

# When is Communication Effective for Reducing Interpersonal Conflict? The Moderating Effects of Credibility and Benevolence

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## Abstract

Bidirectional communication on a personal level plays an important role in developing a long-term buyer-seller relationship, but the process of interpersonal communication may be conflictual. Moreover, interpersonal trust may amplify or suppress the level of conflict in the communication. The present study examines how credibility trust and benevolence trust moderate the positive impact of bidirectional communication on reducing interpersonal conflict in buyer-seller contexts. Surveying data from 251 procurement professionals revealed that benevolence weakens the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and interpersonal conflict whereas credibility trust does not moderate the relationship. The implications of the divergence roles of both benevolence and credibility are discussed.

**Keywords:** bidirectional communication, task conflict, relationship conflict, credibility, benevolence

## 1. Introduction

For developing a long-term buyer-seller relationship, effective communication between a purchaser and a salesperson is highly crucial (Olkkonen, Tikkanen, & Alajoutsijärvi, 2000; Haytko, 2004). Of particular importance in a buyer-seller relationship is bidirectional communication due to the ability of this two-way communication to improve the quality of dyadic communication by increasing clarity of misunderstandings and reducing ambiguities (Dawes & Massey, 2005). However, the process of feedback exchange, clarification, and explanation may be conflictual (Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998), because there are differences in task-related and task-unrelated perspectives, ideas, and opinions between buyer's and seller's representative (Reid, Pullins, Plank, & Buehrer, 2004).

In communication, various facets of trust may play crucial roles to raise or reduce interpersonal conflict. For example, credibility trust may reduce interpersonal conflict because the confidence in knowledge and expertise of a salesperson may influence a purchaser to positively interpret the opposing viewpoints the salesperson provides (Doney & Cannon, 1997). This consequently limits the purchaser's critical stance toward opposing perspectives (Langfred, 2004). Conversely, benevolence trust may promote interpersonal conflict because the perceived goodwill in a salesperson may prompt a purchaser to encourage the salesperson to express opposing viewpoints and options without the fear of disagreements associated with hidden agendas (Amason, 1996). Importantly, interpersonal conflict would limit the development of buyer-seller relationship, such as eroding loyalty and satisfaction toward seller (Plank & Newell, 2007; Hung & Lin, 2013). Therefore, the question of whether various facets of trust result in different impacts on the relationship between bidirectional communication and interpersonal conflict requires further discussion.

This research examines how credibility trust and benevolence trust moderate (amplify or suppress) the positive impact of bidirectional communication on reducing interpersonal conflict in buyer-seller contexts. Specifically, we refer to Reid et al.'s (2004) perspective to infer that interpersonal conflict consists of task conflict and relationship conflict in buyer-seller contexts. According to the paradoxical views on interpersonal trust influencing conflict in buyer-seller relationships (Zaheer et al., 1998), we emphasize the distinct aspects of credibility trust and benevolence trust and argue that credibility amplifies the positive impact of bidirectional communication on reducing task and relationship conflict, whereas benevolence weakens this effect.

This research provides two main contributions to communication, marketing, and interpersonal conflict literature,

thereby enriching the understanding of the effect of trust on the communication-conflict relationship. First, by examining the moderating effects of benevolence and credibility on the linkage communication-conflict in buyer-seller relationships, we add important nuances to our understanding of the communication-conflict relationship (Dawes & Massey, 2005) and extend the application of the contingency perspective of intragroup conflict in buyer-seller relationships and the antecedent-conflict relationship (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Second, while task conflict and relationship conflict were found to occur in buyer-seller relationships, few studies in the marketing or business have empirically tested these two types of conflict in purchaser-salesperson relationships. So by linking bidirectional communication to both task and relationship conflict, we add to this sparse literature.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflict has been defined broadly as the perception that occurs when different parties hold different views or when conflict results from interpersonal incompatibilities (Jehn, 1995), and is inherent in buyer-seller relationships (Bradford & Weitz, 2009). Based on intragroup research, Reid et al. (2004) argue that interpersonal conflict consists of two types of conflict—task conflict and relationship conflict—in buyer-seller context. In a sales context, task conflict refers to task-related disagreements on perspectives, ideas, and opinions between a salesperson and a purchaser. On the other hand, relationship conflict refers to the person-related disagreements between the salesperson and the purchaser, such as tension, animosity, or annoyance. Moreover, task conflict may escalate into relationship conflict when disagreements attributed to a negative assessment of own abilities and competencies (Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

