognitive system shuts down, [and] information processing is impeded" (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003, p. 742). Scholars have attributed this phenomenon to an increased cognitive load as conflict intensity rises, disrupting creative thinking, problem-solving, and

cognitive flexibility (Carnevale & Probst, 1998). Next to this destructive impact on cognitive resources, higher conflict intensity can also actively elicit negative emotional responses (Todorova et al., 2014).

To analyze conflict intensity from another theoretical perspective, we draw on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). At its core, the COR theory posits that individuals seek to preserve, protect, and build up resources, defined "as those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). According to the theory, a threatened or actual loss of such valued resources induces stress outcomes (Barling & Frone, 2017; Hobfoll, 1989). Because conflict is a stressor, employees likely experience a threat to or real loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Accordingly, we can assume that higher conflict intensity leads to an increased stress response as employees may perceive valuable resources to be acutely threatened.

Research findings indicate that organizational conflicts of varying intensity often arise from acts of workplace incivility as well as counterproductive workplace behaviors (Kisamore et al., 2010; Trudel & Reio, 2011). In many cases, employees may overlook colleagues behaving slightly rude, however, if this behavior continues on for some time these simple acts of workplace incivility can develop into conflicts (Trudel & Reio, 2011). If such interpersonal conflicts are handled poorly, over time, workplace bullying can actually be observed and detected (Baillien et al., 2016; Einarsen et al., 2018). From a conflict theory perspective, bullying can be defined as "an unsolved social conflict that has reached a high escalation level, combined with a power imbalance between the offender(s) and the victim (Zapf & Gross, 2001)" (Skogstad et al., 2007, p. 88). Therefore, it becomes apparent that conflict intensity and conflict escalation are decisive for the individual perception of conflict as opposed to the initial task or relationship issue that caused the conflict in the first place.

Considering evidence on both the questionable usefulness of differentiating between conflict types and the importance of perceived conflict intensity, this master thesis investigates the latter. Similar approaches can be found in the work of scholars such as Leon-Perez et al. (2015), Schieman and Reid (2008), Baillien et al. (2017), Wright et al. (2017), and Liu et al. (2015), who

also investigate perceptions of interpersonal workplace conflict independent of the possible source of conflict.

2.2 Effects of conflict on employee organizational commitment

There is much empirical evidence that conflict has various and wide-reaching negative effects on employees and organizations (De Raeve et al., 2009). As previously established, from a COR theory perspective, conflict can be perceived as a threat to or experienced as a real loss of resources. This experience likely motivates employees to protect other resources they deem valuable (Hobfoll, 1989). We hypothesize that employees' organizational commitment represents such a resource. Thus, in this master thesis, the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment is investigated.

Organizational commitment is a relevant variable to study because studies have shown that unresolved workplace conflicts can significantly impact it (Frone, 2000; Leather et al., 1998; Pooja et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2005). It is further relevant for investigation because it is a precursor to multiple important organizational outcomes. Research has shown that low organizational commitment predicts employee turnover, for example (Angle & Perry, 1981; Koch & Steers, 1978; Mowday et al., 1982; Reichers, 1985; Somers, 1995; Steers, 1977; Whitener & Walz, 1993). Consistent with these findings, a significant positive outcome of higher organizational commitment is a more permanent labor force with the intent to remain at the organization (Hanaysha, 2016; Steers, 1977; Wang, 2004). Furthermore, research also indicates that higher organizational commitment is linked to higher job performance (Mowday et al., 1974; Organ & Ryan, 1995; Riketta, 2002; Thomas et al., 2005). There is evidence that employee commitment can drive economic success as well as pose a competitive advantage, meaning that organizational commitment seems highly relevant to business strategy, financial results, and overall performance (Mowday, 1998).

As a concept, organizational commitment captures an individual's relation and engagement with their organization (Meyer & Maltin, 2010) and is characterized by a strong occupational focus. For the purpose of our study, we adopt the definition of organizational commitment "as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization

(Porter & Smith, Note 4). It can be characterized by at least three related factors: (1) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; (2) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization" (Mowday et al., 1979, p. 226). Consistent with this definition, organizational commitment goes beyond passive organizational loyalty and represents not only an employee's emotional response to the organization's environment, but also leads to future action (Fishbein, 1967). The combination of attitudes, beliefs, and opinions as well as actions therefore constitutes an active relationship between the individual and the organization. Research suggests that attitudes of organizational commitment develop gradually but relatively consistently over time as individuals think more frequently about how they relate to their organization (Hrebiniak & Alutto, 1972; Meyer et al., 1991).

Different levels of interpersonal workplace conflict have a significant effect on organizational commitment. Even low-intensity conflicts, which frequently take place in the form of workplace incivility, are negatively related to organizational commitment (Pearson et al., 2002; Thomas et al., 2005; Trudel, 2009). In line with this, higher-intensity interpersonal workplace conflict, which can include instances of e.g., verbal abuse, is also negatively associated with employee commitment (Leather et al., 1998; Pooja et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2005). Pooja et al. (2016) explain this relationship by suggesting that disagreements characterized by strong emotions can lead to animosity and may cause employees to feel incompatible with their workplace. As a result, employees may develop a negative attitude toward the organization in general. Because interpersonal workplace conflict is often destructive, the relationship between employees and their organization as a whole may suffer as a result. This is because dysfunctional conflict can induce negative affect in the form of spillover effects, leading to reduced organizational commitment by negatively impacting attitudes toward the organization as a whole (Pooja et al., 2016).

Examining organizational commitment from a COR theory perspective offers another angle worth integrating. To maintain a high level of commitment and attachment to their organization, employees must invest valuable resources. One condition for employees to be able to build emotional attachment or commitment to their organization is that they perceive a work environment where

they are able to satisfy their needs and make use of their abilities is provided (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). If we combine this with insights from the previous section, it is therefore reasonable to hypothesize that a work environment characterized by increasingly high conflict intensity decreases the likelihood of emotional attachment to the organization as well as employees investing their valued resources accordingly. This is further supported by taking into account one of the key tenets of COR theory which posits that employees likely resort to certain withdrawal or defensive mechanisms to maintain their sense of self-efficacy when experiencing an acute threat to or loss of valued resources (Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Leiter, 1991). The perception of increasingly high conflict intensity is likely to be experienced as such a threat. The withholding or withdrawing of commitment to one's work, and subsequently, one's organization, may be one way employees attempt to cope with the stress of losing resources (Cole & Bedeian, 2007; Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). Withholding or withdrawing of commitment can manifest in employees exhibiting a lower willingness to expend extended energy, giving up additional outside rewards, and/or remaining uninvolved when confronted with work-related issues or problems (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). According to Rabl & Triana (2013), such lowering of commitment means employees are able to limit their investment in the organization and are better able to protect remaining resources. Combining research findings on the detrimental effects of interpersonal workplace conflict on organizational commitment, which can be explained by integrating theory on spillover effects and conservation of resources, we propose our first hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 1: **Interpersonal workplace conflict** is associated with lower levels of employee **organizational commitment***.

2.3 The moderating role of conflict management

Conflict management is a crucial element in the relationship between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment because it has the potential to either amplify or buffer the negative effects of conflict (Römer et al., 2012). Empirical findings on conflict management provide evidence that interpersonal workplace conflicts are often inadequately handled (Tjosvold, 2008). This has wide-reaching and potentially harmful consequences as these findings further demonstrate that poor conflict management in organizations

impacts both the frequency and severity of future conflict (Trudel & Reio, 2011) as well as other organizational outcomes (Meyer, 2004; Thomas et al., 2005). On the contrary, situation-appropriate conflict management, which is built on the restoration of relationships and actively addresses feelings of injustice and dissatisfaction among the parties involved, has the potential to decrease the negative effects of conflict and increase effectiveness again (Behfar et al., 2008). From a COR theory perspective, this kind of context-appropriate conflict management may therefore be viewed as a valuable resource. If, on the other hand, there is a lack of useful conflict management, the absence of this resource may result in various negative effects described above (Hobfoll, 1989).

