Exploring the Impact of Power Dynamics on the Willingness to Participate in Workplace

Mediation

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between perceived power position in a workplace conflict and the willingness to participate in mediation to resolve this conflict. It was hypothesized that individuals in a low-power position are less willing to engage in mediation than individuals in a high-power position. To test this effect participants were asked to imagine themselves in a given workplace scenario where they were in either a low-power or high-power position. Afterwards they were asked to fill out a questionnaire asking about their willingness to engage in a mediation, and potentially mediating variables like 'perceived loss of control'. Contrary to the hypothesis, the results showed no direct effect of perceived power position on willingness to participate. Further analysis revealed an unexpected indirect effect of perceived loss of control, that significantly mediated the relationship between power position and mediation willingness. More specifically, individuals in higher perceived power positions indicated a greater perceived loss of control in the mediation process than participants in the lower power positions, which in turn predicted an unexpected, reduced willingness to participate in mediation. The study's results highlighted the importance of addressing perceived loss of control to encourage mediation participation, especially among those in higher power positions.

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Mediation

A striking example of the detrimental effects of an unresolved workplace conflict can be seen in the case of Boeing, one of the world's leading aircraft manufacturers. To compete with Airbus, the largest competing manufacturer, Boeing pressured their employees to rush the development process for their new plane, the 737 MAX. The engineers, who were tasked to ensure the safety of the plane, voiced their concerns about the rush in building the new airplanes leading to the risk that critical safety measures could be overlooked. Conversely, the company's executives prioritized time-to-market and cost-efficiency, ignoring their employees' concerns. Disregarding this conflict ultimately led to two severe plane crashes, costing Boeing not only their reputation and billions of dollars but also the lives of 346 people (Englehardt et al., 2021).

The devastating outcome of Boeing's internal conflict underscored the critical importance of addressing and resolving workplace disputes effectively, especially when hierarchical differences are at play. The engineers, despite their crucial role in ensuring safety, were overruled by executives prioritizing time-to-market and cost-efficiency, highlighting the imbalance of power within the organization. Had there been a structured process, such as workplace mediation, to manage the conflict, these catastrophic failures might have been avoided. Mediation could have been particularly effective in this conflict, as it would have offered a platform for communication and negotiation between the engineers and the executives, potentially leading to more balanced decision-making that considered both safety and efficiency concerns.

The Boeing case raises important questions about why such a mediation process might not have emerged. The details of the conflict are still being unraveled, however it seems like

workplace mediation was not considered at any point in time, even though Boeing actively promoted Alternative Dispute Resolution and even gave a step-by-step guide to their employees on how to approach such a process ("Boeing Frontiers," 2007). Neither the executives nor the engineers seem to have suggested the use of this Alternative Dispute Resolution. Thus, it raises the question if it could be that the significant power differences influenced the parties' hesitation to participate in workplace mediation to resolve this conflict.

This study aimed to explore the influence that power dynamics can have on the willingness to participate in mediation in workplace conflicts. By understanding these dynamics, we can identify the barriers that prevent effective conflict resolution and develop strategies to promote a more balanced and constructive approach to resolving workplace disputes.

Understanding Workplace Mediation

Workplace mediation is known as a conflict resolution process involving a neutral mediator, who facilitates dialogue between the involved parties, helping them to reach a mutually agreeable solution that addresses both parties' concerns and maintains their working relationship (Munduate et al., 2022). In the workplace, mediation is a valuable tool to resolve conflicts that arise from differences in opinions, work styles, or interpersonal issues, while ensuring that the work environment stays collaborative and healthy (Bollen & Euwema, 2013). A mediator sets out to facilitate this by providing a structured process for addressing conflicts constructively and by encouraging empathy, active listening and an open dialogue (Munduate et al., 2022). It can be used to resolve conflicts between employees, managers, teams, or departments that affect their performance, well-being, and relationships. It can also be used to address issues such as bullying, harassment, or discrimination (Bollen & Euwema, 2013).

