

## Navigating self-managed conflict resolution

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Navigating Self-Managed Conflict Resolution: A Case Study

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## SELF-MANAGED CONFLICT RESOLUTION

### Abstract

This study examines how an organization-wide self-managed interpersonal conflict resolution system is experienced from the point of view of permanent and seasonal employees. Twenty semi-structured interviews and observations at a single agricultural organization were used to assess the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) system. Employee reports were coded by determining if the conflict was owing to processes, relationships, or tasks problems, as well as determining if each conflict was resolved with accommodating, aggressive, avoidant, or collaborative resolution tactics. Interestingly, it was the permanent employees who initiated a majority of conflict resolution processes. Furthermore, only permanent employees who opted to utilize aggressive tactics, usually by demanding that their colleagues quit the job at the organization. Implications of this study suggest the importance of ADR training in order to develop confidence among seasonal employees to initiate resolution processes as well as the importance of teaching resolution tactics as means of reducing employee termination.

*Keywords:* self-management, conflict resolution, non-standard employment

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### Navigating Self-Managed Conflict Resolution: A Case Study

The development of interpersonal conflict within an organization can disrupt and undermine employee physical health, job attitudes, and productivity (Nixon et al., 2011). Owing to these deleterious outcomes, an organization must have policies and procedures designed to mitigate interpersonal conflict. To assist this, there has been increased recent interest in the use of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes to remedy conflict in a way that moves away from the use of multiple levels of management to solve employee interpersonal problems (Hann et al., 2019).

As ADR strategies are aimed at reducing management involvement in conflicts, we focus our study on an investigation of how employees use self-managed conflict resolution tactics within the context of a flat-line hierarchy organization that prescribes this particular ADR. Self-management is defined as the absence of managerial constraints, with responsibility transferred to the individual (Manz and Sims, 1980). Flat-line hierarchy is found in those organizations where administrative centralization is minimized, and where the number of persons in the chain of command is small (Ghiselli and Siegel, 1972). In addition to cost savings for an organization (Hamel, 2011), it is argued that the use of self-management within a flat structure creates an environment in which employees are afforded the freedom to work without being stifled by higher levels of management, while allowing workers control of their work processes, interpersonal relationships, and task completion. Hamel (2011) argues that this is different from the concept of ‘empowerment’, which suggests that authority is still held by higher levels and allowed to trickle down. However, some potential drawbacks of self-management include the creation of informal power bases in the absence of more formal authority (Kirkpatrick, 2017), which will impact the efficacy of ADRs.

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Concerning the particular context of the use of practices such as self-management and flat-line hierarchies, Lee and Edmonson (2017) suggest that research needs to be broadened in terms of assessing the ability of flat or hierarchyless organizations' ability to manage conflict, as well as assessing the experiences of employees who work in these organizations. In consideration of Lee and Edmonson's (2017) call for research, we undertake this study to assess the experiences of workers of an ADR scheme in flat hierarchy organizations that engage a combination of permanent and seasonal workers. We propose ADR usage varies between employees who work under diverse employment statuses in a flat organization. For example, seasonal employees may be at a disadvantage as they have less time to be trained in and to adequately learn, practice, and enact ADR problem-solving techniques. As such, we seek to fill a gap in the literature by providing a theoretically based qualitative analysis of a self-managed interpersonal conflict management system (e.g., Blackard, 2001; Langfred, 2007) among permanent and seasonal employees at a single agricultural organization with a flat organizational structure in the western United States.

### **Workplace Interpersonal Conflict and Resolution**

Often, the interpersonal conflict literature (Behfar et al., 2011; O'Sullivan, 2017; Wall and Callister, 1995) has utilized a tripartite model described by Jehn (1997) to categorize disagreements between two or more coworkers into process, relationship, and task sub-factors. First, process conflicts can be described as those where employees disagree about who should be assigned to work duties and who should be allocated resources such as equipment and rewards. Next, relationship-based conflict occurs when animosity and personal incompatibility are manifest between coworkers who do not 'like' each other owing to a personality conflict, annoyance at coworkers spreading gossip, not being invited to social events, and so on. Finally,

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task-based interpersonal conflict refers to disagreements about how production at the organization should be completed. To address these conflicts, organizations and researchers have worked to understand resolution processes as well as processes that restore peace in the workplace.

Organizational policies and procedures govern how interpersonal conflicts are resolved (e.g., Gilin-Oore et al., 2015; O'Sullivan, 2017). In a hierarchical organization, managerial action in the event of employee conflict can include simple discussion, disciplinary actions, and/or termination based on the severity of the employee actions (e.g., personality conflicts between parties, tardiness, safety violations; Gilin-Oore et al., 2015; Jones and Saundry, 2011; Thomas et al., 2005). A benefit of having a manager or HR representative adjudicate relationship and task conflicts in the workplace is that there is a better likelihood of consistent actions if the manager has been adequately trained in interpersonal dispute resolution (Jones and Saundry, 2011). On the other hand, alternative dispute resolution procedures, such as self-managed interpersonal conflict resolution, remove management's responsibility of mediating disputes and, instead, places the responsibility of resolution onto the disputing parties (Alper et al., 2000). The key benefit associated with placing self-managed conflict resolution responsibilities on the employees is that the self-managed group of employees is best able to solve the problem because they are the ones with the most knowledge of the production goals and responsibilities of each member of the workgroup (Blackard, 2001; Hackman, 1986; Langfred, 2007).

In acknowledging employees' ability to sometimes best settle conflicts in their immediate areas, as well the desire of practitioners to expand the toolkit for settling workplace interpersonal disputes, there has been increased interest in what have been termed 'alternative dispute resolution methods.' (Teague et al., 2011). In examining the history of the development of these,

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Teague et al. (2011) note that traditional approaches to conflict management treated the workplace much like any other social environment, rooted in the belief that sometimes these social relationships would become strained and that resolution of this should take place within a framework of rules established either within the organization in the form of grievance and disciplinary procedures, or without in the form of legal recourse (Colvin, 2012). By comparison, ADR approaches attempt to find mutually acceptable outcomes through a consensual process of negotiation (Cropanzano et al., 2008), concentrating on interest-based rather than rights-based procedures (Roche and Teague, 2012).