A review of the relevant literature shows there are many different definitions of the concept of conflict management. In general, scholars define the process of conflict management as one that "encompasses a wide range of activities, including communication, problem solving, dealing with emotion, and understanding positions (Brett, 2001; Pondy, 1992; Putnam & Poole, 1987)" (Behfar et al., 2008, p. 171). Involved parties' actions during conflict, in other words, their conflict management behaviors, have commonly been researched from three perspectives. In the organizational conflict research domain, conflict management behaviors are commonly conceptualized as orientations of general behaviors (e.g., avoiding), types of specific behaviors (e.g., threats), or individual styles referring to certain personality traits found in individuals (Behfar et al., 2008). Independent of the perspective, researchers agree that both conflict development as well as its outcomes are contingent on the involved parties' constructive or destructive actions as well as others' perceptions of these (Tjosvold, 2006).

In line with the demonstrated significance of conflict management and the perspectives mentioned above, the theoretical foundation underlying conflict management styles is drawn upon. Earlier research on conflict management behaviors employed in interpersonal conflicts has resulted in different taxonomies of such. Traditionally, three taxonomies dominate conceptualizations of conflict management: Deutsch's (1949, 1973) dichotomy of competition and cooperation, Horney's (1945, 1950) trichotomy of moving away, moving toward, and moving against, and, most extensive, the five-part typology (problem-solving, accommodating, avoiding, compromising, competing) originally based on Blake

and Mouton's (1964) work that was later refined by several others (e.g., Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Rahim, 1983; Thomas, 1976).

Deutsch's (1973, 1990) theory of cooperation and competition represents the first major tradition and differentiates between two main responses to conflict. Deutsch (1973, 1990) posits that whereas a cooperative response takes other conflict parties' interests into account while finding a solution that satisfies all involved parties, a person using a competitive response is determined to pursue a solution that best fits themselves rather than others. As De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) acknowledged, distinguishing solely between competition and cooperation is problematic in that it carries the risk of overlooking the option that conflict parties resist to engage in the conflict and choose to downplay the original issue. Indeed, avoiding is considered a popular conflict management behavior in both quantitative and qualitative research (e.g., Behfar et al., 2008; Römer et al., 2012).

The addition of this third, frequently utilized conflict response, avoiding, is found in Horney's (1945, 1950) work, which represents the second major tradition. Her taxonomy (1945, 1950) presents three central behavioral tendencies individuals display when confronted with conflict: moving against others, moving towards others, and moving away from others. Horney's trichotomy has been substantiated by Putnam and Wilson (1982), who redefined the three responses to conflict as solution-orientation, control, and non-confrontation, respectively. In their comparative study on multiple organizations, Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) likewise identified the three responses to conflict proposed by Horney. Work by other scholars (Balay, 2006; Bell & Blakeney, 1977; Ross & DeWine, 1988; Weider-Hatfield, 1988; Wilson & Waltman, 1988) has resulted in similar empirical evidence.

Next to the trichotomy introduced by Horney (1945, 1950), research commonly builds on a five-part taxonomy originally based on Blake and Mouton's (1964) Dual Concern Theory of interpersonal conflict, the third major tradition of conflict management taxonomies. Others, such as Rahim (1983) and Thomas (1976, 1992b) have developed essentially identical taxonomies, although the terminology used varies across scholars. The five-part taxonomy has expanded the previously discussed and widely accepted trichotomy by adding yielding and compromising as further conflict management behaviors. The Dual Concern Theory depicts conflict management as a dual function of concern, for oneself and

for others. The combination of high and low concern in these two dimensions leads to the establishment of five conflict management styles: avoiding (low-self, low-others), forcing (high-self, low-others), problem-solving (high-self, high-others), yielding (low-self, high-others), and compromising (medium-self, medium-others) (De Dreu et al., 2001; Pruitt et al., 2004). Due to its popularity, our study investigates leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior.

2.3.1 Leaders' third-party role in conflict management

Conflict management, as previously established, has a substantial impact on organizational outcomes such as employee organizational commitment (Thomas et al., 2005). When researching interpersonal workplace conflict, it is necessary to examine leaders in the role of organizational conflict managers. This is because leaders in organizations are often confronted with employee conflict, commonly taking on the role of an emergent third-party (Pinkley et al., 1995) that reacts to conflict between subordinates (Römer et al., 2012). Given their formal responsibility for facilitating the right circumstances for individuals to collaborate effectively, employees typically approach their leaders in situations of non-leader conflict (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Römer et al., 2012). This is because, according to COR theory, leaders generally represent a resource in the form of social support for employees (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The third-party role of leaders is distinctly different from that of external and neutral parties such as business mediators because of preexisting relationships with one or more parties involved in the conflict as well as potential conflicts of interest that may arise (Pinkley et al., 1995; Römer et al., 2012).

As discussed above, there is a wide range of conflict management behaviors leaders can use in situations of employee interpersonal workplace conflict. Existing literature suggests that employees' perceptions of their leaders' conflict management behaviors may amplify or buffer the impact of those behaviors on individual and organizational outcomes such as stress (Römer et al., 2012), job performance and productivity (Meyer, 2004), absenteeism and employee sickness rates (Trudel & Reio, 2011), and organizational commitment (Thomas et al., 2005). Work by various scholars further suggests a connection between leaders' third-party conflict management behaviors and their overall leadership styles (Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Saeed et al., 2014).

Research has shown that the outcome of conflict depends on the perceived appropriateness of the conflict management behavior used by the leader (e.g., Römer et al., 2012) as well as the assumed intention behind it. Oftentimes, intentions are misread by the parties involved. For example, leaders may intend to reduce conflict parties' discomfort by avoiding a conversation but be perceived as closed-minded. A leader's effort to open up dialog by arguing a viewpoint forcefully can come across as a coercion attempt (Tjosvold, 2008). The success of conflict intervention is further contingent on multiple factors such as leaders' managerial and personal qualities, e.g., their biases, interests, and conflict intervention capabilities. Possibilities of intervention are further affected by the nature of the relationship between the leader and the conflict parties, which encompass their respective statuses as well as the level of interpersonal trust (Nugent, 2002). Moreover, the significance of involved parties' conflict management behaviors should not be underestimated (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Tjosvold, 2008).

2.3.2 Avoiding conflict management behavior

In this section, we examine the implications of leaders who, in their third-party role, display avoidant conflict management behavior. Leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior is defined "by attempts to withdraw, deny, and disengage from a conflict situation. Changing the topic or making irrelevant remarks are efforts to avoid conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 1998)" (Trudel & Reio, 2011, p. 400). A strong form of avoiding could mean that a leader refuses to acknowledge the existence of a conflict as well as the necessity to resolve it (Song et al., 2006).

Despite the approach's global popularity (Tjosvold, 2008) and the various reasons why leaders may use an avoiding conflict management style, the impact of using such depends on employees' perceptions of it. Reasons to use avoiding can include a lack of time, underdeveloped conflict resolution knowledge and skills as well as personal characteristics (Nugent, 2002). Leaders employing avoiding behaviors may act out of best intentions, attempting to reduce conflict and (re-)establish harmony by retreating from situations perceived as threatening or delaying issues to a later point in time, for example. However, research suggests that such avoidance behaviors indicate a lack of conflict resolution and

typically induce negative affective feelings as well as contribute to the escalation of conflict (Leon-Perez et al., 2015).

Regardless of the conflict source, if involvement is expected, a leader's avoiding conflict management behavior can not only lead to employees experiencing frustration, but also a perceived lack of support (Römer et al., 2012). Such perceived lack of support, in turn, can entail negative consequences as the leader is typically the organizational representative with whom subordinates interact with most frequently. Perceiving a lack of consideration from their leader may subsequently cause employees to infer that their organization as a whole equally neither values nor appreciates them or their contributions (Lambert et al., 2012). These negative feelings are likely to undermine an employee's impression that their leader does not care about their feelings and is unwilling to help in a conflict situation where support is needed. Because of this perceived lack of support and consideration, employees will likely encounter inadequate supplies to fulfil their psychological needs, which in turn should generate adverse attitudes toward their leader, work, and organization as a whole (Lambert et al., 2012). This is reflected in reduced employee organizational commitment. This negative effect is likely to be stronger in light of the hypothesis that intensifying conflicts have increasingly detrimental effects, and the suggested association between a leader's perceived avoiding behavior and the likelihood of conflict escalation (Kuriakose et al., 2019). Therefore, it can be assumed that employees' organizational commitment will be negatively affected when employees perceive higher levels of leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior (Barker et al., 1988; Lambert et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2005; Trudel, 2009).

