

**A Cross-level Examination of the Relationship between  
Workplace Values, Conflict and Trust**

Ju Li Ng\*

*UQ Business School, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia*

Email: [j.ng@business.uq.edu.au](mailto:j.ng@business.uq.edu.au)

Dr Oluremi B. Ayoko

*UQ Business School, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia*

Email: [r.ayoko@uq.edu.au](mailto:r.ayoko@uq.edu.au)

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**ABSTRACT** *Scholars have given enormous attention to the top-down process of how organisational values influence individual values yet literature suggests that individual values do shape team values. Furthermore, few studies have examined the process by which specific individual values impact team values and how these team values influence team processes such as conflict and trust behaviours at the workplace. Similarly, conflict literature is replete with studies that focus on trust as antecedent to conflict but few have examined the reverse proposition that conflict has an impact on trust. To bridge these gaps in literature, this paper proposes a theoretical model aimed at examining a cross-level relationship between values, conflict and trust at the workplace. The implications of research are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** values, conflict management and team processes

### **INTRODUCTION**

Researchers have examined the association between values and organisational variables such as conflict and trust. For example, research reveals that similarity in values and value congruence leads to less conflict (Jehn, 1994, Jehn, Chadwick & Caldwell, 1997) while shared values can potentially increase the propensity to trust (Mayer, Davis & Shoorman, 1995). What is not known is how the constructs of value, conflict and trust interact simultaneously with one another. Similarly, most studies on the relationship between conflict and trust have conceptualised conflict as an antecedent of trust while the reverse proposition that conflict can impact trust has been largely ignored. Furthermore, most research on workplace value has focused separately on the individual, team and organisational level as the unit of analysis while neglecting the advantages that accrue to the research investigating multi-level issues (Erez & Gati, 2004). To bridge these gaps, we propose a theoretical model on the interplay between values, conflict and trust. Our model contributes to three streams of literature namely value, conflict and trust literature by proposing that individual values will impact the adoption of team values and these team values will affect intra-team conflict and team trust.

### **MODEL DEVELOPMENT**

#### ***Individual Values***

In this research, we focus on values at the individual level and we define individual values as “a person’s internalized belief about how he or she should or ought to behave” (Ravlin, 1995: 598). Although relevant literature and various value studies conceptualise individual values variously (see O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992), the present research is

focused on two main individual values of achievement and self-direction. Achievement value is defined as the motivation to be influential, ambitious, successful and capable (Schwartz, 1992), while self-direction value is defined as reliance and gratification from one's independent capacities for decision-making, creativity and action (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). We focus on achievement and self-direction values because they appear to be more likely (than others) to be relevant to team level values.

There is an extensive research on the congruence between individual and team values (e.g. Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997) and between individual and organisational values (e.g. O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). However, as far as we are aware, there is no published work that reveals how specific individual values impact team values. Yet, research shows that individuals in teams will undergo an interactive complex process of building shared beliefs, perceptions and the assumptions of their team to be able to function as a collective (McComb, 2007). The present research will fill this void by investigating the relationship between individual and team values with the aim of identifying which particular individual values might drive specific team values. The next section will explicate the construct of team values.

### ***Team Values***

We define team values as the shared beliefs or average level of values held by members of the team (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007). Specifically, we focus on two major team values namely; team orientation and outcome orientation values (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Team orientation value is defined as being people oriented and collaborative (Erez & Gati, 2004), while outcome orientation value is defined as achievement focused, demanding and is strongly focused on results (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Again, we focus on these two team values because they are the dominant values found in teams (Erez & Gati, 2004). Overall, by focusing on the interplay between individual values (achievement and self-direction) and team values (orientation and outcome orientation), the present research aims at gaining a deeper insight into the specific individual value that is most likely to drive a given team value.

### ***Cross-Level Effects of Individual Values on Team Values***

According to Roe and Ester (1999) values held at various levels of the organisation are vertically linked (Roe & Ester, 1999). In particular, there is a top-down process whereby higher values

(e.g. organisational and team) and activities influence lower level values (individual) and activities, and also a bottom-up process of individual values affecting team and societal values (Erez, Yammarino, & Dansereau, 2006). The top-down approach is achieved through the process of socialisation where individuals internalise shared values (organisational and team) as their own values (Erez, Yammarino, & Dansereau, 2006). Studies show that the top-down approach is connected with employee turnover (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) and the conflict experienced in teams (Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997).

