



# Outflankers Or Outflanked? Investigating The Concept of Organizational Outflanking Through Power, Its Forms and Practice

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## Abstract

*Organizational outflanking refers to the possession of organizational resources, which used to provide an advantage for some over others, leading to benefits or gains for the outflankers in comparison to the implicit violation of the rights of the outflanked. Whilst organizational outflanking has important consequences for organizations, affecting productivity, satisfaction and performance of employees, little attention is paid to this important phenomenon in management and organization literature. The current paper, therefore, aimed to consolidate existing knowledge and promote the importance of the concept with regard to organizational behaviour. Given the limited knowledge on the topic, a scoping review of the literature conducted, in order to explore all available material on the concept of organizational outflanking and its use within previous research. Existing literature has touched on the concept of organizational outflanking in several important ways: examining its relationship with power; highlighting its operation on different levels and exploring how it is practised within organizations. There is some ambiguity, however, surrounding the potential identities of the outflanked and the outflankers. Furthermore, little attention paid to the causal factors of outflanking, beyond power relations. Whilst outflanking has shown that predominantly lead to negative outcomes, there is evidence of positive consequences within specific contexts, which requires further exploration. This paper thus provides consolidated knowledge on the concept of organizational outflanking, drawing together existing understandings, raising some important questions that not answered yet, which emerge from the literature. Finally, this paper gives some significant practical implications to the leaders who are the most responsible in managing the outflanking in the organizations.*

**Keywords:** *Organizational Outflanking, Outflanker, Outflanked, Circuits Power, Resistance of Power, Avoidance of Conflict.*

## Introduction

Organizational workplaces require an environment, which ensures employee satisfaction, productivity and retention. Unfortunately, however, within some organizational contexts, employees encounter problems, which negatively affect the aforementioned factors. Of significance to the current paper is the potentially negative consequences of organizational outflanking for the organization. The concept of 'outflanking' has its roots in military terminology (Stokes, 2007), referring to moving a force to the enemy's side or rear without infiltrating his position (Bisht et al., 2007).

Outflanking appears in the literature on several different levels, such as the international level, where research has examined how governments can be outflanked by private equity, due to privatization and glo-

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balization (Allen, 2008), or through the increasing prominence of transnational actors (McCall, 2009), as well as how organizational resources are used to outflank activist organizations (Bondesen, 2018). Literature has also explored outflanking at the collective level through striking (Johnston, 2004) and feminist political action (Haugaard, 2003; Kesby, 2005). This study pays a great attention to the outflanking at the institutional or organizational level. Within business, for instance, the term is more commonly used to indicate how organizational resources are essential to create the outflanking, with more specific reference to 'organizational outflanking', first applied in the work of Michael Mann (1986). The literature tends to connect organizational outflanking with power and the advantage that some individuals have over others through access to or the possession of resources, or the capacity to diminish the consequences of resistance.

Organizational outflanking is an important concept, which requires deep understanding and further studies to identify the problems of this phenomenon and find practical solutions for it. This is particularly important in relation to organizational behaviour field. Therefore, there is real need to explore the factors behind it, and the categorization of individuals in the organization as outflankers or outflanked. This paper, therefore, aims to demonstrate the importance of the concept of organizational outflanking within organization, to provide a concise overview of existing knowledge on this phenomenon and a deeper understanding of the concept of organizational outflanking and its application in management and organization, as well as highlighting areas that have received little attention and subsequently require further research.

This theoretical paper begins with an explanation of the methods adopted, which is important for demonstrating how the review of the literature was conducted. The review demonstrates existing knowledge on organizational outflanking which includes definitions of the concept, forms of organizational outflanking, the relationship between power and outflanking, and the levels of organizational outflanking and the use of third-party intervention in conflict avoidance. The paper ends with an overview of significant findings and conclusions.

## Methods

A scoping review was conducted to identify all available material on the concept of organizational outflanking and its use within previous research, using an approach informed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005: 22). Here, five stages were involved in the process of conducting the scoping review: identification of the research question, location of relevant studies (via electronic databases), selection of studies (screened by title, abstract and keyword search), charting of data (use of a synthesis table), and collation, summary and analysis of the data (identifying key themes).