The reasoning above gives support to the notion that leadership in the form of social support represents a conditional resource when adopting a COR theory perspective. Social support, which includes leadership, constitutes a resource that not only contributes to the conservation of valuable resources, but can also lead to the depletion of employees' resources. In line with these findings, research suggests that social support has positive effects when it matches employees' specific situational needs. A depleting effect, however, is possible when this is not the case (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Hobfoll, 1989). According to Cohen and Wills (1985), when resources provided do not fully or at least closely match specific needs, they are assumed to be rather ineffective. Excessive social support,

manifested in continuous social companionship, for example, may therefore deplete an introverted employee's resources as those individuals have a high arousal level and tend to avoid external stimulation (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987). The resource provided thus does not match the employee's needs and rather depletes other resources (energy) as a result. Applying this notion of the COR theory to the preceding considerations of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior, such perceived lack of support represents a situational lack of needed resources. Such lack emerges because leaders avoid involvement in workplace conflict despite employees' expectations. Because this expectation of support is not fulfilled, leaders' avoidance behaviors are expected to have a negative effect. As previously discussed with the effect of interpersonal workplace conflict on organizational commitment, from a COR theory perspective, the same mechanism applies here. Leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior is, in the same sense as increasing conflict intensity, likely perceived as threatening to employees' valued resources. The experience of this perceived threat, therefore, is likely to amplify employees' withdrawal intentions in order to protect their remaining resources. Based on this deduction, we propose our second hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2: The negative association between **interpersonal workplace conflict** and employee **organizational commitment** is stronger when employees perceive that their leader displays higher levels of **avoiding conflict management behavior**.*

2.4 Leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior and need for leadership: A three-way interaction?

2.4.1 Need for leadership

A potential moderating effect of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior on the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment has now been hypothesized. Since leadership is a resource from a COR theory perspective (Halbesleben et al., 2014) for which employees have varying needs (De Vries et al., 1999, 2002), need for leadership could moderate the moderating effect of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior. Moreover, existing research suggests that need for leadership is a relevant variable to take into consideration because it possibly captures effects of further organizational, task, and individual characteristics (De

Vries, 1997). Need for leadership can be defined "as the extent to which an employee wishes the leader to facilitate the paths towards individual, group, and/or organizational goals" (De Vries et al., 2002, p. 122) and thus conceptualizes characteristics of subordinates rather than assets of leaders. Need for leadership essentially encompasses both conscious and unconscious mental activities. Employees may act based on these mental activities and communicate to their leader what they want directly or indirectly (De Vries, 1997).

Rather than a basic need, need for leadership can be understood as a quasi-need. De Vries (1997) initially further specified this quasi-need as a social-contextual motive. In later work, De Vries et al. (2002) explain that this quasi-need arises through processes of socialization and is evoked in social environments that encompass expectations surrounding requirements for action and hierarchical relationships. The contextuality of this need is tied to an individual's evaluation of a specific situation (De Vries et al., 2002). Different individuals experience different levels of need for leadership in response to changing settings and times. Settings that evoke feelings of incompetence and/or insecurity are likely to increase an employee's perceived need for leadership, whereas in the absence of these feelings, perceived need for leadership is likely to be lower. Examples of situations where this might be the case are situations where employees are highly experienced and motivated as well as engaged in a continuous feedback and improvement loop with their team members, making leadership intervention less necessary or even redundant (Howell et al., 1990).

In discussing the factors influencing need for leadership, researchers also address the influence of gender. In his foundational work on need for leadership, De Vries (1997) was able to find support for the hypothesis that women generally have a higher need for leadership than men. De Vries explains this finding by drawing on earlier work by Eagly et al. (1994) on women's tendency to fulfil social role requirements. Women's higher need for leadership, as discussed by De Vries (1997), can be understood in the context of women's more comfortable societal position when it comes to subordinate roles. This includes a higher willingness of women to share that they need leadership compared to men.

The extent of leadership needed is further influenced by employees' expectations and assessment of the beneficialness of their leaders' intervention. These inherent expectations and benefit evaluations reflect how individuals

determine the value of specific resources, such as leadership, which is a core building block of the COR theory. According to this theory, something only becomes a resource when individuals value it as such, which subsequently means that the value ascribed to certain resources differs both within and between individuals. In other words, individuals place differing values on different resources as well as differing values on the same resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Valuing the resource of leadership to differing degrees indicates varying need for leadership. An employee who expects great added value from their leader can therefore be expected to place substantial value on leadership as a resource, translating to a higher need for such leadership. Lack of a positive expectation of the beneficialness of a leader's intervention could imply that an individual's need for leadership will be lower (De Vries et al., 1999). This can lead to limited power of leaders to influence their employees, which can again weaken the perceived need for leadership (De Vries et al., 1998). In failing to appropriately meet employees' low need for leadership, a leader's intervention may be perceived as unwanted and can entail various negative employee reactions such as opposition. When leaders match their interventions to employees' need for leadership, on the other hand, research suggests this is beneficial (De Vries et al., 2002; Lambert et al., 2012). In determining how high an employee's need for leadership is, objective assessment is not possible because employees may be unable to accurately determine the extent of leadership needed and will rather act according to their perception of these needs (Lambert et al., 2012).

Building on Kerr and Jermier's (1978) work, De Vries (1997) hypothesized that there are 13 characteristics of subordinates, tasks, and organizations that can decrease employees' need for leadership or make it more difficult to provide leadership. Conflict interferes with several of these characteristics on an individual level, for example, by negatively impacting cognitive ability and processing, as discussed previously. On a task level, for example, the presence of conflict increases ambiguity and unpredictability while interfering with standardized, routine tasks. Furthermore, on an organizational level, conflict oftentimes disrupts the functional collaboration of team members, in some cases severely damaging relationships as well as impairing information and feedback flows. As previously highlighted, from a COR theory perspective, conflict poses a threat to employees' resources (Carnevale & Probst, 1998), which

is hypothesized to increase the value employees ascribe to leadership, with the expectation that leaders will manage the conflict and thereby reduce this threat. Thus, we propose that conflict will amplify employees' need for leadership.

2.4.2 Laissez-faire leadership

Integrating insights on both leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior and employees' need for leadership, laissez-faire leadership needs to be addressed. As mentioned previously, there is a connection between conflict management behaviors and leadership styles. Although leaders employing different leadership styles may respond to workplace conflict with varying degrees of avoidance behaviors, research in this area has shown that the conflict management behavior of avoiding is linked to laissez-faire leadership (Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Saeed et al., 2014; Skogstad et al., 2007; Yang & Li, 2017). This type of leadership can "be defined as a follower-centred form of avoidance-based leadership by focusing on subordinates' perceived situational need for leadership, and leader non-response to such needs, as the main source of variance in outcomes" (Skogstad et al., 2014, p. 325). Across different measuring tools, laissez-faire leadership is commonly defined as this situational need for leadership. Situational need for leadership is a concept first introduced by De Vries et al. (1997; 1999, 2002) and has previously been discussed at length.

Laissez-faire leadership differs from zero leadership in that the laissez-faire leader is officially in charge, but does not fulfil expected role responsibilities and job duties (Eagly et al., 2003; Skogstad et al., 2007; Wong & Giessner, 2018). This failure to meet expectations as well as responsibilities is reflected in leadership (in)actions such as little involvement, interaction and feedback, postponement of decisions, and a lack of effort to motivate employees or fulfil their needs (Bass & Avolio, 1994). When conflict arises, laissez-faire leaders are thus likely to withdraw and abstain from taking sides, pay little attention to or fail to address priorities, and may announce to take action but never actually do so (Bass & Bass, 2008). These avoidance behaviors indicate a lack of active conflict management (Yang & Li, 2017). Like avoiding conflict management behavior, research indicates that a lack of active organizational conflict management has negative effects on employees, which can include growing feelings of work stress and isolation (Loi et al., 2009).

Next to the poor management of conflict, this type of leadership itself can lead to the emergence of conflict. Such emerging and oftentimes escalating conflicts may be the product of insufficient leadership when the leader fails to reward or encourage prosocial behaviors in his/her team and/or does not (choose to) sanction antisocial behaviors by team members (Skogstad et al., 2007). This absence of leadership may create fertile ground for tensions between team members resulting in conflicts (Einarsen, 1999). In addition, leaders who simply adopt a laissez-faire leadership style may give employees the impression that they are intentionally ignoring employees and their needs (Skogstad et al., 2007).