The use of ADR practices originated in the United States and has found some degree of utilization in that environment (Lipsky and Seeber, 1998; 2000; Lynch, 2001). In an attempt to investigate dispute resolution techniques, Hann et al. (2019) suggest three distinct forms; those involving professional mediation only, those involving public or broader third-party processes such as arbitrators, and those involving private or more innovative approaches that include the use of employee review panels and the use of problem-solving techniques to resolve disputes. It is this final approach that is the focus of this article because self-managed ADR inherently allows colleagues to solve problems among themselves without management involvement.

### **Dual Concern Approach to Conflict Resolution**

Organizations have an interest in the constructive resolution of conflict between colleagues owing to the deleterious effects related to employee health and productivity, as mentioned in previous sections. Thus, efforts have been made to understand not only what causes workplace conflict, but also how those conflicts can be resolved. One theoretical model of conflict resolution approaches in the workplace is the dual-concern model whereby a disputant considers their position in the conflict against the position of another person (e.g., Lawless and

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Trif, 2016; Rahim et al., 2000). This framework is characterized by four types of conflict resolution: (a) accommodation, (b) aggression, (c) avoidance, and (d) collaboration.

**Accommodation.** The accommodation approach to conflict resolution is described as one where one member of the direct conflict concedes their interest in the dispute and focuses on a concern for the other person. When there is a need to maintain harmony among employees or when a person believes they might be in the wrong an accommodating conflict resolution process might be enacted (Gilin-Oore et al., 2015; Lawless and Trif, 2016; Rahim, 2002). While this may appear to be self-sacrifice that can preserve relationships between coworkers, a lack of assertiveness can be detrimental to resolving task-based conflict because employees fail to provide suggestions that might differ from coworkers to improve organizational efficiency (Chung-Yan and Moeller, 2010; DeRue et al., 2009; Dunaetz and Greenham, 2018).

**Aggression.** This direct approach also called ‘coercion’ or ‘force’, is characterized by a high concern with self and a low concern for others, and is conceptualized as a ‘win-lose’ conflict resolution style when conflict arises. For example, this approach to conflict resolution is seen when a manager imposes a unilateral decision (Gilin-Oore et al., 2015). This resolution approach emerges when an employee directly confronts to stop a coworker who is being uncivil, is not fulfilling work responsibilities, or whose behavior is putting employees at risk for an industrial accident. While this resolution method might produce an efficient halt to immediate danger, aggression is likely to come across as bullying (e.g., Baillien et al., 2014; Hershcovis and Barling, 2007; Lawless and Trif, 2016; Rahim, 2002).

**Avoidance.** Avoiding direct conflict resolution entails a lack of being assertive concerning the management of the problem, thus postponing the conflict to a later time (DeLeon, 2001; Langfred, 2007; Lawless and Trif, 2016; Rahim, 2002). An employee who wants to avoid



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conflict withholds their expression of frustration or displeasure with a situation, perhaps owing to having anxiety or fear of confrontation, or preferring to defer their position in the conflict to preserve the relationship with their coworker (DeRue et al., 2009; Dunaetz and Greenham, 2018; Lawless and Trif, 2016). While avoidance can manage short-term conflict, it does not mitigate problems in the long run because neither party works to find solutions for the underlying contention (Canary, 2003; Gilin-Oore et al., 2015; Rahim, 2002).

**Collaboration.** The collaboration conflict resolution approach, also known as a “win-win” approach, is described as a situation where one person directly confronts the other person and each person’s concerns are adequately and equitably addressed (e.g. Conlon et al., 2009). Here, each party must be willing to voice their concern about a problem as well as to compromise their stance to meet the needs of the other person. Ideally, the ideas of each party can be integrated to create a solution that is cumulatively better than a single person’s suggestions (Gilin-Oore et al., 2015). This interpersonal conflict resolution process can provide effective long-term benefits such as yielding respect that can bind workplace relationships in addition to solving complex disputes (Rahim, 2002). Summarily, disputes can be resolved within four theoretically driven approaches, yet it is organizational training that can influence how and when employees use those styles.

While the dual-concern model of conflict resolution outlines avenues that employees might engage with each other as workplace conflict arises, each of these modes of interaction can be guided by leadership style as well organizational structures and policies. In an organization where leadership is authoritarian (i.e., controlling behavior over subordinates) employees might not have the opportunity to fully air their grievance because the leader imposes their own will in times of conflict (Kiazad et al., 2010). Finally, with consideration of an organization that has an

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ADR for self-managed employees, these employees may be provided with a latitude of which dual-concern approach of conflict resolution to use when interpersonal conflict arises. However, of course, likely, these employees are also provided with policy-governed ‘rules of engagement’ for managing conflict so that the company can attempt to avoid the creation of a hostile workplace that is rife with aggression.

### **Conflict Resolution Training**

Workplace conflict resolution is frequently guided by management who have been trained in conflict resolution processes. However, a self-managed team must be taught how to resolve interpersonal conflict without management intervention. To accomplish this, employees must be provided with key training modules that address the ability of employees to (a) regulate anxious, frustrated, and angry emotions; (b) assert and honestly voice concerns; and (c) listen to and validate others concerns (Gilin-Orre et al., 2015; Leon-Perez et al., 2016). Whereas training modules can teach employees conflict resolution approaches, we have not found any research that provides evidence for how employees carry out self-managed conflict resolution tactics after receiving training on this particular ADR strategy. Thus, in consideration of this lack of research, we answer the call of Morrison (2014) to investigate how specialized organizational conditions (e.g., flat organizational structures, self-managed conflict resolution schemes, environments where permanent and seasonal employees work together) affect the resolution of interpersonal workplace conflict among employees.