The literature review involved the use of six electronic databases available to the researcher through the Institution of Public Administration (IPA) in Saudi Arabia: Emerald, IEEE, ProQuest, Sage journals, Web of Science and Wiley online library. Three yielded sources on organizational outflanking and subsequently used in the literature review (Emerald, ProQuest and Sage journals). As the intention was to identify all information available on the concept of organizational outflanking, reflecting the under-explored nature of the concept, no restriction of articles by date enforced. Following a keyword search for 'outflank' the numerous sources identified and their lack of relevance to the actual concept required more specific keyword searching, resulting in the use of 'organizational outflanking' within the databases. This yielded 922 sources. These were screened using titles, abstracts and keyword searches, and the exclusion of sources, which did not address the concept, or any duplicates. This resulted in 78 sources, which read in full for relevance, leading to the integration of 37 sources in the final review, which offered some discussion, or mention of organizational outflanking. The data from these 36 sources charted in a table, including citation data, methods, focus and key findings relating to organizational outflanking. These were analysed according to focus and themes identified.

## Organizational Outflanking

### *Defining the Concept*

For Mann (1986), the possession of organizational advantage over those who do not have access to, or lack, organizational resources, or the ability to eliminate resistance against power, represents organizational outflanking. Thus, according to Mann (1986), those who practise outflanking, whether individuals, groups or institutions, are those who succeed and compliance of the masses results from their inability to engage in collective organization for resistance and their being entrenched in organizations controlled by others. Organizational outflanking thus takes place through the ability of the “few at the top” to “keep the masses at the bottom compliant” via laws and norms that are institutionalized (Mann, 1986: 7), and the prevention of resistance in advance “by means of organizational priority” (Sadan, 2004: p.46). It is argued that organizational outflanking, therefore, explains why obedience amongst the masses occurs, or why compliance dominates over revolt (Clegg, 1989), as they are bounded by powerful organizations or as people who have advantages or resources can eliminate resistance from those who have few resources. Power relations balanced in favour of the outflankers, as opposed to the outflanked (Omoijiade, 2014; Omoijiade and N'Egoro, 2014). Such a conception of organizational outflanking appears to indicate that the direction of outflanking occurs from the managers to the subordinates or from the higher ranking within an organization to those below.

### *Forms of Organizational Outflanking*

The literature has shown that there are different forms of organizational outflanking which appear in the behaviour of individuals and groups. Evidence suggests that these forms also occur between organizations through competitive advantage (see, for instance, Cunha et al., 2012; Klakurka and Irwin, 2016). These forms of organizational outflanking, which may also be considered tactics, ensue from lack of knowledge and cost (Omoijiade and N'Egoro, 2014; Douglas, 2016; Stör, 2017). In terms of the former, this includes ignorance, isolation and division (Clegg, 1989; Omoijiade, 2014; Omoijiade and N'Egoro, 2014). In relation to ignorance, this may be conveyed through people's lack of knowledge about “the rules of the game”, including “the rules of behaviour, the agenda, and the meaning of informal behaviour” (Sadan, 2004: 47). Thus, employees may not be aware of policies or rules within their organization and are subsequently dis-empowered by the many organizational processes in place. Ignorance also occurs through individuals not identifying the game itself. It may be, for instance, that despite an organization appearing to have an advantage over another, perhaps in relation to technology, the other organization manages to outflank the former via a different advantage, such as local knowledge or an ability to exploit a particular situation, thus giving the latter the power and enabling them to become the outflankers (Douglas, 2006).

The second form of lack of knowledge; isolation is considered more complex than ignorance (Sadan, 2004). It refers to a lack of information about others (colleagues) in the same position, who share a similar fate. This may arise from organizations' concerns that those who share the same fate may create an alliance or coalition. Thus, organizations resist the power, with organizational outflanking resulting from withholding information from individuals about what is happening. Thus, when outflankers create isolation for others, they can more easily overcome attempts at resistance (O'Connor, 2000). This has been touched on in relation to bullying within organizations, whereby Hodgins et al. (2020) suggest that practices in place, which intended to protect individuals within organizations, also function as tools of isolation, in turn leading to depression amongst the outflanked. Furthermore, organizational outflanking may involve tactics such as concealing or confusing the rules to achieve plans or goals, or the outflanking of others through advanced knowledge of organizational processes. It may be, for instance, as shown above, that an employee's accusations of bullying are impacted by an organization's policy and confidentiality clauses, which can isolate the alleged victim (Hodgins et al., 2020). Ignorance and isolation may also work together, for as

Clegg (1989) explains, "An absence of knowledge may be premised on isolation. One would resist or could do so more effectively if one were not so isolated" (p.221).