Past theory and research have found task conflict impairs member satisfaction, trust, and commitment (de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2013). Based on self-verification theory (Swann et al., 2004), exchange partners become dissatisfied when they interpret challenges of their viewpoints by other partners as a negative assessment of their own abilities and competencies. Relationship conflict, on the other hand, has large negative effects on relationship quality such as satisfaction, loyalty (Hung & Lin 2013; Plank & Newell, 2007). This is because relationship conflict may indicate the generalized value incongruence (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). When a person is perceived as incongruent with generalized values, that person's underlying world view becomes suspect and the threat of future violations of expectations arises (Sitkin & Roth, 1993), which leads to poor relationship quality.

### 2.2 Communication

Communication in a buyer-seller context is the formal and informal exchange of information between buyers and sellers at an inter-organizational or interpersonal level (Olkkonen et al., 2000). Drawing on interaction approach, the interpersonal communication is essential to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty, influence expectations, resolve misunderstandings, and explain options (Sanzo, Santos, Vasquez, & Alvarez, 2003; Sharma & Patterson, 1999). Of particular importance in a buyer-seller relationship is bidirectional communication due to the ability of this two-way communication to improve the quality of dyadic communication by increasing clarity of misunderstandings and reducing ambiguities (Dawes & Massey, 2005).

Bidirectional communication refers to the degree to which communication between exchange partners is a two-way process. In the cross-functional relationship literature, a number of studies suggest that bidirectional communication improves dyadic communications, helps clarify, facilitates dialogue, reduces ambiguity, and increases relationship effectiveness (Fisher, Maltz, & Jaworksi, 1997; Dawes & Massey, 2005). Moreover, Dawes and Massey (2005) have found that bidirectional communication had strong effect in reducing interpersonal conflict, because it is a collaborative and consultative form of communication. According to Sanzo et al. (2003), this research defines bidirectional communication as the degree that information is exchanged between a purchaser and a salesperson, performed regularly, timely, and whenever necessary.

In bidirectional communication, exchanging information makes the buyer's needs and the supplier's capabilities known (Redondo & Fierro, 2007). Therefore, bidirectional communication is associated with the perception of higher relationship effectiveness and a low conflict state that result from reduced ambiguity, facilitating dialogue, and opportunities for healthy constructive discussion (Fisher et al., 1997; Dawes & Massey, 2005). Such purchasers may therefore have a greater understanding of a salesperson's opinions and disagreements, which in turn increases a purchaser's propensity to accept different viewpoints from the salesperson. Therefore, bidirectional communication could diminish the purchaser's perceived task conflict with the salesperson.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** There will be negative relationship between the extent of bidirectional communication reported between a purchaser and a salesperson and the extent of task conflict.

Moreover, this prevented task conflict also reduces the potential of it escalating into relationship conflict (Simons

& Peterson, 2000). In addition, bidirectional communication enhances the understanding of work patterns and preferences of the other member of the dyad better (Fisher et al., 1997), which could lead them to build a knowledge base about each other (Haytko, 2004). This consequently reduces the misunderstandings resulting from differences between their world views (Fisher et al., 1997) and suppresses the purchaser's negative feelings (i.e., tension, annoyance, frustration, and irritation). Therefore, bidirectional communication could diminish the purchaser's perceived relationship conflict with the salesperson.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** There will be negative relationship between the extent of bidirectional communication reported between a purchaser and a salesperson and the extent of relationship conflict.

### *2.3 Interpersonal Trust*

Trust is the notion as a belief, a sentiment, or an expectation about an exchange partner that results from the partner's expertise, reliability, and intentionality (Ganesan, 1994). Researchers have proposed that interpersonal trust is not an unidimensional concept and is context based (Seppanen, Blomqvist, & Sundqvist, 2007; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Doney and Cannon (1997) accommodated measures to the industrial buyer-supplier context in which items were generated on the basis of interviews with marketing and purchasing personnel. While facing some degree of risk in a purchase situation, Doney and Cannon (1997) argue that the development of trust in a salesperson requires observations on the salesperson's past behavior and promises from past interaction experience. Moreover, the buyer would focus primarily on the credibility component of trust to determine the salesperson's ability to meet his/her obligations and the benevolence component of trust to assess the salesperson's motives to help or reward the buyer.