### **The Current Study**

Taken together, the literature (e.g., Lawless and Trif, 2016;) suggests that conflict resolution processes consist of balancing the needs and concerns of each person in the workplace. While much research has examined these constructs in hierarchical organizations, no

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research has examined self-managed conflict resolution in a flat hierarchy organization that includes permanent and seasonal employees. As such, this case study uses inductive and deductive analyses to examine permanent and seasonal employees' experiences with self-managed ADR training and resolution processes through the lens of the dual-concern model for process, relationship, and task conflicts.

### **Method**

#### **Organizational Context**

FruitCo, the case-study enterprise in this study, is a fruit grower and processor located in a rural area of the western United States. As one of the very few organizations that operate a flat line hierarchy and with an ADR system, the organization was selected as a case study and approached directly to facilitate access. This organization operates several agricultural fields as well as operating three fruit processing facilities where produce is sorted, cleaned, packaged, and shipped to customers. All information related to the mission statement, policies, and procedures of FruitCo were provided by participants 'I,' 'O' and 'P,' These informants were employees who conducted duties that would be ordinary titled as 'Accountant,' 'Controller' or 'Human Resource Manager' in a hierarchical organization. The company operates with approximately 40 year-round staff with 10 of these employees conducting mechanical duties related to the upkeep of physical fruit production areas and equipment, while the other 30 employees complete office jobs, including budgeting, business strategy, human resources, and marketing. In addition to the permanent staff, 300 seasonal staff are employed on average for 4-6 months of the year from late spring and into the late summer to harvest the fields and process the fruit.

This company operates as a flat organization where all employees, except the owner, work at the same status/level within the company. The owner of the company indicates that

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seasonal employees have the same status as permanent employees in that each person is equally responsible to complete their job and move the goals of the enterprise forward. To further eliminate status in the company, employees are not given job titles and people are only referred to as their given name or described according to the general job they complete. For example, though there are no official job titles, an employee may be referred to as a “sorter” because their primary job is to separate edible fruit from non-nutritive substances as fruits come down the production line.

Within the scope of the flat organizational structure, the owner of FruitCo developed and enacted a policy that directs self-managed conflict resolution processes. The policy begins by stating that each employee is required to,

*“...take full responsibility for our actions as well as those of fellow colleagues and our overall mission... [to be] personally responsible for our training, time commitments, performance...to manage ourselves, to be principally responsible for the planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling functions, ...take the initiative to coordinate our responsibilities and activities ... develop opportunities for improvement and for making things happen... [as well as] communicate and consult with other parties who are likely to be meaningfully affected when initiating a change of any sort.”*

To further explain how the policy might apply, the policy provides the following hypothetical situations where disputes might arise,

*“Differences between human beings are a natural and necessary aspect of life, especially in the pursuit of excellence. Differences may vary from how to answer the phone, to what type of oil to use in a gearbox, to what equipment to purchase to improve operations, to whether one is following our principles or advancing our mission, to how a person combs their hair.”*

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Next, the policy states, “*We agree to privately engage with the other colleague as soon as practical and attempt to resolve any differences to our mutual satisfaction.*” As conflict occurs, employees are required to follow these steps: (1) have a direct private conversation with the employee with whom there is a conflict, however, if there is discomfort with having a private conversation, it is advisable to go to another coworker to get ideas for how to resolve the issue, and then engage with their coworker directly; (2) direct resolution conversations should occur as soon as practically possible; (3) if the direct conversation does not resolve the conflict, then the disputants can gather a group of 3-10 coworkers “*in the affected work environment or those with relevant expertise with the issue at hand*” to work alongside the disputants to directly discuss and resolve the conflict; and then; (4) if the large group is unable to come to a resolution, then the CEO of the company will make the final decision. Finally, the organizational policy indicates that all communication between employees should be conducted with “*care,*” “*helpfulness,*” and “*tolerance.*”

### **Participants**

Participant recruitment efforts were directed at including participants who reflected the job status, gender, and ethnicity demographics of the organization. A total of 20 employees were recruited to participate in in-depth semi-structured interviews, an empirically validated sample size for case study qualitative research (Marshall et al., 2013; Saunders and Townsend, 2016). Permanent contract respondents were selected by the researcher as the most appropriate given their job role and experience, and seasonal contract participants were selected by the researcher and permanent employees based on demographic characteristics noted above and availability in the work schedule. Please refer to Table 1 for a comprehensive description of participant characteristics (e.g., gender, job status). Although participants did not self-report their ethnicity,

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based on observation it was noted that permanent employees were composed of individuals who were primarily Caucasian while all seasonal employees were Hispanic.

### **Procedure**

While there are well-noted issues with single case studies, particularly around generalizability, this method was selected because on a practical level there are a small number of organizations that utilize self-managed conflict resolution processes. As such, data for this study was gathered across a period of 20 days at the organization. Initially, copious note-taking was conducted to observe general workplace behaviors, as well as taking place in workplace tours and informal discussions with many employees. Next, in collaboration with FruitCo, on-site office space was used to conduct the semi-structured interviews during normal work hours. Before each interview began, the employee was briefed about the study and told that there would be no incentive to participate in the study. After providing informed consent, employees were individually interviewed with interviews lasting between 20 minutes and 2.5 hours, with most interviews lasting approximately one hour. During the interviews, participants were asked questions relating to self-management and conflict at the workplace. Example prompts and questions included: “Tell me about your job orientation after you were hired.”; “In orientation, do they explain the ideas of self-management and flat hierarchy?”; “How do workers resolve an issue?” and “How have you resolved a problem with someone that you worked with since you have been employed by this organization?”