Finally, division occurs when individuals do know about one another and have the potential to form an alliance, resulting in organizations actively separating individuals using complex divisions of labour, or competition in the form of secrecy, such as prohibiting the sharing of details such as pay (Sadan, 2004). It may also be that time and space can be effectively "ordered and arranged to minimize the interaction and mutual awareness of subordinates, or even to render one group of subordinates invisible to another" (Clegg, 1989 221). As such, division involves isolating resistant groups or individuals.

Powerlessness from outflanking can therefore result from a lack of knowledge of the outflanked, but it may also result from individuals who have knowledge not being able to free themselves from outflanking, or from conscious submission to organizational outflanking (Omoijade, 2014). Whilst some people may have the knowledge, for example, they may be prevented from using it and be aware that they are being outflanked because of the price of resistance to outflanking, and thus the 'costs' (Douglas, 2016; Stör, 2017). Individuals may therefore decide that resistance would lead to less of a positive outcome than being outflanked. Thus, outflanking may occur despite having knowledge, where individuals cannot use such knowledge because of the fear of paying the price of outflanking. Sometimes employees who are outside the networks or alliance of power are powerless or are silent regarding what they feel or think others get. This is important, for as Sadan (2004: 49) explains, "organizational outflanking explains why knowledge by itself is not always enough to change the situation".

These different forms of outflanking are illustrated in the work of Stör (2017) who looks at how outflanking occurs within civil society, state authority and climate negotiations. Stör (2017) explains how the example of economic change in driving climate change can be used to highlight the three forms of outflanking. First, the "organizationally outflanked casualties of climate change do not recognize its connection to economic growth, perpetuated through financial markets" (p.18), indicating the occurrence of outflanking via ignorance. Second, whilst the knowledge may be held in relation to the association between "economic growth and climate change...the costs to treat it as a problem of the many in the future are outflanked by the benefits of economic growth for the few today" (Ibid.). Thus, as stated above, the price of resistance to outflanking may be regarded as too high. Thirdly, Stör (2017) suggests that there may be situations where "the organizationally outflanked are not given room to manoeuvre, whether they are communities that suffer under the effects of climate change or low-income classes that are forced to reproduce the conditions in which they are situated" (p.18). As such, individuals "may lack the resources to change the situation they are in.

### ***The Relationship between Power and Organizational Outflanking***

Exploring the concept of organizational outflanking cannot be achieved without consideration of power, as without power, organizational outflanking would not occur (although power is not the only factor, which determines organizational outflanking). Indeed, the literature on organizational outflanking addresses its relationship with power in detail. Mann (1986), for example, looks at how different forms of power result in organizational outflanking. He stated that, whilst power can be understood as "...the ability to pursue and attain goals through mastery of one's environment" (p.6), it is social or collective power which more specifically refers to the process whereby, despite resistance, one individual in a social relationship has the ability to pursue their own goals. Social power manifests in two forms, however, also referring to cooperation between individuals to exercise joint power over a third party. Power is also a dialectical concept, for as Mann (1986) explains, first, power can be either distributive or collective, subsequently representing power that is exercised either over others or through cooperation with others. Second, it is either direct through command and obedience (authoritative), or it is indirect through ideological or economic re-

lations (diffused power). Despite their distinctions, both forms of power can result in outflanking, for whilst diffuse power encompasses more collective power, subordinate classes who believe resistance to be futile, may also be outflanked. Mann (1986; 2012) also explains that power can be either extensive or intensive, with the former referring to the organization of people on a large scale collectively, such as globalization, and the latter resulting in high levels of commitment from participants through coercion and persuasion. The most effective forms of power combine these various elements.