Credibility is the extent to which a purchaser is confident that a salesperson has the required skill and knowledge to fulfill the job effectively and reliably (Ganesan, 1994). Benevolence is defined as the extent to which the purchaser is confident that the salesperson has motives and intentions that benefit the buyer (Ganesan, 1994). Moreover, there seem to be different roles of credibility and benevolence influencing buyer-seller relationships. For example, Ganesan (1994) identified strong effects for credibility trust on relationship commitment but not for benevolence trust. Garbarino and Johnson (1999) also indicated the effect of credibility trust on loyalty, whereas Ball, Coelho, and Machas (2004) have found no effects for benevolence on loyalty. Therefore, we propose that credibility and benevolence may differently affect the impacts of bidirectional communication on both task and relationship conflict.

### *2.4 The Moderating Effects of Benevolence Trust*

Benevolence reflects a salesperson's willingness to show consideration for and sensitivity to the requirements and interests of purchasers (De Clercq et al., 2009). When benevolence is high, a purchaser is less likely to interpret a salesperson's disagreement as intentionally harmful (Peterson & Behfar, 2003), because benevolence reflects the salesperson's willingness to show consideration for and sensitivity to the needs and interests of the purchaser (Mayer et al., 1995). Therefore, when perceived benevolence is high, a purchaser is more likely to encourage a salesperson to frankly express different perspectives, which in turn leads to further escalation of task conflict by raising disputation. Conversely, when benevolence is low, a purchaser is more likely to limit a salesperson to express different perspectives because the salesperson's opinions could be perceived as the purchaser's doubt of a salesperson's intention for the benefit of the salesperson's own interests (Mayer et al., 1995), which in turn may restrain disputations and therefore suppress escalation of task conflict. Galinat and Muller (1988) studied communication among buyers and sellers and observed that salespeople were compliant (i.e., avoided verbally rough communication) when buyers perceived low trust.

Although a purchaser who perceived high benevolence of a salesperson is less likely to interpret the salesperson's disagreements as intentionally harmful (Simons & Peterson, 2000), the tension, antagonism, and unhappiness resulting from the inappropriate behavior (e.g., debate tactics, conflict management approaches) in task conflict should still escalate into relationship conflict (Huang, 2010). Based on affective events theory, Yang and Mossholder (2004) propose that emotional reactions concomitant with task conflict could act as proximal levers, increasing the possibility that group members could take conflict personally. Therefore, a purchaser's perceived negative emotion in task conflict with a salesperson may escalate into relationship conflict with the salesperson. Accordingly, when perceived benevolence of a salesperson is high, the further escalation of task conflict may also result in more relationship conflict. Based on the above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 3a (H3a):** When the perceived benevolence of the salesperson is low, the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and task conflict will be of greater magnitude than when the perceived benevolence of the salesperson is high.

**Hypothesis 3b (H3b):** When the perceived benevolence of the salesperson is low, the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and relationship conflict will be of greater magnitude than when the perceived benevolence of the salesperson is high.

### 2.5 The Moderating Effects of Credibility Trust

Das and Teng (2004) propose that perceived credibility trust related to the probability which given promises are achieved. In the situation where a purchaser trusts in a salesperson's competence, the purchaser is confident that the salesperson has the required expertise and ability to fulfill promises made (Ganesan, 1994). Therefore, when the perceived credibility of a salesperson is high, a purchaser is more likely to accept disagreements from a salesperson due to low probability of not being able to get things done. Therefore, the high levels of perceived credibility of a salesperson will amplify the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and task conflict by limited disputations (Langfred, 2004). Conversely, when the perceived credibility of a salesperson is low, the probability that given promises is not achieved is high (Das & Teng, 2004). Such perceived risk would increase the extent to which a purchaser's propensity to suspect that the salesperson's opinions are accurate (O'Reilly & Roberts 1974), and therefore escalates task conflict by inducing more controversies.