A manager at FruitCo indicated that 80% of seasonal employees are monolingual Spanish speakers. Based on this information, the interviewer asked for the use of a FruitCo Spanish-English language translator. With the help of the translator, participants were able to choose either Spanish or English for their interview. Although organizational support was provided by

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FruitCo, the length of time spent in the case study organization allowed for the independence of the researcher to be established in frequent conversations with employees.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

Inductive and deductive qualitative analysis procedures (Braun and Clarke, 2006) were utilized in this study to examine permanent and seasonal employees' organizational training and utilization of dual-concern approaches to resolving process, relationship, and task conflicts in an organization with a self-managed ADR policy. After the transcription of audio files into electronic documents was complete, each transcript was labeled for gender, the language of the interview, job duty, and employment status (see Table 1). From this point, transcripts were divided into two groups, permanent and seasonal, to analyze employee training and conflict resolution experiences.

**Training.** Inductive analysis was utilized to assess self-managed ADR training at FruitCo. For each employment status group, informant accounts of self-managed conflict resolution training were identified. From here, we made note of each employee's reports of the mode of delivery, content, and duration of ADR training to locate emergent trends among and between permanent and seasonal employee experiences.

**Type of Conflict.** Reports of conflict were identified within each transcript and were deductively categorized as either process, relationship, or task-based as guided by conflict management literature (e.g., Behfar et al., 2011; Jehn, 1997; O'Sullivan, 2017; Wall and Callister, 1995). Conflicts were categorized as *process* if they exemplified issues related to work scheduling (e.g. breaks during work, shift designation, overtime, compensation, equipment allocation), *relationship* if the conflict surrounded employees not 'liking' each other, and *task* if

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the conflict was about a job being completed incorrectly or inefficiently. Please refer to Table 1 for coding details.

**Conflict Resolution Processes.** FruitCo policy indicates that self-managed conflict resolution should be collaborative in that solution should yield “mutual satisfaction”. Yet, to determine if collaboration or some other approach was used to resolve conflict, each report of conflict was coded based on whether the informant was the initiator of conflict resolution processes or asked to resolve the conflict by another person. Following this, each comment related to an employee’s method of conflict resolution was deductively coded based on theory (e.g., Lawless and Trif, 2016; Rahim et al., 2000). An *accommodative* conflict resolution process was coded when one employee in a direct conflict yielded their position to the other employee without trying to have each person get what they wanted/needed. *Aggressive* approaches were those where one employee in the conflict was directly asked to withdraw their employment from FruitCo or when a physical fight ensued. A conflict was coded as *avoidant* if the informant indicated that they did not directly engage the other employee to resolve the conflict. Finally, a resolution was considered *collaborative* when each person expressed their voice and an equitable solution was achieved (e.g. Conlon et al., 2009). Please refer to Table 1 for coding details.

## Results

### Training for Self-Managed Conflict Resolution

Several key findings of conflict resolution training experiences at FruitCo were revealed. Fourteen employees noted that they had been exposed to at least a verbal explanation of the self-managed conflict resolution principles, including the principle that one-on-one meetings should be utilized to resolve disputes. However, two seasonal employees said they “*never heard about self-management*” (H, harvest driver). While there was general knowledge about self-managed



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conflict resolution, three employees indicated that self-managed conflict resolution was “*definitely hard*” (B, permanent, packing) to engage in for everyone, and an additional six employees reported that self-managed conflict resolution was especially difficult for seasonal employees. Based on extended informant interviews, the difficulty with engaging in self-managed conflict resolution is suspected to stem from the training FruitCo offers new employees.

Interviews revealed that each year, seasonal employee orientation is offered, in both English and Spanish, lasting “*four hours at the most*” (P, personnel, permanent) and that during this time “*people come in and talk about safety and the training has videos of self-management*” (K, box builder, seasonal). At this orientation, information about self-managed conflict resolution is presented; however, this four-hour onboarding training includes time for all employees to complete employment paperwork in addition to watching training videos on various topics, not only the topic of self-managed conflict resolution. The benefits of the onboarding program are that seasonal employees are introduced to or reminded of core self-management conflict resolution principles each season, regardless of whether they had worked at FruitCo in the past, and employees learn in a language of their choice; English or Spanish. Yet, despite annual training, there was evidence that it is a matter of working at FruitCo for long periods that help employees become more comfortable with self-managed conflict resolution procedures: “*some seasonal employees do not understand the concept of self-managed conflict resolution, but, if you were here for 12 months out of the year it becomes easier*” (I, controller, permanent).

A permanent employee (O, business strategy) reported that permanent employees are provided with a two-day in-person English language training about self-managed conflict

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resolution that includes: *“exercises where we have people participate...[with] a hypothetical situation and each one of the people in the small group plays some role and we just have gotten through describing the process and we have them go through it and come to a resolution.”* Yet, while permanent employees were provided with a more complete training compared to seasonal employees, one permanent employee had never seen the policy in person: *“I think it’s on paper somewhere, but I have not seen it. I just know what it is. I cannot quote the theory”* (N, shipping and distribution, permanent).

While FruitCo made efforts to train self-managed conflict resolution, the lack of organizational-sponsored language training to enhance communication between monolingual English and Spanish employees was noted to hamper communication between employees. A plant manager (J, permanent) indicated that the lack of language training leads to the use of *“bilingual people to get around language barriers”*. Further, he states that there is *“a safety issue if you don’t speak English and only speak Spanish – how will you be able to communicate to the rest of us that something is going wrong?”* Aside from safety issues that can occur from not being able to directly communicate about workplace conflicts, the use of bilingual coworkers to mediate conflict was used, *“not all of the mechanics and supervisors speak Spanish, so the communication one-on-one is difficult so there’s always a need for an interpreter for a lot of the times. And that always kind of creates problems because they are not professional interpreters and sometimes they interpret inflections and not the true meaning.”* (B, packing, permanent).