Mann (2012) suggests that there are four sources of power, which provide the background for organizational outflanking: ideological, economic, military and political. Ideological power is most commonly reflected in religions and secular ideologies including patriarchy, liberalism, fascism and racism. Thus, it refers to desires for meaning, with shared norms, beliefs, values and ritual practices. Economic power infiltrates relations of people's everyday lives, involving the mobilization of labour alongside modes of production, such as that represented in the emergence of industrial capitalism, and subsequently class distinctions. Military power, as redefined by Mann (2012) in Volume 3 of his work, refers to "the social organization of concentrated and lethal violence" (p.9). It is focused, physical and lethal, thus it can result in death. Finally, political power, for Mann (2012) focuses on the role of local, regional and national-level government (geographically bounding power) in regulating and providing order in social life, through the provision of rules. Thus, for Mann (2012), outflanking emerges through different forms and sources of power. Bondesen (2018: 32) argues, however, "Organisational outflanking is a product of the specific social situation and does not describe a specific form of tactic or mechanism of power".

Organizational outflanking has also been explored in relation to power by Haapasaari et al. (2018), who draw on the work of Hardy (1996), in relation to the three dimensions of power (resources, processes and meaning). For Hardy (1996) 'resource power' involves desired outcomes and behaviour being achieved via the implementation of resources which others may be dependent upon, including "...information, expertise, political access, credibility, stature and prestige, access to higher echelon members, the control of money, rewards and sanctions" (p.57). Such power is task-oriented and involves the continuous use of either punishment/ deterrent or reward to achieve the desired behaviour. Processes power refers to decision-makers keeping decision-making processes for themselves and preventing others from being involved. Meaning power involves power being used to influence perceptions, preferences and thought processes in order to encourage individuals to accept the current state of affairs in the absence of conceivable alternatives.

In Haapasaari et al.'s (2018) study, it is resource power which is predominantly related to outflanking. It is argued, for instance, that individuals who have control over resources are considered to have power over those who do not (the outflanked). Thus, outflankers may be considered to hold resource power. Swan and Scarbrough (2005) suggest, however, that it is important to "acknowledge power as a productive force, independent of hierarchical settings" (p.11). They demonstrate the significance of process and meaning power (power to) as opposed to resource power (power over) in relation to innovation processes, arguing that there has been a tendency to focus on 'power over' in the hierarchical setting, in relation to innovation processes. Power over, in this sense, refers to the mobilization of resources which might include, for example, financial resources, information and staff. This, they argue, provides a limited understanding of power relations. Thus, they suggest that a more open view of power recognises its ability to be a productive force and to acknowledge 'power to' as much as 'power over'. 'Power to' in this situation, is therefore considered more important than 'power over'. Arguably, then, both 'power to' and 'power over' are important elements of organizational outflanking and must thus be acknowledged when exploring this concept.

The work of Clegg (1989) on power is important for understanding resistance to power, of which outflanking is one form. Organizational outflanking, then, is an aspect of power but is not a central theory of

power or powerlessness (Sadan, 2004). Baunsgaard and Clegg (2012) suggest that organizational outflanking represents one of two different types of resistance to power. Resistance to power in this sense may be considered a new power in itself, or a new force field. Clegg (1989) argues that it is important to acknowledge that power is not a thing, nor is it something that people have in a proprietorial sense. They 'possess' power only as far as they are relationally constituted to do so. As Clegg (1989) suggests, power in organizations must concern hierarchical power and their relation to one another and proposes the 'circuits of power'.

Clegg's (1989) development of the circuits of power draws on the work of Lockwood (1964), Parsons (1967), Lukes (1974) and Foucault (1977), as well as Machiavelli. As Silva and Backhouse (2003) explain, by drawing together these different perspectives, Clegg's (1989) view of power focuses not just on actions, as in the work of Giddens (1984) on structuration, but also on what drives these actions, such as individual agents' intentions and strategies. Using Foucault's (1977) work on disciplinary power, Clegg goes further than Giddens to show how the knowledgeable individual is established through power. Clegg (1989) outlines three different circuits of power; episodic, social and systemic. The episodic circuit of power, causal power or 'power over' is where an individual is made to do something by another that they would otherwise not have done. It is therefore a type of power identified by its resistance (Silva and Backhouse, 2003). Thus, as Clegg (1989) states, when power remains purely episodic, it "does not enter into the other circuits of power" (p.18). Furthermore:

...as power always involves power over another and thus at least two agencies, episodic power will usually call forth resistance because of the power/knowledge nature of agency. Power and resistance stand in a relationship to each other. One rarely has one without the other (p.208).