However, there is another body of literature that indicates that individual values are the drivers of higher level values and activities. For example, Drach-Zahavy (2004) proposes that individual values are related to team support (see also Eby & Dobbins, 1997). In addition, extant literature suggests that individual values shape the shared constructs of climate (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007) and culture (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000).

In this research, we will focus on the bottom-up approach of how individual values influence team values because of three reasons. First, teams consist of individuals (Ilgen, 1999) and as such these individuals affect the collective behaviour of the team (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). Hence, team-level shared perceptions such as team values stem from the attributes of individual team members (Molleman, Nauta, & Jehn, 2005) through interactions among individuals (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). Second, the individual values are relative stable and less malleable (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004), and thus, we argue that the bottom-up process of individual values affecting team values is a strong driving force. Third, given that employees spend a larger proportion of their time working in teams (Ilgen, 1999), individual values have a crucial influence on teams (Tjosvold, Law, & Sun, 2003). Focusing on these team values will assist in a deeper understanding of what individual values are connected to them. The next section reviews literature and discusses the proposed relationships between individual and team values.

### ***Individual Value of Achievement and Team Value of Team Orientation***

While recent studies continue to assume congruence between values (see Erdogan, Liden, & Kraimer, 2006; Khazanchi, Lewis, & Boyer, 2007), the present research departs from the assumption that there is congruity between values at both individual and team levels. Specifically, few researchers

have examined the cross level effects of how specific individual values affect team values (Erez, Yammarino, & Dansereau, 2006). Hence, we will examine the relationship between individual values of achievement and self-direction (and their differing motivations) and how they impact team values of team orientation and outcome orientation.

As defined earlier, achievement value is the motivation to be influential, ambitious, successful and capable (Schwartz, 1992). Research findings indicate that the selfish focus on personal interest and success will motivate individuals with achievement value to thwart optimal attainment of team goals (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001) if the team goals are not aligned with success and performance (Wagner, 1995). In particular, individuals with achievement value prefer aggressive and outcome oriented culture (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). In addition, individuals with high achievement value are likely to engage in an exaggerated personal pursuit of success and power, which leads to autocratic behaviours such as domineering conducts and aggression (Schwartz, 2003). In contrast, team value of team orientation motivates teams to preserve and enhance the welfare of others by establishing teamwork and collaboration (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Clearly, the individual value of achievement and team orientation value are incompatible (Schwartz, Melech, Lehmann, Burgess, Harris, & Owens, 2001). Taken together, we argue that the individual values of achievement will negatively impact team value of team orientation (see Figure 1). Therefore, we propose:

[Insert Figure 1 here]

*Proposition 1: Individual value of achievement will negatively impact team value of team orientation.*

### ***Individual Value of Achievement and Team Value of Outcome Orientation***

We have earlier established that individual value of achievement is the motivation to be influential, ambitious, successful and capable (Schwartz, 1992). Individuals subscribing to these values will strive for personal success through their own skills (Schwartz 1992) because of their need and desire to control events in order to obtain rewards (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Given these motivations towards success, individuals with high achievement value are expected to thrive in teams that are results and outcome-focused (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Specifically, we argue

that the individual value of achievement will positively impact team value of outcome orientation especially because both values are oriented towards achieving high performance (Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992) (see Figure 1). Therefore, we propose:

*Proposition 2: Individual value of achievement will positively impact team value of outcome orientation.*

#### ***Individual Value of Self-Direction and Team Value of Team Orientation***

Individuals with high self-direction value are also self-reliant and will focus on their independent capacities to make decisions for their actions (Schwartz, 1992). Furthermore, they are focused on satisfying their needs and desires (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Due to the high autonomy of such individuals and their focus on satisfying their needs and desires (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001), they are not keen on supportiveness and teamwork (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). As a result, individuals with value of self-direction are not likely to focus on collaboration and team welfare and subscribe to team value of team orientation (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Given the above, we propose:

*Proposition 3: Individual value of self-direction will negatively impact team value of team orientation.*