With the use of a bilingual interpreter, the employees who were having a conflict were not able to directly self-manage a resolution. However, to mitigate some language barriers in his work area, one Spanish-speaking employee stated that he uses some of his off-work time *“to try to learn more [English] every year by reading books or listening to the radio so I get more English.”*

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*And then you can be speaking to the people who can't speak Spanish and then you can also talk to the people that speak Spanish so you can understand both"* (L, unloads trains, seasonal).

Summarily, the ADR training program at FruitCo is delivered in significantly different ways based on whether an employee is on a permanent or seasonal contract with neither group being offered language training to facilitate ADR processes between monolingual employees. Moreover, given informant accounts, it is evident that the knowledge and comfort associated with self-managed ADR processes are divided by contract status. Considering the differences of ADR training based on contract status, in the sections below, we describe employee workplace conflicts and ADR processes divided by contract status to contrast these groups' experiences.

### **Process, Relationship, and Task Conflict**

Workplace interpersonal conflicts described by informants could be divided into three categories: process, relationship-based, and task-based conflict. Please refer to Figure 1 to view a flow chart that provides details for the frequency of process, relationship, and task conflicts reported based on employment status, as well as Table 1 for types of conflicts as reported by all participants. A tally of the frequency of conflict reported, including permanent and seasonal employees, includes 18 process conflicts, five relationship conflicts, and 21 task conflicts. Participants reported process conflicts that included frustrations with employees who were *"taking too much break"* (L, unloads train, permanent) or being assigned a work schedule *"they are not okay with"* (M, lab quality control, seasonal). Relationship conflicts were situations where informants were irritated by other employees who were arguing or physically fighting because *"one guy doesn't like the other guy"* (N, distribution and shipping, permanent). Task conflict arose owing to employees being frustrated because work was not being completed efficiently because a person is *"doing what they want instead of working as a team"* (F, forklift

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operator, seasonal) or when “*someone was trying to tell them to work faster*” (H, mechanic, seasonal).

We note two things of interest among the analysis of types of conflict reported by informants. Primarily, the seasonal employees did not report any incidents of relationship conflict with other seasonal employees. However, those relationship conflicts were noted by permanent employees to be an issue as they reported that they had observed conflicts that included two or more seasonal employees having relationship conflicts. Alternately, permanent employees did not report any process conflicts with other permanent employees. Perhaps, with permanent employees, they have “*latitude to take on tasks*” to enlarge their work role assignments and “*pretty much promote yourself within to whatever department*” (I, accounting, permanent) which can eliminate conflicts related to having jobs assigned and resource allocation.

### **Conflict Resolution Approaches**

Across all interviews, informants provided 44 examples of conflicts that had occurred at some time during their employment at FruitCo. The reports included 25 conflicts where permanent employee conflicts were directed at seasonal employees, nine incidents of seasonal employees having conflict with other seasonal employees, seven incidents of permanent employees conflicting with other permanent employees, and three reports of seasonal employee conflicts directed at permanent employees. Please refer to Figure 1 to see a detailed flow chart that provides results about how employees with permanent or seasonal status use each of the four dual-concern approaches based on process, relationship, and task conflicts. In the sections below, we provide results organized by each of the four facets of the dual-concern conflict resolution processes (e.g., Lawless and Trif, 2016; Rahim, Magner and Shapiro, 2000).

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**Accommodation.** One example of the accommodative resolution technique was revealed across the interviews. The conflict surrounded the process of uniform allocation between permanent and seasonal uniforms. A permanent employee (B) explained that seasonal employees are not issued uniforms each year because *“It is too expensive and prohibitive. Not cost-wise prohibitive, but logistically prohibitive to provide clothing for everyone for three months. And to get the uniform with their name tag on it, this season would be over.”* The response from this permanent employee, who was being confronted by seasonal employees about their lack of uniforms, was to just stop wearing the uniform he was provided by FruitCo so that he would not be confronted by seasonal employees who were frustrated about the resource allocation.

FruitCo does have a flat organizational structure self-managed that indicates that *“Everyone has purchasing authority here. But that liberty has to be balanced out by responsibility. The obligation that comes along with that right and freedom is that you have an obligation to coordinate. So, if you are purchasing something and it affects other people you have an obligation to coordinate that purchase”* (O, packing, permanent). Here, it appears that the permanent employee knew that the coordination for uniform purchase was not feasible, so he just gave up his interest in having a uniform to quell the seasonal employee who was upset about the issue.

**Aggression.** Interviews revealed 13 (29%) conflict resolution processes were categorized as aggressive, with each of these incidents being reported by permanent employees. When speaking about the use of these specific types of interventions, the interviewees sometimes described them as *“uncomfortable”* and *“not nice.”* Three respondents indicated that employees had been aggressively coerced by colleagues to find a job outside of FruitCo, sometimes with threats of violence. One example of an aggressive intervention includes, *“Let’s say someone*

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*comes up to you during the day and says they think they don't belong at the organization. And then there's another six people telling you this. If the six people think you should leave you should be able to see the writing on the wall and think that you're not someone who should be here. There's a lot of no-nonsense people in the company that are not into dealing with a bad personality. If you are annoying, eventually somebody's going to hit you for it at some point"* (O, shipping and receiving, permanent). The hostility of the work environment when an employee is not favored is also expressed by informant 'P' (personnel, permanent), *"I think that if somebody asks you to leave you're going to eventually want to leave because it must not be a good place to work."*

Employment terminations for policy violations (6 of the 13 reports) were designated as aggression when the informant accounts did indicate that any collaboration was to resolve the situation. Permanent employee 'B' (packing) indicated that *"there are cardinal things that will get you dismissed right away like if you're drunk or if you're in a fight. Those kinds of things you are asked to leave"* because safety issues are involved. When asked how someone is terminated for such severe infractions, employee 'O' indicated that employees *"don't have a unilateral authority to require you to leave. If I think you need to leave and you don't think you need to leave then we need to find us a third-party [another FruitCo employee] to come in and mediate the situation."* At this point, the informant says that the mediating panel of co-workers decide to force the person committing the infraction to leave.