As such, episodic power is relational, and relies on the existence of resistance in order to be identified. Thus, if subordinates are willing, the exertion of causal power cannot take place.

The circuit of social integration, in contrast to the episodic circuit's emphasis on causal power, focuses on dispositional power, which tends to include "...the rules that govern meaning and membership in organizations" (Silva and Backhouse, 2003: 298). This form of power "...originates in the social circuit and supplies social integration and stability to the power relations" (Sadan, 2004: 51). It relates to the rules of membership, to the "...groups, rules and hierarchies" (Silva and Backhouse, 2003: 301) and the subsequent capacity to exercise power, but without necessarily exercising it. Thus, individuals have the entitlement but do not always exercise it. It is only when that power is exercised, that it becomes causal power. Furthermore, as Silva and Backhouse (2003) suggest, this circuit involves not just formal structures of the organization, but also informal.

The circuit of systemic integration focuses on power that is facilitative, thus resulting in productivity and the ability to achieve collective goals. It is regarded as the technological means to apply power, in contrast to dispositional power, which provides the conditions for causal power to take place. Thus, techniques might be the different forms of discipline exercised over employees by managers, techniques that relate to Foucault's (1977) notion of 'disciplinary practices'. As such, a manager requires the dispositional power or standing conditions, facilitated by the techniques (or facilitative power) available to them, to exercise causal power. Such techniques, for Clegg (1989) include rewards and sanctions, as well as "...supervision, routinization, formalization, mechanization and legislation, which seek to effect increasing control of employees' behaviour, dispositions and embodiment" (p.191). As Silva and Backhouse (2003) state, "The resulting coordination in working practices is what we call systemic integration" (p.302).

What is important about the circuits of power is that by drawing together different perspectives of power, they provide an insight into the complexities taking place. As such, whilst episodic circuits, for in-

stance, are considered to represent where real acts of power are enacted, it is the field of power, reflected in dispositional and facilitative power, or the social and systemic circuits, where the complexity and diversity of power become evident (Clegg, 1989). Clegg's (1989) circuits of power, therefore, provides an important perspective on power which is effective when exploring organizational outflanking and why people are likely to conform or be obedient. As Clegg (1989) explains:

Lacking the organizational resources to outmanoeuvre existing networks and alliances of power, subordinate agencies are usually able to achieve effective resistance only based on a collective organization for which they frequently lack capacities for action. With such collective organization, they may be able to exploit fissure and division in the ruling ranks (p.19).

Thus, subordinate agencies who individually lack the capacities to resist may be able to work collectively and exploit weaknesses in the organization. Mutiganda (2014) therefore suggests that resistance to change develops when the circuits of power have come together, which can result in organizational outflanking. Thus, the outflanker is a person or organization that possesses a "dominant circuit of power" in comparison to the outflanked individual or organization. Using organizational outflanking to examine accountability among public decision-makers during the institutionalisation of competitive tendering in Sunset City, an elderly care service, and to determine if it was ceremonial, Mutiganda (2014) demonstrates how relationships are shaped by someone who has the power over another, due to the utilisation of tools, knowledge and skills to solve organizational problems during change. The example of Finland is used to discuss competitive tendering for elderly care, where bids did not have to include additional costs associated with the care of the elderly and feeding them. The winning company subsequently housed the elderly in a care centre owned by a business partner, which was an additional cost not accounted for by the public sector. As every mature and permanent citizen in Finland is entitled to a social allowance towards rent when they cannot afford to pay it, this cost fell to the public sector. Thus, the public officials were outflanked as they had to include additional contracts for the rent and maintenance of the centre. As a result, this example illustrates the ways in which private sector organizations may use their "facilitative circuit of power to outflank the institutional change process to the detriment of total costs of services financed by public funds" (p.24). The study showed that an organization, which possesses dominant circuits of power, has the ability to outflank the thought processes and actions of other organizational actors, which subsequently results in additional agreements beyond those anticipated or expected, with the outflanking organization.