#### ***Individual Value of Self-Direction and Team Value of Outcome Orientation***

Individuals with self-direction value are likely to have independent thoughts and action, and will also be independent in exploring the best ways to get tasks completed (Schwartz et al., 2001). Given their independence in seeking and exploring the best options for the tasks at hand to attain the desired achievements (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001), studies show that individuals with the value of self-direction are linked with increased creativity and innovation (Schwartz et al., 2001). Overall, the above motivations and behaviours are likely to enhance the team outcome orientation value that also promotes achievements within teams (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Hence, we anticipate that individual level value of self-direction will positively impact team value of outcome orientation and we propose:

*Proposition 4: Individual value of self-direction will positively impact team value of outcome orientation.*

### ***Team Values and Intra-Team Conflict***

Scholars posit that specific sets of values will lead to specific behaviours (Szabo, Reber, Weibler, Brodbeck, & Wunderer, 2001). For instance, Jehn's work (1994, 1997) shows that the emphasis that teams place on different value dimensions are linked to performance or conflict (Jehn, 1997). Yet, to date, there is no research that has ascertained the specific values that lead to different types of conflict. For this reason, we extend the literature in this area by examining how specific team values (team orientation and outcome orientation) will interact with intra-team conflict (task and relationship). In this research, conflict is defined as perceived incompatibilities by parties of the views, wishes and desires that each holds (Jehn, 1992). Consistent with previous research, conflict is mainly conceptualised as task conflict and relationship conflict (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Task conflict encompasses the disagreement about ideas as well as the content and issues related to the task (Jehn & Chatman, 2000). On the contrary, relationship conflict pertains to disagreements based on personal and social issues that are not related to work (Jehn & Chatman, 2000) such as friction, frustration, irritation, annoyance and personality clashes (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

### ***Team Value of Team Orientation and Intra-Team Conflict***

As previously established, team value of team orientation motivates teams to preserve and enhance the welfare of others by establishing teamwork, cooperation and collaboration (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Such collective oriented interest (Schwartz, 1992) will encourage harmonious relationships with other team members (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). Specifically, team orientation value reduces aggression in teams (Erdogan, Liden, & Kraimer, 2006) because team oriented groups are more likely to behave synergistically and in supportive ways to their members (Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997). Though conflicts are inevitable (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003), scholars propose that such supportive favourable environment will also cause team members to become more efficient and less ambiguous to their members (Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997). As a result, discussions and debates are facilitated instead of encouraging personal attacks and animosity (Jehn, 1995). In addition, the supportive environment will also provide for the clarification of personal issues (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003), and again these are expected to minimise and eliminate any personal attacks and animosity (i.e. relationship conflict). Hence, we argue that team oriented value is more

likely to be positively associated with intra-team task conflict but negatively related to intra-team relationship conflict. Therefore, we propose:

*Proposition 5: Team value of team orientation will be positively associated with intra-team task conflict.*

*Proposition 6: Team value of team orientation will be negatively associated with intra-team relationship conflict*

### ***Team Value of Outcome Orientation and Intra-Team Conflict***

Based on earlier discussions, outcome orientation value will drive teams to invest their time and energy in performing tasks towards performance and results (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). However, conflicts are common phenomena in teams (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003). In particular, team members are bound to have differing coordination of efforts in handling tasks at hand (Jehn, 1997). The motivation to get results may lead to differing ways of doing tasks which, in turn, may lead to task conflict (Jehn, 1997). Thus, we argue that team value of outcome orientation will be positively associated with intra-team task conflicts.

However, the strong drive towards results and outcome can also cause behaviours that appear to be demanding and aggressive, which in turn, may disrupt harmonious, positive social relations (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). There is a possibility that when such behaviours are displayed, they may cause team members to perceive disagreements as personal attacks (i.e. relationship conflict). Hence, we argue that outcome orientation will also be positively associated with intra-team relationship conflict. Taken together, we propose:

*Proposition 7: Team value of outcome orientation will be positively associated with intra-team task and relationship conflict.*

### ***Intra-Team Conflict and Team Trust***

As organisational structure becomes more team-based (Pelled, 1996), scholars suggest that the need to increase trust is pertinent (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In particular, there is a need to better understand how values and conflict affect trust outcomes (Kiffin-Petersen, 2004). In this research, team trust is defined as “an emergent state comprising of team members’ intention to accept



vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviours of the other members of their team” (Kiffin-Petersen, 2004: 39).