In addition, the beneficial effect of perceived credibility of a salesperson on suppressing task conflict also reduces the opportunity to escalate relationship conflict (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000). Conversely, lack of perceived credibility creates negative emotions and affect toward the salesperson and subsequently escalates relationship conflict (Selnes & Gønhaug, 2000). Based on the attribution theory, Selnes and Gønhaug (2000) reported that perceived low supplier reliability leads to negative affect toward the supplier due to negative deviance from what is promised being attributed to the supplier. Therefore, perceived credibility of a salesperson may be an important factor to prevent escalation of relationship conflict. Based on the above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 4a (H4a):** When the perceived credibility of the salesperson is high, the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and task conflict will be of greater magnitude than when the perceived credibility of the salesperson is low.

**Hypothesis 4b (H4b):** When the perceived credibility of the salesperson is high, the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and relationship conflict will be of greater magnitude than when the perceived credibility of the salesperson is low.

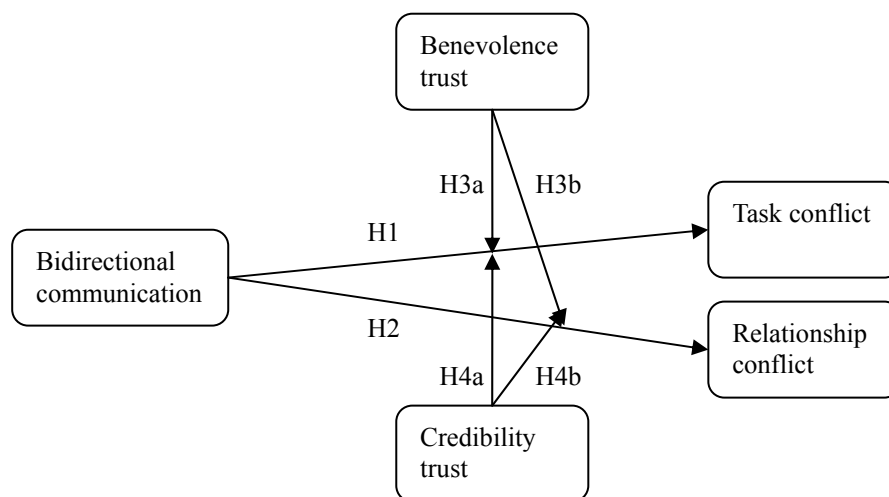


Figure 1. Conceptual model

### 3. Method

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data. In the questionnaire, we asked the respondents to self-select an ongoing business relationship that they were having and rate the primary person with whom they had the most contact. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section of questionnaire assessed the main constructs in our conceptual model (Figure 1), and the second section of questionnaire requested information about a number of demographic questions about themselves, their company, and their supplier. To pretest the survey instrument for readability and relevance and ensure that our questions were clear and understandable, we

conducted the survey with a sample of 33 purchasers.

### 3.1 Sample and Data Collection

Using a mailed questionnaire, data were collected from procurement professionals within companies in Taiwan which were selected from the list of top 5000 companies in Taiwan from China Credit Information Service. From the list, 500 companies were randomly selected. We contacted the procurement manager in each company for approving of data collection from them or their colleagues. Of the 1050 questionnaires mailed to 312 firms, 298 questionnaires were returned and the response rate was 28.4%. Standard checks for non-response bias indicated that this was not a problem in the current study (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). No statistically significant differences were detected in the demographic and the measures of conflict between the first quartile of respondents (early respondents) and the last quartile (late respondents).

In the returned questionnaires, 47 questionnaires indicated high level of purchase importance. Although Plank and Newell (2007) report that the importance of the relationship does not affect the perceived interpersonal conflict, Bunn (1993) points out that purchase importance influences the perceived influence of the decision participants. Therefore, this study excluded the 47 questionnaires. In the 251 respondents, 134 (53%) male and 117 (47%) female, work in a wide variety of industries. We requested that respondents describe the context of their