Ribeiro and Scapens (2006) look at outflanking in relation to management accounting change, and as Mutiganda (2014), they have a theoretical focus on circuits of power. They use a case study of an organization where changes were being promoted in management accounting and discuss how individuals are outflanked by organizations through the institutional systems in place. Thus, whilst doctors, for instance, may resist the introduction of changes to systems and practices which introduce more financially-oriented rules because they view these as damaging to the patient service. At the same time, regularities in the use of these rules is explained by the outflanking of individuals by the organization, as a result of the power of prevailing taken-for-granted rules of meaning and membership. In other words, it is the power of the institutions, which leads to outflanking. This power does not emerge from individuals naturally being more knowledgeable but rather from institutionalised rules, which are fixed by disciplinary devices and the distribution of resources. The authors discuss the example of an organization in which the director has authority over the employees, in terms of hiring and firing, but also how the absence of a reliable Information Technology infrastructure and subsequent 'disciplinary gaze' ensured that the director had more power over the employees, which may be a reason for the outflanking.

Diab and Aboud (2019) state that the market logic or the power of the markets does not necessarily prevent worker resistance but rather when resistance is related to ideologies based on either religious

beliefs, community values or democratic practices, workers are in a stronger position to outflank control measures enforced by management. Community members may resist, for instance, where there is a sense of grievance and insecurity relating to market logic, providing a form of workers' power. Whilst Clegg's (1989) work has received some criticism around the assumed failure to incorporate issues of attributes of group agency (McPhee, 2004), the circuits of power explain the complexities involved within how power is exercised in organizations and why employees predominantly conform or are obedient to their managers and organization, or how they are outflanked. It also explains how employees can become the outflankers, through collective action.

### ***Organizational Outflanking as a Method of Conflict Avoidance***

The literature also focuses on how organizational outflanking is practised within organizations, predominantly concerning conflict avoidance, which examines outflanking between managers and their subordinates. This has tended to focus on either third-party intervention by managers in subordinate conflicts (Kozan et al., 2007; Kozan et al., 2014) or conflict avoidance between subordinates and their managers (Tjosvold and Sun, 2002; Wang, 2006; Xu, 2009). The majority of the research focuses on the Chinese (Xu, 2009; Tjosvold and Sun, 2002; Lu et al., 2020) or Turkish context (Kozan et al., 2007; Kozan et al., 2014), with one additional study looking at comparative differences in conflict avoidance between Chinese and American participants (Friedman et al., 2006). Looking more closely at this research, in the Turkish context, research has explored managers' intervention in subordinate conflicts within Turkish organizations. Turkey is largely a collectivist culture with high power distance and managers playing a key role in conflict management as harmony is an important goal and conflicts can negatively impact this in a collectivist culture.

In one study using a questionnaire with 392 employees within 59 organizations, the findings indicated that managers used five different strategies to intervene in conflict: mediation, inquisitorial, motivational tactics, conflict reduction through restructuring, and educating the parties. As part of these, Kozan et al. (2007) discuss the use of 'outflanking' where third parties are used to maintain or improve close relationships during cases of conflict. In a later study, Kozan et al. (2014) drew on questionnaires with 39 managers and 165 subordinates. The findings indicated that levels of subordinate satisfaction were higher with manager mediation and lower where managers did not intervene in the conflict. It was shown that third parties play a significant role in preserving the face of adversaries. Looking at another collectivist culture, Lu et al. (2020) similarly suggest that those from a low-power party may adopt outflanking as a strategy for avoiding conflict rather than resolving the disagreement immediately. The study highlighted how in the Chinese context, negotiators in the low-power party may try to interact with superiors to request intervention to resolve conflicts. This is explained as relating to the fact that whilst they may want to pursue their interests, the low-power party cannot (for instance, they may not have the resources), thus instead of pursuing a strategy which would satisfy the interests of both parties (rather than their own) an alternative strategy is adopted. The low-power party may advance its interests when its bargaining power increases, giving greater powers of negotiation.