The literature is replete with studies on trust as an antecedent of conflict. For example, the presence of trust is more likely to result in positive effects (Simons & Peterson, 2000) and work relationships characterised by trust engender cooperation and reduce conflicts (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). However, trust is fragile and takes time to build (Nooteboom & Six, 2003), and any negative interaction can result in a dramatic reduction or complete disappearance of trust and even distrust (Murnighan, Malhotra, & Weber, 2004). Thus, it is anticipated that intra-team conflict (especially destructive conflict) will most likely have a critical impact on trust. This is mainly because team members will make decisions about their willingness to be vulnerable towards other team members based on the perceived risks involved and the alternatives available to reduce those risks (Kiffin-Petersen, 2004). In this sense, conflict can pose as a risk.

With the exception of the work of Ayoko and Pekerti (2005; In Press) and Korsgaard, Brodt and Whitener (2002), there is little research examining the reverse proposition of conflict as an antecedent of trust (Ayoko & Pekerti, 2005). For example, Ayoko and Pekerti (2005) report that relationship conflict; high levels of conflict intensity and destructive reactions to conflict inhibit trust, while task conflict and longer conflict duration among organisational members facilitate trust. Likewise, Korsgaard, Brodt and Whitener (2002) found that negative encounters such as conflicts and disagreements between manager and employees are not necessarily associated with low trust. These studies provide interesting insights into the link between link between conflict and trust. We extend work in this area by examining how intra-team conflict serves as an antecedent of the various forms of team trust.

Scholars argue that trust is dynamic and distinct in character at different stages of any professional and personal relationship (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). Hence, the formation of trust goes beyond a simple transactional exchange and predictability (Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006). Rather, it is based on confidence in the face of risk (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996) and threat such as conflict. In addition, the degree to which one trusts another varies along a continuum of intensity (Williams, 2001). We know that there are three types of trust namely; Calculus-Based Trust (CBT),

Knowledge-Based Trust (KBT) and Identification-Based Trust (IBT) (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). However, we will focus our attention on KBT and IBT because recent literature suggests that CBT is not a form of trust but a form of distrust (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). The conceptualisation of trust as KBT and IBT will provide an in-depth understanding on the differing types of trust (Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006) and how intra-team conflict is related to them.

KBT is defined as trust perception that relies on information such as history of interactions between interactants. This interaction history allows for the development of a generalised expectancy that the other's behaviour is predictable and that he or she will act in a trustworthy manner (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). IBT is defined as trust perception that is based on the identification with each others' desires and intentions, where individuals develop a shared identity of needs, preference, thoughts and behaviours (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

#### ***Intra-Team Task Conflict and Team Trust***

Task conflict also concentrates on the best way of achieving organisational objectives (Jehn, 1992, 1994). This focus serves as shared common goals. In addition, scholars anticipate that task conflict will facilitate the reduction of both behavioural and cognitive uncertainty, which in turn, will lead team members to have some degree of predictability and trust (Ayoko & Pekerti, In Press). Also, it is expected that the predictability would lead to more positive team interactions. Both predictability and positive interactions will subsequently provide information for the development of generalised expectancy of trustworthy behaviours (i.e. KBT). However, given that task conflicts are work related issues, the discussions are unlikely to include personal matters (Jehn, 1995). Hence, KBT is most unlikely to encourage the identification process of each other's needs, thoughts and behaviours (i.e. IBT) (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Therefore, we propose:

*Proposition 8: Intra-team task conflict will be positively related to KBT team trust.*

*Proposition 9: Intra-team task conflict will be negatively related to IBT team trust*