Many organizations are based on hierarchical structures that can facilitate conflicts due to power imbalances between the parties (Wall & Callister, 1995). The imbalances in power can lead to situations where the more powerful party may impose their will on the less powerful party (Medina et al., 2008), just like in the Boeing case. It might also happen that the less powerful party feels overlooked or even oppressed, which can intensify the conflict on their part (Bollen & Euwema, 2015). This could lead to several reactions from the low-power party, such as mistrust, anger, absenteeism, and intentions to quit the job (Schieman & Reid, 2008), which can cost the company a lot of money. Mediation becomes especially relevant in cases of conflict with hierarchical differences to ensure a neutral space for communication, where employees can express their perspectives, concerns, and needs while mitigating the impact of power imbalances.

Some advantages of workplace mediation are that, unlike lawsuits or formal complaint processes, it prioritizes maintaining a positive relationship between the parties (Meyer, 1997). Instead of imposing decisions from above, mediators can allow parties to tailor their solutions and create personalized agreements. Mediation has been shown to be able to enhance the individual's job satisfaction, since it lowers stress levels by addressing any concerns immediately and giving the parties the feeling of being heard and respected (Wall & Dunne, 2012). It should also be confidential, so participants can openly discuss their perspectives without fearing for their privacy. From an organization's point of view, mediation is also very cost-effective, since it avoids legal expenses and lengthy proceedings (Bollen & Euwema, 2013). However, mediation is only appropriate when both parties are willing to actively engage in the process and are keen to keep the agreements made during the mediation, since forcing this process might lead to individuals not adhering to the mutual agreements that were made (Liebmann, 2000).

Workplace mediation can be particularly useful when informal conflict resolution fails. For instance, a subordinate might disagree with their manager over project ideas, and after voicing concerns and being dismissed, the conflict persists. Both parties are tense, and this conflict may start to influence other areas of their work. Instead of letting the tension escalate to the point that it reaches legal steps, they decide to engage in mediation. A skilled mediator lets both express their viewpoints and facilitates a communicative environment where they can discover the value of combining their ideas. Besides creating a common ground that can result in a successful project, incorporating both parties' strengths, it can also enhance the team's ability to work together efficiently in the future by overcoming the differences themselves (Bingham, 2004).

Challenges and Power Dynamics in Mediation Participation

However, due to the below mentioned reasons, power imbalances could also lead to hesitation to participate in mediation, in the first place. While there are numerous studies on the topic of mediation in the workplace and its effectiveness, to our knowledge, few have investigated the direct influence that perceived power and power imbalances have on the willingness to participate in mediation. If their effects were known, recommendations for practice could be made and interventions could be tailored by addressing reasons or concerns individuals have that lead them to decide against participating in mediation. Therefore, the aim of this study was to determine whether perceived power imbalances between conflicting parties (with one party perceiving themselves in a high-power position and the other in a low-power position) influence their willingness to participate in workplace mediation. Additionally, the study seeks to explore potential mediating variables that might impact this relationship.

Individuals in higher positions often hold more influence and authority over those in lower positions, which could negatively impact the willingness of individuals in low-power positions to participate in mediation, for several reasons. First, even though mediation is guided by a neutral mediator, individuals in lower power positions may hesitate to participate due to concerns about the process or consequences of mediation. As Wiseman and Poitras (2002) stated, people in low-power positions are likely to respond fearfully and aversive to a workplace conflict with a high-power holder. Employees often perceive a potential risk to their position or worry about repercussions from higher-ranked individuals when speaking up to their authorities in a workplace conflict (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). Kalter et al. (2021) state that employees often hide their emotions because of fearing consequences for their reputation or career during a mediation process with their supervisors. Based on these previous findings, it thus might be the case that people in lower power positions may also fear that they will be punished for their expressions during a mediation, which could add further to a lower willingness to participate in mediation because of the fear of the consequences of challenging authority.