The impact of the perceived lack of leadership depends on the discrepancy between individual employees' needs for leadership and the extent of leadership actually received. Research supports the notion that fit between needs and supplies is more favorable than insufficiency when looking at organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment (Lambert et al., 2012). Important to consider when assessing fit is that employees and leaders perceive leader behaviors differently, and that these interpretations are furthermore subject to both implicit and explicit expectations (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Wong & Giessner, 2018). From a COR theory perspective, laissez-faire leadership can thus be perceived as a type of situational leadership deficiency whereby employees discern a lack of resources, e.g., consideration or competence, suggesting that this type of leadership may have significant negative implications in situations experienced as challenging. In instances where employees feel equipped to cope with the situation, laissez-faire leadership may be, in line with this argument, significantly less influential (Skogstad et al., 2014).

Instances of interpersonal workplace conflict can be considered particularly challenging for employees, making it reasonable to assume an increased need for leadership. Applying COR theory, experiencing a high need for leadership in situations of interpersonal workplace conflict likely prompts employees to value leadership, as a resource, highly. Drawing on previous theoretical considerations, it is therefore plausible to assume that when this resource of leadership is desperately needed, but not provided by the laissez-faire leader, the negative effect of leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior will be stronger than when there is a match between the need for this resource and leaders' adequate supply of such. Following this line of reasoning,

when there is a misfit between needed leadership and actual leadership received, negative effects on outcomes such as organizational commitment can be expected and are supported by research (e.g., Lambert et al., 2012). The larger the gap between needed leadership and actual leadership received, the more negative the effect on organizational commitment, presumably.

To our knowledge, the assessment of laissez-faire leadership simply assumes a discrepancy between leadership needed and leadership provided, while failing to capture the actual need for leadership and the extent of leader avoidance behaviors. Based on the previous elaborations on leaders' perceived third-party avoiding conflict management behavior and employees' need for leadership, our third hypothesis aims to test the combination of these variables. Therefore, we propose a three-way interaction between interpersonal workplace conflict, leaders' perceived third-party avoiding conflict management behavior, and need for leadership on employee organizational commitment:

> *Hypothesis 3: The negative association between **interpersonal workplace conflict** and employee **organizational commitment** is stronger when leaders are perceived to display higher levels of **avoiding conflict management behavior** and employees' **need for leadership** is high, representing a three-way interaction.*

2.5 Research model

Our research model is displayed in Figure 1 below. The previously derived hypotheses are labeled H1, H2, and H3.

Figure 1
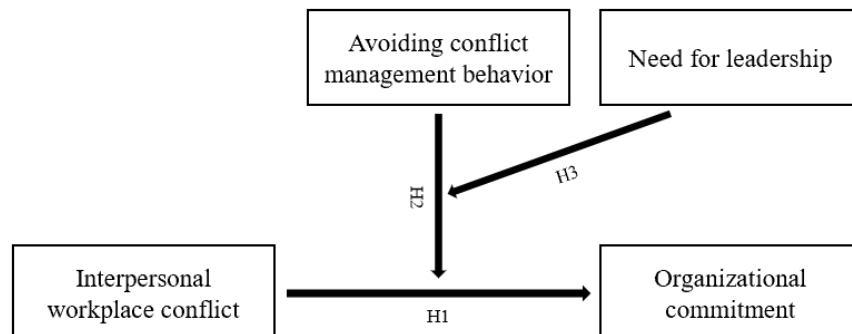
3. Method

3.1 Research design

In line with the previously discussed theory as well as our hypotheses, we employ a cross-sectional research design which follows a quantitative, deductive approach. In accordance with widely adopted practice in deductive research, we use a self-report questionnaire. Our model is based on employees' perception of different constructs rather than potential changes of these between time points, thus, the assessment is conducted at one point in time.

3.2 Data collection

We employed the snowball-sampling technique to collect sufficient responses by leveraging our professional network on the platform LinkedIn. We believe LinkedIn is the most suitable channel for data collection in this instance because of the high probability of reaching employees from a wide range of institutions and based on the reach of our previous LinkedIn posts. For example, we garnered over 10,000 views on several posts in the span of two weeks and both possess an extensive professional network due to multiple years of work experience. Moreover, we encouraged our network to share the questionnaire link with their organization. Next to this, we also reached out to our private, non-professional network. To ensure data anonymity, the same link to the questionnaire was distributed so that later identification and tracing of participants is not possible.

3.3 Measures

By definition, "reliability concerns the extent to which an experiment, test, or any measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials" (Carmines & Zeller, 1979, p. 11). Although all measures included in this study were previously validated, to confirm their internal reliability, we assessed such by calculating Cronbach's alpha. In line with the widely acknowledged rule of thumb that a Cronbach alpha value that meets or ideally exceeds $\alpha = .70$ is considered sufficient (Cortina, 1993), we assessed all measures against this benchmark. All scales included share a high internal reliability as their respective Cronbach alpha values exceed the typical benchmark of $\alpha = .70$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Moreover, the internal consistency of all scales was assessed by conducting a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). To conduct the CFA, we used JASP (Version 0.17.1) and calculated Chi-Square and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI). The CFA demonstrated an adequate fit of the research model to the data based on the model fit indicator CFI = .902. According to van Laar & Braeken (2021), a cut-off value for the CFI equal to or greater than .90 implies a reasonably good fit between observed data and hypothesized model. Therefore, the CFA results indicate acceptable psychometric properties of the scales included in our study and suggest the distinctiveness of variables studied.

3.3.1 Interpersonal workplace conflict

To assess employees' perceptions of interpersonal workplace conflict, six items of the Workplace Interpersonal Conflict Scale (Wright et al., 2017) were used. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' (1) to 'very often' (5). Examples of items included "In the past 30 days, how often have you had a disagreement with others over the work you do?" and "In the past 30 days, how often have you been shown a lack of respect or felt underappreciated by others at work?" (Wright et al., 2017, p. 180). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .82$.

3.3.2 Employee organizational commitment

To measure employee organizational commitment, the Organizational Commitment Scale by Mowday et al. (1979) was used. This scale contains 15 items, six of which are phrased negatively and need to be scored reversely. All items are measured on a 7-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). An example item is "I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful" (Mowday et al., 1979, p. 228). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .92$.

3.3.3 Leaders' perceived third-party avoiding conflict management behavior

The scale to assess leaders' perceived third-party avoiding conflict management behavior was a scale adapted from The Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (De Dreu et al., 2001; Van de Vliert, 1997). In its entirety, it contains five subscales: yielding, compromising, forcing, problem-solving, and avoiding.

In a study by Römer et al. (2012), the four items included in the avoiding subscale were rewritten to fit the third-party role of leaders and inquired about employees' perception of their leaders' display of this conflict management behavior. The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'completely disagree' (1) to 'completely agree' (5). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .74$.

3.3.4 Need for leadership

To measure employees' need for leadership, we adapted De Vries et al.'s (1998) Need For Supervision Scale so it fits our assessment of leader behavior. We rephrased the items slightly to ask participants about their need for leadership in relation to their nearest leader instead of their regional manager, which the items of the scale originally inquired about. The five items included in the scale reflect different aspects of the need for leadership concept. Specifically, "Item 3 asks whether supervision is relevant for the activities carried out during work, Item 4 asks whether supervisors have added value for the work carried out, and Item 5 asks explicitly about the influence of the supervisor. [Item 1] asked subordinates whether they thought supervision is indispensable in the organization [...], thus tapping the more objective, contextual, aspect of need for supervision. [Item 2 asked] whether supervision is seen as relevant for the development of a subordinate [...], reflecting a more subjective aspect" (De Vries et al., 1998, p. 491). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .82$.

3.3.5 Control variables

The effects of gender on conflict management behavior have been widely discussed in research, as Davis et al. (2010) have elaborated on extensively in their work. While some scholars argue that gender plays an important role in the evaluation of conflict management (e.g., Holt & DeVore, 2005; Thomas et al., 2008), others have found little empirical evidence for its significance (e.g., Chusmir & Mills, 1989; Korabik et al., 1993; Renwick, 1977). One example of the former is illustrated in Brewer et al.'s (2002) empirical findings which clearly indicate that women are more likely to be associated with an avoiding conflict management style than men. In this master thesis, we follow Davis et al.'s (2010) proposition that gender differences, no matter how small or large, may affect how female and male leaders are perceived by their employees, and therefore have

included leader gender as well as employee gender as control variables in our study. Participants were asked to select their own and their leader's gender from three options provided: male, female, and non-binary. For the purpose of the analysis, we dichotomized the variables into male (0) and female (1).