Table 1. Measurement items and validity assessment

	Loadings
<b>Relationship conflict: (<math>\alpha=0.95</math>; CR=0.95; AVE=0.82)</b>	
1. How much anger was there between you and the salesperson during the course of the negotiation?	.92
2. How much personal friction was there between you and the salesperson during the course of the negotiation?	.95
3. How much of a personality clash was there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?	.89
4. How much tension was there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?	.85
<b>Task conflict: (<math>\alpha=0.94</math>; CR=0.95; AVE=0.85)</b>	
1. How many disagreements over different ideas were there between you and the salesperson during the negotiation?	.90
2. How many differences about the content of the decision were there between you and the salesperson during the negotiation?	.94
3. How many general differences of opinion were there between you and the salesperson during this negotiation?	.93
<b>Bidirectional communication: (<math>\alpha=0.86</math>; CR=0.86; AVE=0.62)</b>	
1. There are regular exchanges of business information between me and the salesperson.	.68
2. The salesperson keeps me well informed about any change or questions that could be of interest to me.	.82
3. The salesperson never hesitates to explain to me the pros and cons of the recommendations he/she make to me.	.85
4. If I ask for some type of information, whether it is strategic, technical or operating, the salesperson supplies it rapidly without any difficulty.	.78
<b>Moderating variable: credibility trust in salesperson: (<math>\alpha=0.81</math>; CR=0.81; AVE=0.59)</b>	
1. This salesperson has been frank in dealing with me.	.77
2. This salesperson is knowledgeable about his/her products.	.72
3. If a problem, such as shipment delay, occurs, this salesperson is honest about it.	.82
<b>Moderating variable: benevolence trust in salesperson: (<math>\alpha=0.87</math>; CR=0.88; AVE=0.64)</b>	
1. This salesperson cares for me.	.70
2. In times of shortages, this salesperson has gone out on a limb for me.	.80
3. This salesperson has been on my side.	.85
4. This salesperson is like a friend.	.84

All scales are from 1 = "absolutely disagree" to 7 = "absolutely agree", CR construct reliability, AVE average variance extracted

Table 2. Correlation matrix (n=251)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relationship conflict	<b>0.91</b>						
2. Task conflict	.728***	<b>0.92</b>					
3. Bidirectional communication	-.234***	-.191**	<b>0.79</b>				
4. Credibility	-.325***	-.292***	.655***	<b>0.77</b>			
5. Benevolence	-.249***	-.224***	.705***	.619***	<b>0.80</b>		
6. Gender difference	-.093	-.066	-.026	-.012	-.030		
7. Length of relationship	.056	-.018	-.033	.096	.123	-0.084	
Mean	2.937	3.636	4.985	5.230	4.670	0.680	3.470
Standard deviation	1.067	1.052	0.808	0.787	0.902	0.647	1.910

The numbers in bold are the square roots of the variance shared between the constructs and their measures.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

relationship. The purchased goods from the salesperson were 184 products (73.3%) and 67 services (26.7%). Of the 251 who responded, 73 (29%) stated that the salesperson was female. Mean experience with the salesperson was 3.47 years with a standard deviation of 1.91 years. Moreover, following the work of Menon, Bharadwaj, Adidam, and Edison (1999), we pooled the data because the analysis of variance test showed that the main constructs in our conceptual model (Figure 1) did not differ significantly (p-value from 0.13 to 0.62) between both categories of purchased goods.

### 3.2 Measures

The questionnaire included measures of perceived levels of bidirectional communication, task conflict, relationship conflict, credibility trust, and benevolence trust. We adapted the measures (Table 1) from previous research, with minor wording modifications to fit our study context, and then had them professionally back translated (Chinese and English) to ensure conceptual equivalence.

The interpersonal conflict scale developed by Reid et al. (2004) was used to measure the amount and type of buyer's perceived task and relationship conflict in a buyer-seller relationship. Three items used to capture task conflict and four items used to capture relationship conflict. Bidirectional communication was adapted from the scale developed by Sanzo et al. (2003) and was measured by four items respectively. Scales for benevolence trust and credibility trust were adapted from the scale developed by Ganesan (1994) to measure the buyer's perceived trust with a supply's representative. The scale for the benevolence trust was measured by four items and the scale for the credibility trust was measured by three items.