Research in the Chinese context has also tended to explore outflanking as one of several strategies for conflict avoidance between subordinates and their managers. Wang (2006), for instance, discusses six different forms of avoidance used by employees, which involve different types of strategies. Withdrawal, passive competition, exit and outflanking are all communication avoidant strategies where the individual avoids confrontation directly with the individual, whereas pretending and yielding are issue avoidant strategies where the individual maintains the relationship but surrenders the issue. Cooperation in the latter cases is thus selected at the expense of competition. Outflanking, as one of these strategies, thus involves reaching one's own goals whilst avoiding confrontation and negative consequences. This may involve the



use of actions considered to be outflanking behaviours, which include backstabbing, going to an authority, or public agreement with private disagreement. It may be that the employee avoids direct confrontation with a manager, for instance, where they have been refused something but continue to pursue their goals by generating an alliance with other dissatisfied employees, potentially creating greater adversity against the manager.

Outflanking cannot be considered an inactive or passive strategy, due to the efforts required and the consequences of the behaviour. Indeed, Bear et al. (2014) argue that:

It could be that the type of avoidance...influences individual, affective outcomes in the context of task conflict, such that outflanking (avoidance by working around someone) has positive effects since the task still gets done, whereas withdrawal or pretending that the conflict does not exist leads to negative emotional effects since the task is not completed, leading people to feel frustration and other negative emotions (pp.223-234).

Furthermore, Tjosvold and Sun (2002) found that where outflanking was used as conflict avoidance (as opposed to confirming), there was evidence of stronger relationships and more effective problem-solving. The research, which drew on interviews with 85 managers and employees in six State Owned Enterprises in South China found that conflict avoidance involved several motivations and strategies and that reliance upon the other person, promotion of task productivity and strengthening. At the same time, both managers and employees relied upon the relationship where there was the prior existence of either cooperative goals or a strong relationship. The aim of trying to work around the other, or outflanking, which motivated by both cooperative goals and fear of revenge. Outflanking was considered to indicate where individuals are not passive and do not show emotion but are highly proactive and driven by goals and objectives which they try to achieve through influencing others through a third party. It has shown that individuals who used outflanking believed that it had a positive effect on their performance and their confidence.

Xu (2009) similarly looks at outflanking with regards to avoidance of conflict with managers in China, specifically at how employees use outflanking as one of four strategies to avoid engaging in conflict with their managers. Outflanking involves turning to another party to help to resolve anger or turning to a 'third party to resolve the anger without affronting social face'; withdrawal involves staying cool, ignoring and giving silent treatment; retaliation refers to taking covert or indirect revenge to balance the perceived inequitable situation and finally, re-channelling where anger is expressed towards people or items which are not related to the source of anger. Outflanking in this sense, which involves friends, families and colleagues, or associations, is considered valuable for helping individuals to achieve emotional support and to resolve the conflict without confronting their boss directly. Xu (2009) found that the outflanking strategy had a significant effect on improving the future productivity of employees, even though it did not help build mutual relationships. Thus, whilst outflanking can lead to greater productivity it can also harm mutual relationships if not effectively managed. Xu (2009) thus states that employees must choose the third party with care, to ensure that the boss is not made aware of the employee's anger, which can also be considered a form of direct confrontation and lead to mistrust.

Research has also highlighted cultural differences in the use of outflanking, between Western and Eastern countries. Friedman et al. (2006) compared conflict avoidance between employees in Taiwan and the US and found that amongst the Chinese, there is a higher level of power distance than Americans, with greater status differentiation and an expectation that those higher up in the hierarchy are responsible for conflict resolution. Subsequently, there is also a greater respect for authority. Thus, the Chinese may be more concerned about the maintenance of the relationship with their boss and the avoidance of confrontation and therefore be more likely to engage in tactics involving conformity rather than outflanking, in com-

parison with Americans. The findings indicated that outflanking was less likely to occur amongst Chinese than Americans. The literature on conflict avoidance, then, seems to suggest that in collectivist cultures, outflanking has a different meaning to its use in other cultures. It refers to the use of a third party to resolve conflict (such as managers or supervisors) rather than how other literature has referred to outflankers as those who have access to resources in an organization. Conflict avoidance literature has also highlighted how the direction of outflanking can occur at the level of the manager but also the subordinates.