Indeed, FruitCo encourages the use of gathering 3-10 FruitCo employees, per policy, to intervene when instances of interpersonal conflict arise that cannot be directly resolved by the employees initially involved in the conflict. Whereas this policy was probably well-intentioned

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to peacefully resolve disputes, a few informants portrayed these processes as venues for intimidation tactics.

**Avoidance.** Across all interviews, only one (2%) report of direct interpersonal conflict was avoided by a permanent employee with zero reports from seasonal employees. The one incident was a situation where a permanent employee (P) was irritated with a seasonal employee who attempted to pull her into a relationship conflict involving several people, but she told them “*not to call me out for this*” because she was busy with completing her job duties. It should be noted that this lack of avoidance by seasonal employees when conflict arises is interesting considering informant reports related to there being feelings of hesitation to engage in self-managed interpersonal conflict resolution. This was described as uncomfortableness among seasonal employees, especially among those employees who were relatively new to FruitCo. Employee E (shipping and receiving, seasonal) and Employee I (controller, permanent) indicated that it took them a long time of working at the company before they felt comfortable confronting others. An example of this discomfort was expressed by colleague E (shipping and receiving, seasonal), “*For people, it is hard because they are nervous, and they don’t know what to expect.*” Further, employee I (controller, permanent) indicated that when he formerly worked as a seasonal employee, he had been afraid to confront colleagues for fear of losing his ability for rehire the following year.

**Collaboration.** A total of 29 reports (68% of all examples) described their conflict resolution processes as a collaboration between employees. Among these examples, employees reported a collegial atmosphere where “*they talk in between themselves and they try to come to an agreement between the local workers*” (E, shipping and receiving, seasonal), and that this

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process was aligned with company policy, as reported by a permanent employee in “*we have steps to follow. We have to try to resolve it within ourselves*” (C, accounts payable).

Beyond using self-managed conflict resolution to manage simple conflicts (e.g., returning late from breaks), more complicated conflicts were also rectified via collaboration, as reported by a permanent distribution and shipping employee (N): “*There were three guys that worked in the warehouse and had been here for four years who were considered permanent. So, they wanted to have coveralls or something because they’re out there sorting parts. Anyway, it got to the point where we had a meeting because they had been here for four years straight and they needed to be made permanent and given uniforms. So, they did.*” With this situation, a conflict about processes in terms of employment and equipment occurred. The seasonal employees had been frustrated because they believed they needed a better work situation. As the FruitCo policy suggests, a panel of “*those in the affected work environment or those with relevant expertise with the issue at hand*” (FruitCo policy) were able to be redistributed through a meeting with a panel of colleagues to find a mutually satisfactory resolution, with the seasonal employees receiving a change in employment status and being provided with coveralls.

### **Discussion**

This is the first qualitative study to investigate self-managed conflict resolution in a flat organization that features self-managed ADR among both permanent and seasonal employees. This study provides several insights that suggest that self-managed ADR should be equally trained across all employees and, even then, may not always be beneficial. In the case of FruitCo, contractual status was an indicator of how conflict resolution processes were taught and eventually utilized by employees.



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This study revealed that the self-managed ADR training processes at FruitCo varied based on contractual status, with permanent employees receiving a much more robust training program. While past research suggests that conflict resolution training is effective when implemented across a minimum of six hours and includes material related to the management of cognitive-behavioral reactions to conflict (Gillin-Oore et al., 2015; Leon-Perez et al., 2016; Warhime, 1980), only the permanent employees received this sum of training hours. On one hand, the permanent employees did initiate ADR processes per policy requirements, yet despite the comprehensive training, the permanent employees engaged in more aggression than the seasonal employees who experienced less training. This suggests that the number of training hours may have provided those employees to have the confidence to engage in self-managed ADR. However, those employees did not always utilize the collaborative tactics they were trained to utilize.

Second, analysis of interviews revealed that self-managed conflict training featured a lack of bilingual language skill-building concerning the implementation of ADR at FruitCo. On-site observation and interviews revealed that FruitCo did not offer comprehensive Spanish language training with an in-person trainer (Spanish language training is done by playing a pre-recorded video), nor any modules that teach monolingual Spanish and English employees basic bilingual communication skills that might be useful in times of interpersonal conflict. This deficit of Spanish language training is concerning as Valverde-Barrantes and Aveiga (2007) found that language barriers were a significant contributor to workplace interpersonal conflict when all employees do not share a common language. For example, if a mono-linguistic Spanish speaker is upset with a mono-linguistic English speaker for slowing production, communication between the two employees might need to have a bilingual coworker to mediate the conflict, precluding a

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direct conflict resolution process. Here, the self-managed ADR is undermined owing to a lack of comprehensive training. Together, the lack of adequate training for seasonal employees produces a dynamic that undercuts a portion of the ability of the mono-linguistic Spanish speakers to communicate on equal standing with their colleagues. Thus, without an ability to directly communicate with each other, the ADR cannot be fully realized equitably between employees.

Aside from training, this study examined the processes employed by FruitCo staff in times of conflict. While FruitCo policy prescribed self-managed conflict resolution incorporating colleague collaboration, one-third of the incidents reported by employees did not consist of collaboration tactics to resolve interpersonal disputes. Within those conflicts where collaboration was not used, it was permanent employees who veered away from this strategy that was prescribed in the FruitCo ADR policy even though they had greater ADR training. The permanent employees utilized aggression as the second most common resolution process after collaboration. On the other hand, seasonal employees never reported aggression as a resolution tactic. To provide some interpretation of our findings for why seasonal employees used collaboration more often despite their lack of training in ADR strategies, we turn to the job insecurity literature for suggestions. One explanation might be that the seasonal workers might want to present themselves as non-problematic owing to the inherent job insecurity associated with their employment status. Seasonal employees are in a situation fraught with job insecurity (i.e., an overall concern about the continued existence of the job in the future; Sverke et al., 2002, p. 243). Given this situation where employees know their contract is limited and that a new contract the following year is based on performance, they need to be aware of how their behavior is being perceived. Related, Garrido Vázquez et al. (2019) reported that feelings of job insecurity

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can be a result of conflict with co-workers, suggesting that using a collaborative approach to resolve conflict can mitigate negative emotions associated with job insecurity.