4. Analysis

4.1 Preliminary Analyses

To conduct preliminary analyses, multiple analytical procedures were performed using the program IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29) to describe and analyze the data. Next to typical descriptive statistics we calculated Pearson's correlations among the main variables and control variables in our study.

4.2 Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 was tested using hierarchical linear regression analysis, which assesses the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable while taking control variable effects into account. Control variables of participant and leader gender were entered in the first step, and the main predictor interpersonal workplace conflict was entered in the second step.

Hypothesis 2 and 3 were tested using Hayes' (2022) PROCESS (v.4.2), a SPSS macro supplement. All results of interaction analysis are reported in terms of unstandardized B coefficients and hence should be interpreted accordingly. To test Hypothesis 2, PROCESS Model 1 was used to determine the moderating effect of leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior on the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment. Interpersonal workplace conflict was entered as the independent variable, employee organizational commitment was entered as the dependent variable, leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior was entered as the moderating variable, and participant and leader gender were entered as covariates.

Hypothesis 3 was tested using PROCESS Model 3 to investigate the hypothesized three-way interaction effect between interpersonal workplace conflict, leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior, and need for leadership on employee organizational commitment. Interpersonal workplace

conflict was entered as the independent variable, employee organizational commitment was entered as the dependent variable, leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior was entered as a moderator, need for leadership was entered as a second moderator, and participant and leader gender were entered as covariates. To further analyze the hypothesized interaction, simple slope analysis was performed.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive statistics

The sample included a total of $N = 353$ participants. Of the participants, 39.1% were male and 60.9% were female. One participant who identified as non-binary was excluded from the analysis due to the necessity to dichotomize this variable for further analyses. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 72 years [mean (M) = 33.84, standard deviation (SD) = 11.35]. Organizational tenure ranged from a minimum of 1 year to a maximum of 37 years [$M = 5.39$, $SD = 7.32$]. However, an organizational tenure of 1 year appeared most frequently in the dataset, representing 36.5% of participants. 58.2% of participants did not occupy a leadership position. Of those in a leadership position (41.8%), 23.2% had personnel responsibilities. Responses collected represented employees working in a total of 28 countries, with 42.3% of participants working in Germany, 14.9% in Norway, and 10.8% in Austria. More than 50% of participants worked in organizations with more than 1,000 employees. From this group, more than half worked in organizations with more than 10,000 employees. The sample almost equally represented participants who work in smaller departments (up to 15 employees) and larger departments (more than 15 employees). While 22.9% of participants worked in the public sector, 77.1% worked in the private sector.

When asked about their nearest leader, 56% of participants reported them as male and 44% of participants reported them as female. More than 60% of participants reported their leaders' age to be between 30 and 49 years, followed by 23.6% of leaders between 50 and 59 years. Besides these large age categories, there were only a small percentage of leaders reported to be younger than 30 or older than 60 years. Furthermore, 7% of leaders had less than 1 year of leadership experience, 32.3% had between 1 and less than 5 years, 25.2% had between 5 and

less than 10 years, 16.1% had between 10 and less than 15 years, and 19.4% had more than 15 years. Means and standard deviations for all study variables can be found in Table 1.

5.2 Correlations

Table 1 contains the calculated Pearson correlations among the main variables in this study (interpersonal workplace conflict, leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior, need for leadership, employee organizational commitment) as well as the control variables participant and leader gender. Participant gender was correlated significantly and positively with conflict intensity, organizational commitment, and need for leadership. Leader gender was correlated significantly and negatively with leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study Variables

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Participant Gender	353	1.61	0.49	–					
2 Leader Gender	348	1.44	0.50	.17**	–				
3 Interpersonal Workplace Conflict	330	1.77	0.60	.17**	.01	(.82)			
4 Organizational Commitment	273	4.71	1.12	.13*	.05	-.51**	(.74)		
5 Avoiding Conflict Management Behavior	301	2.51	0.76	-.05	-.16**	.20**	-.31**	(.92)	
6 Need for Leadership	268	3.55	0.88	.16**	.06	-.31**	.45**	-.35**	(.82)

Note. Gender: 0 = Male, 1 = Female. Cronbach's alpha values are presented on the diagonal line in parentheses. * $.01 < p < .05$ (two-tailed test). ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

5.3 Hypothesis Tests

5.3.1 Hypothesis 1

It was hypothesized that interpersonal workplace conflict is associated with lower levels of employee organizational commitment. Results for the hierarchical regression analysis can be seen in Table 2. The variance explained by the model was 30.6% [$F(3, 268) = 39.460$, $p < .001$]. The results indicate that

interpersonal workplace conflict was significantly and negatively associated with employee organizational commitment ($\beta = -0.544$, $p < .001$). The variance explained by the independent variable alone is equal to $\Delta R^2 = .288$. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Hypothesis 1

Model		B	SE	t
1	(Constant)	4.131	.284	14.543**
	Participant Gender	.295	.141	2.089
	Leader Gender	.072	.139	.518
2	(Constant)	5.620	.278	20.228
	Participant Gender	.506	.120	4.202**
	Leader Gender	.049	.117	.417
	Interpersonal Workplace Conflict	-1.015	.096	-10.542**

Note. Dependent Variable: Organizational Commitment. $R^2 = .019$ for Model 1, $R^2 = .306$ for Model 2. $\Delta R^2 = .019$ for Model 1, $\Delta R^2 = .288$ for Model 2. ** $p < .01$.

5.3.2 Hypothesis 2

The study postulated that leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior has a moderating effect on the relationship between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment. The variance explained by the model was 34.41% [$F(5, 266) = 30.6589$, $p < .001$]. The interaction term for interpersonal workplace conflict and leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior was not significant (B = 0.0180, $p = .8758$) with $\Delta R^2 = .0001$. The hypothesized moderating effect of leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior on the relationship between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment is not significant and therefore Hypothesis 2 is rejected. Conditional effects at different values of the moderating variable leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Conditional Effects of the Focal Predictor Interpersonal Workplace Conflict at Values of the Moderator Avoiding Conflict Management Behavior

Avoiding	*B*	*SE*	*t*	LLCI	ULCI
Low	-.9671	.1508	-6.4119	-1.2640	-.6701
Medium	-.9535	.1025	-9.3061	-1.1553	-.7518
High	-.9400	.1148	-8.1890	-1.1660	-.7140

Note. Avoiding = Avoiding Conflict Management Behavior. $p = .00$.

5.3.3 Hypothesis 3

In the study a three-way interaction effect between interpersonal workplace conflict, leaders' third-party avoiding conflict management behavior, and need for leadership was hypothesized. The variance explained by the final model was 38.74% [$F(9, 254) = 18.1398$, $p < .001$]. The hypothesized three-way interaction is significant (B = -0.2299, $p = .0337$), yielding support for Hypothesis 3. The investigated interaction term explained close to 1% of unique variance ($\Delta R^2 = .0086$). Conditional effects at different values of the moderating variables can be seen in Table 4. A graphical depiction of this interaction can be seen in Figure 2. According to simple slope analysis, all slopes were statistically significant. Simple slope analysis shows that the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment is significant at all levels of the moderator (leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior). Further, the interaction shows that the association is still significantly stronger when there is a combination of high need for leadership and high avoiding conflict management behavior. This means simple slope analysis supported that higher levels of avoiding conflict management behavior in combination with higher levels of need for leadership increased the negative effect of interpersonal workplace conflict on employee organizational commitment.

Figure 2

The Three-Way Interaction between Interpersonal Workplace Conflict, Avoiding Conflict
Management Behavior, and Need for Leadership

Table 4

Conditional Effects of the Focal Predictor Interpersonal Workplace Conflict at Values of the Moderators Avoiding Conflict Management Behavior and Need for Leadership

Avoiding	NeedfL	*B*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Low	Low	-.9533	.2418	-3.9421	.0001	-1.4295	-.4771
Low	Medium	-.7845	.1645	-4.7678	.0000	-1.1086	-.4605
Low	High	-.6495	.1973	-3.2920	.0011	-1.0380	-.2610
Medium	Low	-.8557	.1556	-5.4980	.0000	-1.1623	-.5492
Medium	Medium	-.8594	.1089	-7.8910	.0000	-1.0738	-.6449
Medium	High	-.8623	.1400	-6.1597	.0000	-1.1380	-.5866
High	Low	-.7582	.1296	-5.8494	.0000	-1.0134	-.5029
High	Medium	-.9342	.1542	-6.0587	.0000	-1.2379	-.6306
High	High	-1.0750	.2155	-4.9897	.0000	-1.4993	-.6507

Note. Avoiding = Avoiding Conflict Management Behavior. NeedfL = Need for Leadership.

6. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the moderating effect of leaders' perceived third-party avoiding conflict management behavior on the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment. In addition, this master thesis explored a potential three-way interaction between interpersonal workplace conflict, leaders' perceived third-party avoiding conflict management behavior, and need for leadership in an effort to investigate a) whether such an interaction exists and b) how this interaction affects employee organizational commitment.

In line with an extensive review of the existing literature and empirical findings on interpersonal workplace conflict in previous sections, this study found support for Hypothesis 1. That is, our data shows that there is a significant negative association between experiencing interpersonal workplace conflict and an employee's organizational commitment. This result highlights that an individual's perception of conflict can subsequently have detrimental effects due to the demonstrated negative impact of low organizational commitment on organizational outcomes (e.g., Frone, 2000; Leather et al., 1998; Pooja et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2005).

We hypothesized a significant negative moderating effect of leaders' perceived third-party avoiding conflict management behavior on the association

between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, this effect was not significant, which means that leader avoidance in and of itself does not indicate when this association holds true. In other words, according to our data, the negative effect of interpersonal workplace conflict on employee organizational commitment is not contingent on whether or not employees perceive their leaders to be displaying avoiding conflict management behavior. This non-finding is not in line with previously discussed theory and empirical findings on leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior and laissez-faire leadership, which is demonstrably linked to leaders' avoidance conflict management patterns (Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Saeed et al., 2014; Skogstad et al., 2007; Yang & Li, 2017).

In light of this non-finding we criticize the widely accepted notion that avoidant leadership matters across contexts and entails negative consequences. Adopting a COR theory perspective, we believe this result offers several possible interpretations. First, it indicates that leadership is, on average, less valued as a resource than expected based on theoretical presumptions. We draw on Halbesleben and colleagues' (2014) work to offer a more comprehensive interpretation of this result. According to their COR-based literature review, the value of resources can differ depending on the approach emphasized: the nomothetic approach is built on the idea that some resources have universal value, whereas the idiographic approach is built on the idea that resource value is determined by the fit between the individual and the resource. Our result is therefore in line with the latter approach in that it gives support to the notion that resource value is mainly determined on an individual rather than a universal basis – at least for the resource of leadership. It thus underscores the importance of questioning the seemingly universal value of resources such as leadership in light of the ongoing research effort by scholars (see e.g., Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Morelli & Cunningham, 2012) to identify the determinants of resource value. Second, the result may be seen as a hint that although leadership can be perceived as a valuable resource, it is not the only resource that seems to matter in times of conflict. This could be the case because employees who experience interpersonal workplace conflict draw on other resources than leadership, e.g., interpersonal skills, to effectively cope with the situation. Third, another angle worth discussing in light of this result is a possible link between

avoidant leadership and autonomy. It could be that employees view a leader who is not present when not needed as one who grants autonomy to them, leaving them to do their work as they see fit and develop solutions to their problems independently. Because autonomy represents one of three basic psychological needs (Van den Broeck et al., 2010) and influences performance motivation (Humphrey et al., 2007), a leader perceived as non-involved could contribute to employees' motivation to work in an autonomous fashion (Yang, 2015). This interpretation is further supported by research that links autonomy-supportive leadership to various positive employee-related outcomes such as psychological job adjustment and task motivation (see e.g., Baard et al., 2004). Therefore, if employees actually perceive leaders' avoidance behaviors as autonomy-enhancing and empowering, it makes sense that their organizational commitment does not suffer as a result.

The assumption that avoidant leadership is detrimental in and of itself therefore seems to not hold true. Instead, the question emerges whether certain conditions must be present for it to matter, and if so, what those conditions are. Examining the results of Hypothesis 2 and 3 jointly, it becomes apparent that a high need for leadership is such a condition. In short, our data shows that leaders' perceived avoiding conflict management behavior does not matter unless employees have a high need for leadership.

More specifically, the results of our study indicate that while the relationship between perceived interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment is negative at all levels of leaders' perceived avoiding conflict management behavior and employees' need for leadership (as illustrated by the negative slopes depicted in Figure 2), the effect of higher levels of perceived avoiding conflict management behavior has stronger negative implications for employee organizational commitment when employees' need for leadership is high. As can be seen from the narrowing slopes with increasing conflict intensity in the bottom graph, the importance of how avoidant a leader behaves in a conflict situation seems to decrease when employees' need for leadership is lower. An opposite trend emerges when employees have a high need for leadership, as is evident from the diverting slopes in the top graph, which represent different levels of leaders' perceived avoiding conflict management behavior. We expected that need for leadership would strengthen the moderating

effect of avoiding leadership, but the graphs show that the moderating role of avoidant leadership is in fact entirely dependent on need for leadership. It does not strengthen, but explain it.

In other words, we would have expected that the effect of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior would have been even more detrimental when there is a high need for leadership. That means that, from a COR theory perspective, the resource leadership is valued highly, likely indicating that employees have a high expectancy toward their leader to take charge when workplace conflict arises. However, our results show that the effect of leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior can be explained only when the value employees ascribe to leadership is assessed as well, thus taking into account the extent to which employees' need for leadership is not met. Building on this, only when employees value the resource of leadership highly and it is not provided, they may realize that their work environment does not enable them to protect and expand their resources. The larger the gap, the stronger employees' withdrawal mechanisms might be stimulated, causing employees to withdraw their commitment to the organization. Put briefly, only when employees' need for leadership is left unmet to an extent large enough does their organizational commitment suffer significantly.

In light of this finding, rather than focusing on how an avoidant leader behaves in a conflict situation, the focus should be on the degree of gap between needed and received leadership, since this gap appears to be of crucial importance. When this gap is smaller, and employees receive an amount of leadership that satisfies or almost satisfies their needs, employees might perceive their leader less negatively. This less negative leader perception could lead to smaller spillover effects toward the organization, which would subsequently have a less negative impact on employee organizational commitment.

Revisiting the previously drawn upon COR theory perspective, we return to our discussion that it could be that employees simply value leadership less than other resources, e.g., social support from colleagues (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Having other valued resources available could balance out the negative effect of a leader's avoiding conflict management behavior. In other words, it could be that support and consideration from colleagues in times of conflict are resources of similar or equal value to leadership support, which translates to a lower need for

leadership. In such instances, a highly avoidant leader likely does not pose a substantial threat, therefore, employees' withdrawal mechanisms are not activated as strongly. As a result, their organizational commitment suffers less. On the contrary, when employees do not perceive resources other than leadership as valuable or do not have a sufficiently large amount of other resources available to draw upon, they will likely experience a higher need for leadership with the consequences described above.

If we apply this central finding to laissez-faire leadership, it becomes apparent that the usual assumption of a gap between leadership needed and leadership supplied is not sufficient. This has several implications worth discussing. Firstly, it is important to assess avoiding conflict management behavior and need for leadership separately. Secondly, in short, laissez-faire leadership is not simply laissez-faire leadership in terms of its effectiveness. Rather, the (in)effectiveness of a laissez-faire leader is dependent on the specific gap between needed and received leadership of each employee. According to Bass and Avolio (1994), groundwork scholars on leadership styles, laissez-faire leadership is considered the most ineffective way to lead compared to the two other styles included in their Full Range of Leadership model. However, it is too simple to assume a certain ineffectiveness of laissez-faire leadership based on an assumed gap between needed and received leadership when our results show that this gap is decisive for how ineffective this leadership style truly is.

While calling to assess need for leadership, we need to recognize the specificity of such an assessment. Need for leadership is a characteristic of the follower, not the leader, and is dynamic and fluid within and between individuals as it is both context- and situation-dependent (De Vries, 1997). These qualities make it difficult – yet utterly important – for leaders to assess it, especially when employees are rather heterogeneous in their need for leadership and differ from each other. This might be the case in teams that are characterized by diversity which can include but is not limited to members' tenures, abilities, personalities, and genders (Homan et al., 2020). This could be especially difficult in organizations facing continuous and constant changes in teams. For example, leaders working with many incoming employees may find it especially challenging to initially assess their need for leadership.