## Findings

This paper has highlighted the importance of the concept of outflanking within organizations. Its identifying four key ways in which the literature has engaged with the concept of outflanking: first, to determine the different forms of organizational outflanking; second, to indicate the relationship between power and outflanking; third, to outline the differing levels at which outflanking can operate and finally, to highlight the use of third party intervention in conflict avoidance. It has been shown, however, that there are shortcomings in the literature in terms of dominant power in the workplace, with unanswered questions surrounding who becomes the outflanked and who the outflankers are? Are the leaders always play the role as outflankers and subordinates predominantly play the role as outflanked? Does outflanking only occur between managers and their subordinates or can it occur between employees as colleagues? Thus, is it always a hierarchical relationship or can it be horizontal too?

It has also been shown that the literature focuses on power as the main cause of outflanking, at the expense of other potential factors. It may be that the type of relationship, such as a negative relationship, may play a role in causing outflanking. Personalities may also be significant factors in determining outflankers and the outflanked.

Finally, even though the concept of outflanking has negative consequences, especially where it is practised by those with power over those who do not, the evidence from the literature offers tentative suggestions that there may be some positive outcomes when outflanking is used as a strategy to avoid conflict, particularly in Eastern countries. Whereas Western countries tend towards egalitarian practices within workplaces, in Eastern countries, such openness is often absent and thus organizational outflanking potentially provides a form of relationship maintenance here. There may be a positive relationship, then, between using organizational outflanking as a strategy for solving conflict and the maintenance of relationships in the workplace.

## Conclusion

This paper provides a consolidated source of information on the concept of organizational outflanking, demonstrating the importance of the concept within management and organizational studies, whilst also collating existing knowledge and underlining potential avenues for future research. Whilst important insights have emerged from existing literature, there are arguably many areas relating to this phenomenon, which would benefit from further investigation. Research might pay attention, for example, to the measurement of outflanking within organizations, especially concerning the different forms of outflanking (lack of knowledge and cost). Whilst it has also been shown that outflankers and the outflanked can vary, with both outflankers and the outflanked being governments, private organizations, unions, leaders, employers, and employees, research is needed which examines outflanking outside of hierarchical relationships, such as that between colleagues. Furthermore, the literature has evidenced different perspectives on outflanking, whether looking at it collectively or individually, with outflanking emerging from different directions. There is a need to explore this further through empirical studies, which examine the differences in levels of organizational outflanking, in terms of whether it is greater at the individual or collective level. Furthermore,

research might explore whether organizational outflanking relates to the culture of organizations or the characteristic of individuals. Finally, literature has tended to focus on outflanking within specific countries, including China, Finland, Turkey, the US and the Balkan countries, so there is a need to examine the concept in relation to different countries to develop understanding here.

As shown, the phenomenon of organizational outflanking has negative consequences on the productivity, satisfaction and performance of employees. There are therefore several practical implications, which can be drawn from the findings of this research. First, breaking the silence surrounding this phenomenon will raise awareness of outflanking amongst leaders, and its effects within organizations, which will help to promote change, maintain relationships and reduce the cost of problems generated by the negative consequences of outflanking. Secondly, as Sadan (2004: 49) states "Organizational outflanking makes clear the necessity of active organizational development in order to gain significant achievements while resisting power". Arguably, there is a need to adopt strategies for empowering employees, thus more sufficiently distributing opportunities for all employees within organizations, to reduce the occurrence of the phenomenon as much as possible. Increasing efforts to embed a culture of empowerment and fairness within organizations will endorse the goals of the organization more effectively, by preventing the control of resources by either the powerful minority or the creation of alliances for resistance.

Finally, leaders must pay greater attention to the factors that lead to instances of ignorance, isolation and division amongst their employees and more actively involve employees within decision-making processes to minimise the potential for resistance. In addition, by encouraging leaders to take organizational outflanking into account, they will have the capacity to determine both the outflankers and the outflanked, ensuring that they are able to treat each side fairly to promote smooth operation within the organization.

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