Instead of using collaboration, permanent employees reported the use of aggressive conflict resolution strategies in 40% of their examples. We suggest three reasons why permanent employees resorted to aggression. First, permanent workers knew that they could not differentiate themselves in status via the traditional mechanisms of earning a more prestigious title promotion due to the nature of a flat organization. However, permanent employees knew that the development of informal esteem from colleagues along with a formal pay increase was associated with choosing to take more work tasks within the organization. Instead of focusing on completing tasks in their area of professional expertise, employees could ‘call out’ employees who work in a completely different area of the organization to build their value instead of collaborating to create a more efficient process whereby both employees could gain value. A second reason for aggressive behaviors by permanent employees is owing to what could be considered a flaw in the self-managed ADR policy. An area for concern with the policy is that it allows for 3-10 potentially biased people to become involved in the process because FruitCo policy states that the confronting group should include “those in the affected work environment” (FruitCo policy). This is concerning because as the confronting group widens against a single employee, the group is likely to increase aggressive behaviors (Goldstein, 2002). Finally, because the permanent employees work in roles that would be considered ‘management’ in a hierarchical organization, it seems that the duties of enforcing safety and integrity policies, as well as forcing those employees who violate those policies to quit, falls on those permanent employees and implicitly makes those permanent employees act as gatekeepers to the organization. Taken together, it does appear that self-managed ADR generally works the

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majority of time at FruitCo, but is more problematic when used as an intervention for unilateral decisions on employment termination for severe infractions.

Aside from collaborative and aggressive resolution approaches, there was scant use of accommodation and avoidance of conflict. It is possible that these incidents were not reported because a non-interaction, or avoidance of conflict would not come to memory during a discussion, or because incidents of accommodation would not come to memory because the person who accommodated did not have a stake in a conflict and did not have anything to report. As such, the results do not necessarily indicate an absence of these processes but, instead, an under-report.

Despite conducting in-depth interviews with 20 employees, research at a single organization inherently has some limitations. First, as the participants reported examples of conflict resolution processes based on memory there is a possibility that participants may have recalled incidents that were recent or emotionally critical, and not necessarily typical practices within the organization (Hess et al., 2013). Related, the recall of a limited number of conflict resolution incidents does not necessarily account for how a single employee responds to all conflict, or how their approach to a conflict may have changed across their tenure at the organization. For example, without a longitudinal study, it cannot be discerned if an employee in the first year of hire might avoid conflict resolution processes, but in subsequent years of hire, the employee might be collaborative or aggressive owing to their familiarity with the self-managed conflict resolution policy. Finally, the process of audio recording interviews as a part of the qualitative data collection process could have created some inhibition because it is unnatural to have conversations recorded, or perhaps of some anxiety with not trusting the researchers

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(despite the mitigations noted in the method section) to keep those recordings away from FruitCo management.

### **Conclusion**

This case study provides evidence for how permanent and seasonal workers enact conflict resolution in an organization that promotes self-managed conflict resolution. While the findings presented in this study provide insights into ADR systems, there are avenues for further investigation. Researchers should examine if the rates of conflict resolution styles vary based on other factors that can affect relationships in the workplace that were not examined in this study. For example, there is a need to expand the investigation to other flat hierarchy structured organizations as well as traditional hierarchical organizations to test the generalizability of the findings revealed in this study. As future studies develop, we also suggest that researchers examine how varied organizational self-managed conflict resolution training might decrease hierarchical employee differentials while, in tandem, increase collaborative resolution approaches. Finally, an investigation that specifically assesses the potential moderating effects of job insecurity on self-managed conflict resolution among seasonal or other non-permanent employees would be useful to better understand the complex factors related to workplace interpersonal conflict. Together, by parsing out each of these variables, human resource managers, organizational consultants, and worker representatives will be able to design an ADR that best fits each unique organization to restore and/or maintain collaborative conflict resolution approach principles in the workplace.

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## SELF-MANAGED CONFLICT RESOLUTION

**Table 1***Summary of Conflicts Reported by Participants*

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Interview Language</b>	<b>Job Duty</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Description of Conflict</b>	<b>Part in Conflict</b>	<b>Type of Conflict</b>	<b>Conflict Resolution Approach</b>
A	Female	English	Sorter	Seasonal	Request to work overtime	Approached by Permanent	Process	Collaborate
					Change shifts	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
					Breaks too long	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
B	Male	English	Packing	Permanent	Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Collaborate
					Employees physically fighting owing to personality conflict	Initiated to Seasonal	Relationship	Aggress – told person to quit job
					Seasonal employee does not like that permanent workers have uniforms	Approached by Seasonal	Process	Collaborative, but turned to accommodation
C	Female	English	Accounts payable	Permanent	Job not being done correctly	Approached by Permanent	Task	Collaborate
D	Female	English	Office assistant	Permanent	Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Collaborate
E	Male	Spanish	Shipping and receiving	Seasonal	Job not being done correctly	Approached by Permanent	Task	Collaborate
					Job not being done correctly	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Collaborate
F	Male	Spanish	Forklift	Seasonal	Breaks too long	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
					Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Collaborate
G	Male	Spanish	Machine maintenance	Seasonal	Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Collaborate
H	Male	Spanish	Harvest driver	Seasonal	Job not being done efficiently	Approached by Permanent	Task	Collaborate