Although leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior is particularly detrimental for employees' organizational commitment when the gap between leadership needed and received is substantial, avoidant leadership does not have a positive effect when this gap is smaller – the effect on organizational commitment is only less negative. This inherently negative effect of avoiding, when exhibited by leaders, offers several angles worth discussing.

When involved in interpersonal workplace conflict, most employees expect leader involvement to a certain degree to facilitate conflict management and create environments in which team members can collaborate effectively (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Pinkley et al., 1995; Römer et al., 2012). For some leaders, this may be more difficult than for others based on their personal characteristics. Specifically, the pitfall of avoidance may befall leaders with a pronounced need for harmony. They may postpone intervening in situations of conflict where prompt action might mitigate escalation or may be personally inclined to settle for easily accomplished, superficial solutions in an effort to diffuse conflict without having to address its underlying causes (Nugent, 2002).

Next to these typically shared expectations for the leader to actively manage workplace conflict, the perceived appropriateness of the conflict management behavior used by the leader as well as the inferred or assumed intention behind it could play into the negative effect of leaders' avoiding behavior. Some leaders, driven by good intentions, may believe that there are good reasons to use avoiding conflict management behavior. Our findings, however, allow us to challenge this belief as they support the notion that good reasons do not exist unless there is no need for leadership. As highlighted previously, individuals frequently misinterpret each other's intentions. Despite a leader's genuine intention to prevent conflict escalation, such attempt could be interpreted as disinterest in employees' concerns.

Another reason leaders may refrain from intervening in employee conflict is maintaining the image of impartiality. Nugent (2002) posits that both the maintenance of strict impartiality as well as the appearance of such impartiality is crucial for leaders. Leaders may, for these reasons, try their best to resist attempts by involved parties to win them over by avoiding interactions with such. They may also behave in certain ways to clearly establish impartiality, for example, by not speaking to involved parties about the conflict at all to avoid signaling

sympathy towards one side or the other. Besides our belief that it is entirely possible for leaders to maintain impartiality and credibility while actively assisting in conflict resolution, our research shows that leaders who engage in avoidance behaviors ultimately fall short of their overarching objective to not be perceived negatively.

7. Implications

7.1 Implications for Practice

From a practical perspective, the present research findings support the notion that leaders' perceived conflict management behavior in situations of interpersonal workplace conflict affect organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment. Firstly, our results underline the importance of organizations and their members being aware of the detrimental consequences of interpersonal workplace conflict and the escalation potential of such. In the same sense, organizations may benefit from investing in organizational members' understanding of the relevance of organizational commitment.

Secondly, organizations should ensure that their leaders are not only aware of the potential negative effects of avoiding conflict management behavior on outcomes such as organizational commitment but are further equipped with the appropriate knowledge and tools to effectively resolve conflicts. Two aspects should be emphasized here. Throughout our study, we placed particular importance on the significance of perception. The notion that employees' perceptions of both interpersonal workplace conflict and leaders' conflict management behavior are decisive should be reflected in organizational leadership training. As Römer et al. (2012) also suggested in their research, this specifically includes that leaders learn to be more transparent about their intentions and actions to avoid being perceived as conflict-avoidant. This training should ensure that leaders refrain from using an avoiding conflict management style simply because they do not feel confident in their ability to resolve a conflict. In addition, leadership training should include raising awareness of leadership as a valuable resource for many employees, especially in times of conflict.

Thirdly, organizations and leaders should invest more in detecting and recognizing individual employees' need for leadership. Therefore, we support

Lambert et al.'s (2012) recommendation that organizations should equip leaders with necessary tools that enable them to determine employees' need for leadership to subsequently calibrate the extent of leadership provided in accordance with the extent and kind of leadership needed by individual employees. As a part of this, leaders should develop an understanding of the possibly severe consequences of a discrepancy between leadership needed and leadership supplied.

7.2 Implications for Research and Theory

Our unprecedented study design enables us to offer several relevant implications for research and theory. Our research findings indicate the relevance of need for leadership while simultaneously pointing to the necessity to investigate this concept further. Hence, we suggest scholars to research how individuals' need for leadership can be assessed both effectively and efficiently in an organizational context. This should include both appropriate tools as well as subsequent enablement of leaders to properly use such. Since need for leadership is contingent on employees' perception, it seems promising to consider how employees can be involved in determining the changing appropriate amounts of leadership needed.

The importance of need for leadership should further be reflected in future research on laissez-faire leadership. Previous studies on this type of leadership have generally assumed that it entails a supply of leadership that is too low. Research on passive and avoidant leadership, terms some scholars use interchangeably with laissez-faire leadership, has also generally assumed that leader avoidance in and of itself is harmful (see e.g., Barling & Frone, 2017; Skogstad et al., 2014). In light of our findings, we criticize this presumption because it does not take individual subordinates' need for leadership into account, thereby reflecting and reproducing an oversimplified and incomplete picture. Investigations of laissez-faire leadership that reflect an awareness of need for leadership are crucial so that empirical research can be conducted on the size of the gap between leadership needed and leadership supplied. Subsequently, theory on laissez-faire leadership should be expanded by these new insights because the current understanding of this type of leadership is deficient, as our study shows.

Initial efforts to expand the knowledge sphere on laissez-faire leadership have been undertaken by Skogstad and colleagues (2007, 2014). Their work

stands for a limited number of studies on laissez-faire leadership which have recognized that need for leadership is a relevant element to explore when striving towards a more holistic understanding of laissez-faire leadership (see Skogstad et al., 2014; Yang, 2015; Yukl, 2006). Precisely, Skogstad et al. (2014) suggest that leaders should refrain from using a laissez-faire leadership style. These scholars posit that "[t]his is probably especially true when subordinates are in need of leadership" (Skogstad et al., 2014, p. 337). Despite stating this recognition explicitly, leadership scholars have yet to empirically test need for leadership when assessing the effect of leaders' avoidance behaviors. Moreover, to our knowledge, no deliberate attempts have been made to quantify the discrepancy that results from an employee's need for leadership and a leader's avoidance to provide it. What the present master thesis thus aims to contribute in addition to increased awareness of need for leadership is the quantification of this need-dimension. Our study allows us to offer some initial insight into how leader avoidance and need for leadership act separately and in conjunction with each other, and hence to demonstrate when and to what degree the two affect the organizational commitment of employees who experience conflict.

Our research finding on the importance of leadership in times of conflict has additional implications for future research on COR theory. We propose that more research is needed on the influence of individual differences on personal need for leadership, which includes investigations of the value of particular resources in particular situations for particular individuals. Another aspect we believe to be promising lies in further exploring under which other conditions – aside from conflict – the value of resources varies. In addition, it could be relevant to not only examine the value of particular resources but also their effectiveness, a proposal that ultimately entails the larger question of whether a resource can only be effective when it is seen as valuable. Because our study was conducted with a predominantly Western sample, we call for more research to investigate whether the variation in the ascribed value of a resource could be contingent on culture. Pines et al. (2002), in their cross-cultural study on the importance of six functions of social support (a conditional resource), discovered certain similarities in terms of how different countries interpret the importance of a particular resource. Their work may serve as a starting point for this endeavor, however, we recommend that

further investigations are necessary to shed light on the relationship between culture and the assignment of value to resources.

Aside from COR-specific implications for research and theory, we recommend that scholars should further investigate if leaders' perceived avoiding conflict management behavior is moderated by factors other than need for leadership. At the same time, organizational outcomes other than employee organizational commitment should be investigated to examine whether our research findings are generalizable to such.

8. Limitations

There are several methodological limitations to this study. Firstly, we utilized a cross-sectional study design, which does not allow for inferences of causality. That means even if we assume, based on existing literature, and subsequently demonstrate that perceived interpersonal workplace conflict negatively affects employee organizational commitment, we are not able to prove that organizational commitment is a consequence and not an antecedent. This limitation could be addressed in a longitudinal study which would allow for confirmation of the direction of the relationships between the variables assessed (Einarsen et al., 2018).