#### ***Intra-Team Relationship Conflict and Team Trust***

In contrast, relationship conflicts are associated with personal attacks and animosity (Jehn, 1994), thus leading to team members feeling uncomfortable working together and thereby increasing process loss (Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997). These have been suggested to promote division,

weaken relationships and diminish trust (Panteli & Sockalingam, 2005). In particular, when team members experience relationship conflict, each individual within the team will be more cautious and will be more likely to perceive the situation as threatening and risky (Simon & Peterson, 2000) given the personal attacks and animosity. As a result, these could potentially lead to negative interactions or minimal interactions. Subsequently, these will not assist in providing information to be able to develop the expectation to predict that the other member will act in trustworthy manner. Hence, it is expected that relationship conflict will be negatively related to KBT. In addition, the inability to work together and the weakened relationship due to the non-reciprocal or negative exchanges will also discourage the establishment of shared identity (McComb, 2007). Subsequently, the lack of shared identification with one another's needs, thoughts and behaviours (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996) will, in turn, lead to negative perception of IBT. Taken together, we propose:

*Proposition 10: Intra-team relationship conflict will be negatively related to KBT and IBT team trust.*

### ***Intra-Team Conflict, Team Climate and Team Trust***

Team trust is an emergent state that can be situational (Kiffin-Petersen, 2004). Thus, we argue that situational factors such as team climate can play a crucial role in team conflict and team trust. For example, climate is found to influence variables such as innovation in teams (Bain, Mann, & Pirola-Merlo, 2001). Studies show that climate perceptions determine how individuals behave collectively by influencing their perceptions and feelings about certain events at work (Grawitch, Munz, & Kramer, 2003). In this research, team climate is conceptualised as team communication openness and team psychological safety.

### ***Team Climate of Communication Openness***

We follow Ayoko and define communication openness as “the ease of talking to each other in the team and the extent of understanding gained when people talk to other group members” (2007: 109). Communication openness facilitates a free exchange of thoughts and ideas among employees and thereby enhances the perception of trust (Butler, 1991). For example, Lovelace, Shapiro and Weingart (2001) argue that the team members' feelings about expressing doubts will influence their collaborativeness or contentiousness which, in turn, will influence members' freedom to express their

concerns or doubts. Given that open discussions and debates are associated with task conflict (Jehn, 1995), task conflict will lead to high team communication openness and team communication openness will lead to increased propensity to trust because when issues are clarified, communication openness enhances trustworthy behaviours (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). Conversely, relationship conflict is generally associated with personal attacks and animosity (Jehn, 1995), including the affective components of tension and frustration (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). This, in turn, will discourage team members experiencing relationship conflict to openly discuss and clarify issues (Jehn, 1997). Consequently, it is expected that intra-team relationship conflict will be negatively related to communication openness. Low communication openness, in turn, will lead to decreased team trust because disagreements related to personal issues will continue to persist. Based on the foregoing discussion, we propose that communication openness will mediate the relationship between intra team conflict and team trust. Given this, it is proposed (see Figure 1):

*P11: Team climate of communication openness will mediate the association between intra-team (task and relationship) and team trust (KBT and IBT).*

### ***Team Climate of Psychological Safety***

We define team climate of psychological safety as focused on productive discussion and the accomplishments of shared goals without having the fear of negative consequences to self, self image or career (Edmondson, 2003). Specifically, psychological safety is an environment that is safe for interpersonal risk taking and allows team members to speak freely (Edmondson, 1999). Studies also show that the perception of psychological safety by team members is positively related to favourable team processes such as frequent feedback and open discussion of errors (Edmondson, 2003).

An earlier discussion established that intra-team task conflict is associated with open discussion and debates (Jehn, 1995). Task conflict also focuses on sharing common goals in getting the job completed (Jehn, 1994). Open discussion and shared goals are likely to enact a team climate that is psychologically safe. In particular, the focus on task completion becomes a priority, and this requires honest and open discussion of mistakes and errors. We expect honest and open discussion of mistakes to lead to increased team trust because such a positive psychological net should increase the socio-

emotional state of team members and assist free expression of a variety of perspectives (Peltokorpi, 2004) including clarification of issues.