Bollen et al. (2010) found that subordinates who do participate in mediation, often experience a higher level of uncertainty during the process and the perception that they possess a lower level of control, which consequently leads them to be less satisfied with the process of mediation afterward. Thus, it might also be that an anticipation of the uncertainty and the low perceived control during the mediation process also influence the willingness to participate in mediation in the first place, since they might worry that their opponent uses their higher position to influence the mediation or mediator.

Furthermore, people in lower power positions might worry that the mediator or the mediation process is not completely fair, impartial, or confidential and thus have lower trust in it

since unfortunately, some cases in the media have shown that not all mediation processes have been treated confidentially in the past (Lee & Giesler, 1998), which might scare off especially those unfamiliar with mediation.

An individual's locus of control could also play a role. If individuals have an external locus of control, it leads them to believe that the consequences of their behavior are beyond their own control, adopting a more passive role in determining outcomes (Galvin et al., 2018). Smith et al. (1997) found that lower status employees generally have a more external locus of control, while higher status employees score higher on an internal locus of control. Connecting this to the findings of Şahin et al. (2009), which stated that individuals with an external locus of control tend to use avoidance strategies in conflict resolution and individuals with an internal locus of control tend to use more confrontational strategies in conflict resolution, it could lead to the assumption that an external locus of control influences the willingness to participate in the mediation negatively since individuals might believe that they have no influence on the outcome. However, if they have an internal locus of control, meaning that they believe that they control the consequences of their actions, this will probably lead to a higher willingness to participate in mediation, since they put more effort into their actions and are more confident with confrontation.

Korman et al. (2021) found that individuals in higher hierarchical positions tend to score higher on self-efficacy, which means that they are more confident in their own capability to execute a behavior that is necessary to achieve their goals, while those in the lower hierarchical positions tend to score lower on self-efficacy, meaning that they are less confident in their capabilities to behave in alignment with their goals. A study by Ergeneli et al. (2010) found that when individuals who score low on self-efficacy conflict with their supervisors, they tend to

favor using compromising or avoidant strategies. Relating this finding to the willingness to participate in mediation, it might be the case that individuals who occupy a low-power position and thus have a lower self-efficacy are less likely to participate in mediation than individuals who occupy a high-power position and thus have a higher self-efficacy regarding mediation.

Research by Van Kleef et al. (2006), that has been done on managers, indicates that people with perceived higher power in a negotiation pay less attention to their opponents and act without worrying about consequences, while those with less power must act carefully in order not to risk their dependence. Van Dijk et al. (2016) also found that people with perceived lower power in a legal conflict have a higher need for support from another party due to their perceived loss of control, meaning that they will likely choose an option that fulfills their need for empowerment. Connecting these findings to the occupational environment could lead to the hypothesis that someone with perceived lower power might rather choose another option, like legal aid, to (first) restore their lack of control in the conflict, over wanting to participate in mediation.

Latreille and Saundry (2013) argue that while supervisors generally hold more decision-making power, they give up their authority during the mediation process. However, this feeling could emerge due to the unfamiliarity with the concept of mediation. As mediation seeks a mutually acceptable agreement between both parties and not an imposed decision from the impartial mediator, it should not be seen as a loss of control to either party, when well informed about the process.

Another factor that seems to not have been researched sufficiently yet is age. Age may also influence individuals' perceptions of authority and power within the workplace. Older employees, often possessing a wealth of experience and a deep understanding of company

structures, may have a different perspective on conflicts and authority than younger employees. Understanding how age impacts these dynamics is crucial, as it may affect other underlying variables that influence individuals' willingness to engage in mediation processes. Exploring the intersection of age and power dynamics and their influence on willingness to participate in workplace mediation can provide valuable insights into how different generations perceive workplace conflicts.