In addition, we included two control variables to avoid model misspecification and take into account possible alternative explanations for variations in both task and relationship conflict. First, because prior history in the relationship could affect interpersonal conflict (Dawes & Massey, 2005), we measured as a log transformation of the durations of the purchaser and the salesperson doing business with each other. Second, conflicts are often linked to the diversity of work groups (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003), thus, we controlled for the pair of purchaser's and salesperson's gender.

The study used a confirmatory factory analysis (CFA) to ensure the convergent and discriminant validity of all constructs in conceptual model (Figure 1). We did conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using LISREL 8.5. The CFA yielded adequate model fit for the proposed factor structure ( $\chi^2(125)=254.37$ ; GFI=0.90; CFI=0.96; IFI=0.96; RMSEA=0.064). As shown in Table 1, all the items loaded on their respective constructs and were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), composite reliabilities of all constructs were greater than 0.80, and all average variance extracted (AVE) estimates were greater than 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981); therefore, the measures demonstrated adequate convergent validity and reliability. We further tested for discriminant validity by following the procedures outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981), by comparing the variance extracted estimates of the measures with the square of the correlation between constructs. As shown in Table 2, the shared variances between all possible pairs of constructs were lower than the square root of AVE for the individual constructs thus indicating the adequate discriminant validity.

#### 4. Results

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. We mean-centered the variables before creating the interaction terms to reduce multicollinearity (cf. Aiken & West, 1991). All the VIF values were less than 3. These results indicated the multicollinearity was not a serious problem. Table 3 provides the results of hierarchical regression analysis testing the hypotheses. As shown in models 1, bidirectional communication had a significant negative relationship with task conflict, providing support for hypothesis 1. In model 4, bidirectional communication had a significant negative relationship with relationship conflict, providing support for hypothesis 2.

Table 3. Regression of task conflict and relationship conflict on bidirectional communication

Variables	Task conflict			Relationship conflict		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	3.775***	3.612***	3.661***	2.950***	2.950***	2.829***
Gender difference	-0.163	-0.154	-0.160	-0.214	-0.204	-0.210
Length of relationship	-0.061	0.138	0.104	0.284	0.491*	0.462
Bidirectional communication	-0.250**	0.111	0.098	-0.315***	-0.070	0.060
Benevolence		-0.147	-0.134		-0.150	-0.140
Credibility		-0.340**	-0.336**		-0.375***	-0.369***
Bidirectional communication x Benevolence		0.128*			0.121*	
Bidirectional communication x Credibility			0.084			0.087
R <sup>2</sup>	0.042	0.111	0.102	0.069	0.145	0.138
$\Delta R^2$		0.069**	0.060**		0.076**	0.069**

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

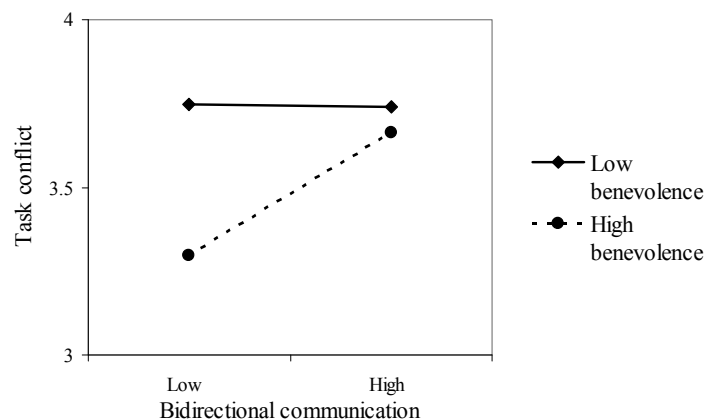


Figure 2. Interaction effect of bidirectional communication and benevolence trust on task conflict

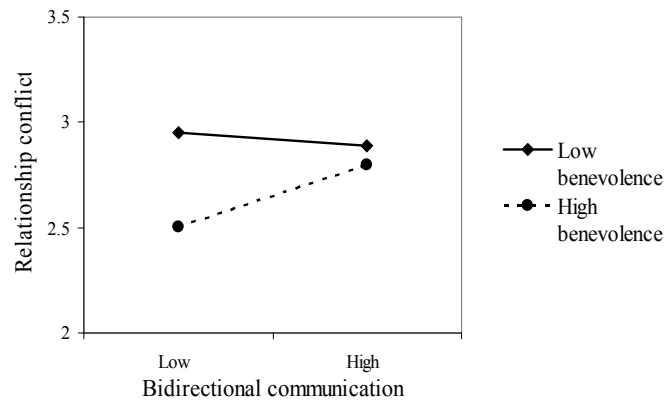


Figure 3. Interaction effect of bidirectional communication and benevolence trust on relationship conflict