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<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Interview Language</b>	<b>Job Duty</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Description of Conflict</b>	<b>Part in Conflict</b>	<b>Type of Conflict</b>	<b>Conflict Resolution Approach</b>
I	Male	English	Mechanic	Permanent	Late to work	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
					Falsifying timecards	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Aggress, told person to quit job
J	Male	English	Plant manager	Permanent	Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Permanent	Task	Collaborate
					Seasonal employees not using self-managed conflict resolution	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
K	Male	Spanish	Box builder	Seasonal	Job not being done efficiently	Approached by Permanent	Task	Collaborate
					Decide who should do jobs	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
L	Male	English	Unloads train	Permanent	Need to reuse materials, not dispose of them	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
					Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Aggress, told to get back to work
					Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Collaborate
					Breaks too long	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
					Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Collaborate
M	Female	English	Lab quality control	Seasonal	Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Collaborate
					Breaks too long	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
					Job not being done efficiently	Approached by Permanent	Task	Collaborate
					Scheduling shifts	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
N	Male	English	Distribution/shipping	Permanent	Breaks too long by seasonal employee	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
					Seasonal employees arguing with each other	Initiated to Seasonal	Relationship	Collaborate
					Seasonal wanted coveralls uniform	Approached by seasonal	Process	Collaborate

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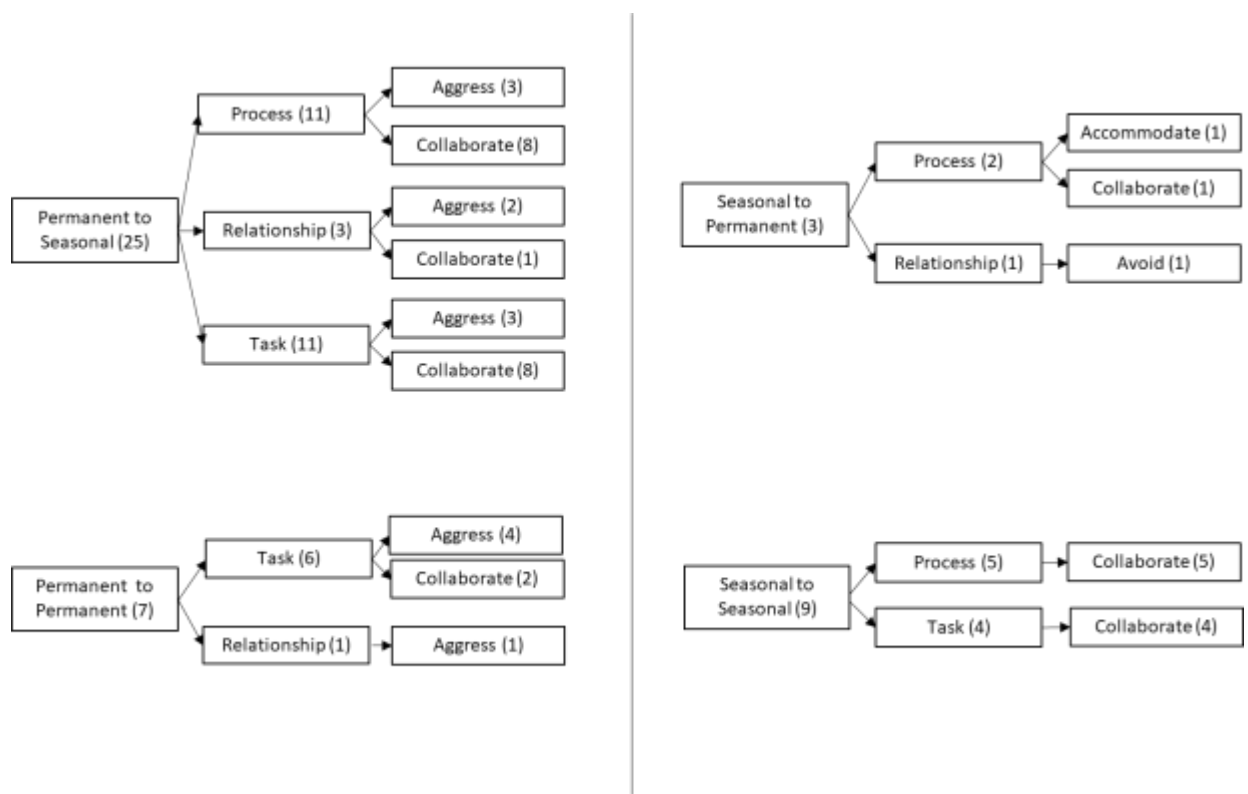
<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Interview Language</b>	<b>Job Duty</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Description of Conflict</b>	<b>Part in Conflict</b>	<b>Type of Conflict</b>	<b>Conflict Resolution Approach</b>
O	Male	English	Controller	Permanent	Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Permanent	Task	Aggress, told person to quit job
					Seasonal employees physically fighting with each other	Initiated to Seasonal	Relationship	Aggress, told person to quit job
					Employees arguing	Initiated to Permanent	Relationship	Aggress, told person to quit job
					Falsifying timecards	Initiated to Seasonal	Task	Aggress, told person to quit job
					Not completing work	Initiated to permanent	Task	Aggress, told person to quit job
P	Female	English	Personnel/ payroll	Permanent	Shift scheduling	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Collaborate
					Employee leaving work early	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Aggress told person to quit job
					Falsifying accounting sheets	Initiated to Permanent	Task	Aggress, ended with termination
					Job not being done efficiently	Initiated to Permanent	Task	Aggress, told person to quit job
					Employee drug use	Initiated to Seasonal	Process	Aggress, told person to quit job
					Seasonal employee wanted a permanent employee to get involved in an existing conflict	Approached by Seasonal	Relationship	Avoid, did not get involved

*Note.* The 16 participants reported a total of 44 conflicts

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**Figure 1**

*Summary of Conflict Per Employment Status*



*Note.* A total of 16 participants reported incidents of interpersonal conflict. The figure provides a flow for which of the dual-concern conflict resolution was used as incidents of process, relationship, and task conflicts arose among permanent and seasonal employees.