Secondly, as we have pointed out, our research findings represent new insights in the area of third-party conflict management behavior as well as laissez-faire leadership. Although it is important to highlight the implications of these findings, we recognize that they are only based on one study. To ensure these findings are not merely explainable by e.g., our study design or our sample, our hypotheses should be tested again using revised designs and different samples. Several replications of our study are necessary before concluding with certainty that leaders' avoiding conflict management behavior is, in general, not of significant influence. Once replication studies have been conducted and yield results which are supportive of our findings, these findings can supplement existing knowledge.

Thirdly, all data was collected using a self-report questionnaire with a single data source, an approach which could result in common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Empirical evidence, however, has shown that such a bias occurs much less frequently than previously assumed (Doty & Glick, 1998;

Spector, 2006). Our study solely focused on the perception of individual employees, including their perception of interpersonal workplace conflict as well as their leaders' third-party conflict management behavior. Next to this, employees reported their personal perceived need for leadership and organizational commitment. Data collected from these self-reported measures may differ from potentially more objective observational assessments, e.g., it is likely that in some cases, leaders' behavior is perceived as avoiding by one employee, whereas when observed by a neutral third-party, the same behavior would not be regarded as such. However, the decision to build our research on individual assessments of perception is rooted in our understanding that perception is the critical factor for the emergence and development of conflict as well as the interpretation of others' behavior (Kuriakose et al., 2019).

Fourthly, in our study, it was not possible to control for all potentially relevant influences on the variables themselves. An example of a relevant influence worth considering could be cultural background, as research has shown that the conflict management behavior of avoiding is perceived differently across cultures (Tjosvold, 2008).

Fifthly, although we tried to reach as many participants from as many countries as possible to generate as diverse and representative a sample as possible, this effort is expandable. Because of this, the research results are neither generalizable across countries nor within one specific country.

9. Conclusion

In this master thesis, we investigated employees' perceptions of interpersonal workplace conflict and its association with employees' organizational commitment. Our study has provided support for the hypothesis that experiencing interpersonal workplace conflict has a significant negative effect on employee organizational commitment, producing a finding in line with existing research. We did not find support for the hypothesized moderating effect of leaders' perceived avoiding conflict management behavior on the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment. This non-finding is not in line with existing theory and previous research. Moreover, we explored a potential three-way interaction between interpersonal workplace conflict, leaders' perceived avoiding conflict

management behavior and employees' need for leadership. As expected, this hypothesis was supported and helps us understand the previously discussed non-finding. Specifically, it seems that need for leadership does not simply strengthen, but is necessary to explain, the effect of leaders' perceived avoiding conflict management behavior on the association between interpersonal workplace conflict and employee organizational commitment. Our results demonstrate that the gap between leadership needed and leadership supplied is decisive for how severe avoiding conflict truly is.

This finding of novel character contributes to the literature on laissez-faire leadership which typically simply assumes a gap between leadership needed and leadership supplied. By assessing these separately, our study enables us to craft a more nuanced picture of the effect leaders' avoidance behaviors can have in times of conflict. Our findings add to the knowledge on how interpersonal workplace conflict affects both individuals as well as organizations and highlights the importance of ensuring leaders are aware of the significant value of matching their support to their employees' needs. In addition, our results support the notion that leaders should be trained to (pro-)actively manage workplace conflict.

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11. Appendix

Appendix 11.1: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

The Conflict and Leadership Survey
This information sheet will give you insight about the purpose of the research project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the research project
Conflict is part of everyday organizational life and affects every employee. In this survey, we investigate topics such as conflicts in organizations, leadership behavior, and wellbeing.

Who is responsible for the research project?
BI Norwegian Business School (BI) is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?
You are invited to participate in this survey if you currently work in an organization and if you currently report to a leader/manager/supervisor (also as part of a team).

What does participation involve for you?
If you choose to participate in this online survey, you will now be asked to answer a series of questions. This will take approximately 5 minutes. Your answers will be recorded electronically. All information will be anonymous and cannot be traced back to you. The information will be used for research purposes only. Participation is voluntary, and you always have the right to exit the survey. Once you have submitted your responses, it is not possible to delete or remove them, as participation is anonymous and individual responses cannot be identified.

What will happen to your data at the end of the research project?
The anonymous data for this project could potentially be used for generating original scientific publications, follow-up studies, and archiving for future research.

Where can I find out more?
If you have any questions about the project, want additional information, or want to exercise your rights, contact:
• Maren Raß (maren-rass@gmx.de) and Catriona Stohlmann (catrionastohlmann@outlook.com)
• Mats Glambek for BI Norwegian Business School
• BI Norwegian Business School's Data Protection Officer: Ingrid Østensen

Yours sincerely,
Maren Raß and Catriona Stohlmann

Consent form

◯ I have read and understood this information sheet and consent to participate in this research project

◯ I choose not to participate and wish to end this survey

Appendix 11.2: Questionnaire

Demographic Questions

Please answer the following questions about yourself.

What gender do you identify as?

○ Male

○ Female

○ Non-binary / Other

How old are you?
Please enter a whole number

[   ]

How long have you been working for your current organization (in years)?
Please enter a whole number

[   ]

What is the name of the country you work in?

[   ]

Approximately, how many employees does your organization have?

○ <20

○ 20-49

○ 50-99

○ 100-499

○ 500-999

○ 1000-9999

○ >10000

How many employees does your department have?

○ <5

○ 5-14

○ 15-29

○ 30-50

○ >50

Is your organization in the public or private sector?

○ Public Sector

○ Private Sector

Are you currently in a leadership position?

○ Yes, and it includes personnel responsibility for employees

○ Yes, but it does not include personnel responsibility for employees

○ No

Your Leader

Please answer the following questions about your leader/manager/supervisor. Please think of the leader/manager/supervisor nearest to you.

What is your leader's gender?

○ Male

○ Female

○ Non-binary / Other

What is your leader's age?

○ 20-29

○ 30-39

○ 40-49

○ 50-59

○ >60

Approximately, for how long has your leader occupied leadership positions (including positions in other organizations)?

○ <1 year

○ 1 year to <5 years

○ 5 years to <10 years

○ 10 years to <15 years

○ >15 years

○ I don't know

The following statements are about conflicts at work. Please indicate for each statement which response option is most fitting from your perspective.

In the past 30 days, how often have you:

	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
Felt like you were treated unfairly by others at work?	○	○	○	○	○
Had a disagreement with others over the work you do?	○	○	○	○	○
Been shown a lack of respect or felt underappreciated by others at work?	○	○	○	○	○
Been treated with hostility or rude behavior by others at work?	○	○	○	○	○
Had others yell at you at work?	○	○	○	○	○
Been blamed or criticized for something that was not your fault by others at work?	○	○	○	○	○

The following statements are about your leader, when there are conflicts in your workplace.
Please think of your nearest leader and indicate for each statement which response option is most fitting from your perspective.

How does your leader react if there is any disagreement between subordinates (you and your colleagues - in the following referred to as 'parties'), regardless if the issue is work-related or nonwork-related?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My leader avoids confrontation about the interests.	○	○	○	○	○
My leader tries not to get involved.	○	○	○	○	○
My leader avoids the parties.	○	○	○	○	○
My leader avoids differences of opinions as much as possible.	○	○	○	○	○

The following statements are about the impact of your leader. Please think of your nearest leader and indicate for each statement which response option is most fitting from your perspective.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
In this organization the role of my leader is absolutely indispensable.	○	○	○	○	○
My leader cannot teach me anything.	○	○	○	○	○
For my job-related activities it does not really matter whether I have my leader or not.	○	○	○	○	○
I cannot see much added value of my leader on my work.	○	○	○	○	○
My leader has a marked influence on my performance.	○	○	○	○	○

The following statements are about possible feelings you might have about the organization you work for. Please indicate for each statement which response option is most fitting from your perspective.

	Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Moderatly Agree	Strongly Agree
I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel very little loyalty to this organization.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for this organization.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I find that my values and the organization's values are very similar.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I could just as well be working for a different organization as long as the type of work was similar.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This organization really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
It would take very little change in my present circumstances to cause me to leave this organization.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am extremely glad that I chose this organization to work for over others I was considering at the time I joined.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
There's not too much to be gained by sticking with this organization indefinitely.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Often, I find it difficult to agree with this organization's policies on important matters relating to its employees.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I really care about the fate of this organization.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
For me this is the best of all possible organizations for which to work.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Deciding to work for this organization was a definite mistake on my part.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○