In models 2 and 5, the interactions between bidirectional communication and benevolence were significant. Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate the interactions from Table 3 by showing the slopes of regression lines linking bidirectional communication to both task conflict and relationship conflict under the conditions of high and low benevolence. Figure 2 shows that the relationship between bidirectional communication and task conflict will be positive rather than negative under high benevolence. Figure 3 also demonstrates such positive relationship between bidirectional communication and relationship conflict. Therefore, the negative relationships between bidirectional communication and both task conflict and relationship conflict were weaker under the conditions of high benevolence trust than low benevolence trust. Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported. The moderating effect of credibility trust is presented in models 3 and 6. In both models, the interactions between bidirectional communication and credibility were not significant. Hypotheses 4a and 4b were not supported.

To validate our results, we estimated a structural equation model by SmartPLS. The bootstrap re-sampling procedure (5000 samples) was used to generate the standard errors and the t-values, which allows the beta coefficients to be made statistically significant. The results are shown in Table 4 and the sign and magnitude were consistent with those from the regression analysis. In addition, we also examined conditional effects of bidirectional communication on both task and relationship conflict across the high and low benevolence trust using PROCESS SPSS macro which provided by Hayes (2013). PROCESS estimates the coefficients of the model using OLS regression (for continuous outcomes) or maximum likelihood logistic regression (for dichotomous outcomes) as well as generates direct and indirect effects in mediation and mediated moderation models, conditional effects in moderation models, and conditional indirect effects in moderated mediation models with a single or multiple mediators. The model 1 in PROCESS is a computational tool for path analysis-based moderation analysis, offers a tool for probing two-way interactions, and constructs percentile based bootstrap confidence intervals for conditional effects. In Table 5, the relationships between bidirectional communication and both task and relationship conflict were negative under conditions of low benevolence trust. In contrast, the relationships between bidirectional communication and both task and relationship conflict were positive under conditions of high benevolence trust. Therefore, the results of conditional effects bidirectional communication on both task and relationship conflict were also consistent with those from the regression analysis.

Table 4. Path coefficients of PLS

Constructs	Task conflict	Relationship conflict
	Path coefficients	Path coefficients
Main effects model		
Bidirectional communication	-0.222**	-0.251**
Moderating effects model		
Bidirectional communication	-0.067	-0.048
Bidirectional communication X benevolence trust	0.270*	0.236 <sup>+</sup>
Bidirectional communication X credibility trust	-0.134	-0.128

\*\* p < 0.01, \* p < 0.05, <sup>+</sup> p < 0.1



Table 5. Visualizing conditional effects bidirectional communication on both task and relationship conflict

Bidirectional communication	Low benevolence trust (value = 3.58)		High benevolence trust (value = 5.98)	
	Task conflict	Relationship conflict	Task conflict	Relationship conflict
3.96	3.77	3.03	3.25	2.62
4.96	3.60	2.88	3.44	2.76
5.96	3.42	2.72	3.62	2.91

## 5. Discussion

In contrast with previous empirical work on the role of trust in the linkage of conflict-performance (e.g., Parayitam & Dooley, 2009), this research addresses whether various facets of trust have moderating effects on the linkage of communication-conflict. In line with previous research on bidirectional communication (Dawes & Massey, 2005), our study shows the impacts of bidirectional communication on reducing interpersonal conflict in buyer-seller contexts. By highlighting the different roles of credibility trust and benevolence trust in their moderating effects on the impacts of bidirectional communication on reducing interpersonal conflict, this study adds important nuances to our understanding of the communication-conflict relationship.