Conversely, intra-team relationship conflict is expected to endorse a climate of low psychological safety because relationship conflict is perceived as personal attacks (Jehn, 1995). Given that in an unsafe environment, individuals and team members are expected to face ambiguity, unpredictability, and threat (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004), it is anticipated that issues related to relationship conflict will not be clarified. Given the above, we expect team trust to decrease. As depicted in Figure 1, we propose:

*P12: Team climate of psychological safety will mediate the association between intra-team conflict (task and relationship) and team trust (KBT and IBT).*

### **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

In this research, we make five contributions to the literature on values, conflict, trust and teams. Firstly, the model is one of the first that attempts to study the constructs of values, conflict and trust simultaneously, thus providing a more holistic understanding of the interactivity between these constructs. Past research has examined these constructs separately or only linking two of the three constructs, yet studies show that these three issues are pertinent in organisations (Kriffen-Peterson, 2004). Secondly, findings from the current study will also contribute to the limited understanding of how the types of conflict impact the various forms of trust. This is an important research agenda because conflict and trust are two important constructs in teams. Thirdly, this research will also contribute to the growing literature on multi-level issues related to values. In particular, we argue that the understanding of how specific individual values drive team values is crucial for managers to better manage teams. Specifically, findings from the current research will provide an insight for HR managers who will need to recruit employees whose individual values will need to be aligned with the values of the teams they are building in the organisations. Finally, the examination of team climate as the contextual variable will also assist in the understanding of how team climate can promote or inhibit team trust in the presence of conflict. Future research should quantitatively test the propositions generated in the current research agenda.

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## APPENDIX A

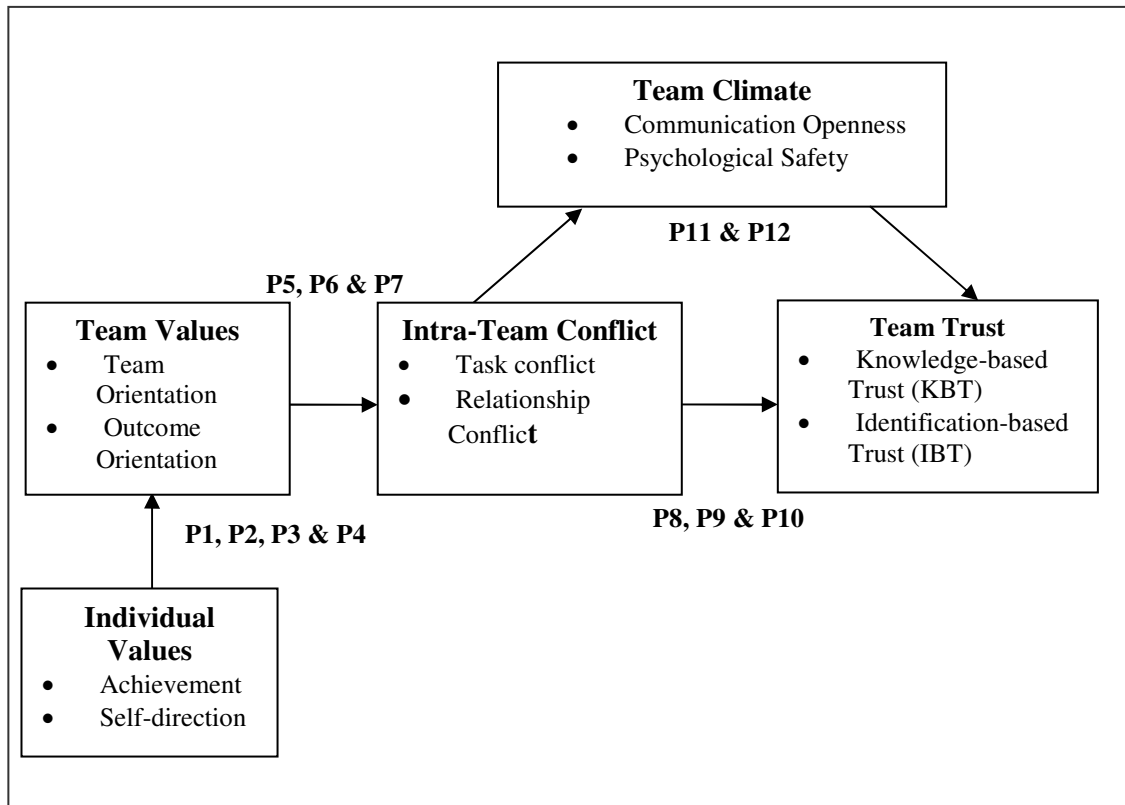


Figure 1: Cross-level Model of Values, Conflict and Trust