As anticipated, the direction of relationship between bidirectional communication and task conflict depends on the level of perceived benevolence in a salesperson. Specifically, the presence of high levels of benevolence trust appears to trigger debates in task-related issues, thereby assisting the positive relationship between bidirectional communication and task conflict. Conversely, bidirectional communication has a negative relationship with task conflict when the levels of benevolence are low. As such, this result clarifies that perceived benevolence in a salesperson may be a critical facet of trust to allow task conflict, while purchasers and salespeople are involved in bidirectional communication. Thus, our study extends prior research on bidirectional communication (Dawes & Massey, 2005) by showing benevolence trust may limit the impact of bidirectional communication on decreasing interpersonal conflict.

The results of this study also support that the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and relationship conflict is weaker at high levels of benevolence trust than at low levels of benevolence trust. Similarly, the relationship between bidirectional communication and relationship conflict is positive at high levels of benevolence trust. That is, a purchaser that reports task conflict also tends to report relationship conflict regardless of the levels of benevolence trust. The findings seem to be accord with the results of Parayitam and Dooley's (2007) study in which the relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict is positive regardless of high or low levels of benevolence trust. However, Parayitam and Dooley (2007) report that such positive relationship at low levels of benevolence trust is stronger than at high levels of benevolence trust. Therefore, the strength of relationships between task conflict and relationship conflict under various levels of benevolence trust needs further exploration in buyer-seller relationships.

There were no statistically significant moderating effects of credibility on strengthening the impacts of bidirectional communication on reducing both task and relationship conflict. There are two possible reasons for the results. First, at lack of perceived credibility with a salesperson, the purchaser is more likely to simply avoid uncertainty from the salesperson's disagreements by direct information avoidance or selective ignoring (Braskers, 2001). Such information avoiding behavior may decrease the opportunities of disputation and, therefore, lead to smooth process of bidirectional communication. Therefore, the low levels of credibility reduce rather than increase the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and both types of conflict. Second, the perceived credibility with a salesperson may lead a purchaser to suspect that the salesperson is more likely to act in his/her own interests. In China, Liu, Li, Tao, and Wang (2008) found that buyer's perceived competence trust in a supplier positively relates to the buyer's perceived uncertainty in opportunistic activities of the supplier in their relationship. Accordingly, high perceived credibility with a salesperson may induce the purchaser's critical stances toward the salesperson's different viewpoints and, therefore, the process of bidirectional communication is likely to be conflictual.

## 6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions for Research

This study shows that benevolence trust decrease the negative relationship between bidirectional communication and interpersonal conflict and credibility trust does not play a significant role in changing the strength of relationship thus providing practical insight for sales staff. For developing long-term buyer-seller relationship, building bidirectional communication between a purchaser and a salesperson is a crucial tactic. However, it should

be noted that salespersons should avoid frank expression of differences in perspectives even though purchasers aspired to have options from salespersons or be assessed their perspectives by salespersons. Therefore, we suggest that salespersons should recognize different buyer preferences and adapt his/her preferences appropriately to interact with the buyer.

We acknowledge that our study contains some limitations, which in turn offer opportunities for further research. The R-squares of task conflict and relationship conflict are approximately 11% and 15%, which compare well with similar study in buyer-seller relationships (Reid et al., 2004). However, we suggest that other variables included in the model would have better predicted interpersonal conflict such as perceived empathy, customer orientation, psychological distance between a purchaser and a salesperson. This study is cross-sectional in design. This design element limits our ability to make causal assertions about the links between trust and interpersonal conflict. The reverse causality is thus possible: interpersonal conflict may affect trust. Though Curseu and Schrujijer (2010) found that trust is an antecedent for intragroup conflict through a longitudinal design, this study could not examine the reciprocal nature of these processes. Future research may use a temporally lagged design and collect independent and dependent variables at different times, enabling clarification of the lines of causality. In addition, further research may also use an experimental design to test the effects of credibility and benevolence on interpersonal conflict (Doney & Cannon, 1997) to warrant the causal claims and disentangle the two facets of trust.

This framework does not make predictions on how task conflicts from various combinations between credibility and benevolence affect outcomes (e.g., innovation, decision quality) in buyer-seller contexts. Extant research has reported that trust has negative moderating effect on the linkage of task conflict-innovation (De Clercq et al., 2009), and a positive moderating effect on the linkage of task conflict-decision quality (Parayitama & Dooley, 2009). Therefore, future research should consider how the interplay between various facets of trust and interpersonal conflict affects outcomes.

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