Further, since all of the above-mentioned potential mediators seem to play a different role it would be difficult to formulate specific hypotheses for each of their effects, thus it will rather be explored if any of these mentioned variables, like the degree of trust in the mediation process, in the opponent and mediator, the degree of uncertainty about the mediation process and behavior of the opponent and mediator, self-efficacy, the locus of control, and the degree of perceived loss of control mediate the willingness to participate in workplace mediation. Understanding these factors can help predict the willingness to participate in mediation in different power positions and tailor interventions accordingly.

Since many of the above-mentioned reasons for the willingness to participate in workplace mediation for a conflict between imbalanced power positions point in the same direction, the following hypothesis was constructed:

H1: Individuals with perceived higher power than their opponent are more willing to participate in mediation than individuals with perceived lower power than their opponent.

Method

Research Design

The research design employed a between-subjects design. The independent variable, relative power position in workplace conflict, was manipulated through randomized scenarios

presenting the participant with either a high- or a low-power position. The central dependent variable was the willingness to participate in mediation. As exploratory mediator variables trust, uncertainty, self-efficacy, locus of control, and loss of control were also measured. The study received approval from the BMS Ethics Committee of the University of Twente (request number: 240348).

Participants

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The study initially included 110 participants who provided informed consent and completed the survey. Four participants (3.6%) were excluded for not participating seriously. Additionally, 28 participants (25.5%, one (3.6%) in the high-power condition (HP) and 27 (96.4%) in the low-power condition (LP)) were excluded for failing the attention check. Among the excluded participants, 24 were female (85.7%) and four were male (14.3%), with a mean age of 25.9 years. The excluded group consisted of 26 Germans (92.9%), one Russian and one Italian.

After these exclusions, the final sample comprised 78 respondents (70.9% of the original sample). 46 individuals (59%) in the lower power condition and 32 individuals (41%) in the higher power condition. The final sample included two non-binary individuals (2.6%), 37 males (47.4%), and 39 females (50%). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 58 years, with a mean age of 25.8 years. The sample's nationality distribution included 64 Germans (82%), seven Dutch (9%), two Africans (2.6%), one Bulgarian (1.3%), one Italian, one Kenyan, one Polish, and one Portuguese.

Independent, dependent, and potentially mediating variables

Manipulation of relative power position

The experimental manipulation of the relative power position (independent variable) was achieved through the presentation of two conflict scenarios. The scenarios described the same situation from two different points of view, namely from the perspective of the low-power subordinate and the perspective of the high-power supervisor. This should have eliminated any other factors that could play a role or lead to a different decision on wanting to participate in a mediation. The scenario presented a workplace conflict where a supervisor wanted to set tighter deadlines, while a subordinate was concerned about their ability to reach these deadlines. The conflict led to blaming and yelling on both sides, to the point where they eventually stopped talking to each other, and neither of them knew how to proceed in this conflict. Based on the model of Glasl (1982) this scenario described a conflict of moderate escalation, which is the phase of escalation where mediation is argued to be most effective (Medina et al., 2017).

Manipulation and attention checks were analyzed to ensure the integrity of the experimental manipulation. An item which was used to check if the participants paid attention to the scenario was: "What is your job in this particular scenario?", where the participants could either check "Employee", "Boss" or "Other". Using this methodology, it was observable if the participants read the scenario at the beginning attentively and understood their position correctly, and if they did not, they were excluded from the analysis. An item to check if the manipulation worked as intended was: "Based on this conflict situation at work, how do you feel in regard to your opponent in the scenario?" with the answer possibilities being: "I feel superior to my opponent in this scenario.", "I feel equal to my opponent in this scenario.", "I feel inferior to my opponent in this scenario.". In the high-power condition, 43.75% of the people indicated feeling

superior, while only 6.52% of the people in the low-power condition indicated feeling superior. Since not all the expected frequencies were above five in the chi-square test, Fisher's Exact Test was performed to check whether the experimental condition influenced participants' responses regarding perceptions of inferiority, superiority, and equality, and it revealed a highly significant correlation between the conditions and the participants' responses, indicating that the manipulation successfully influenced the participants perceived power position ($p < .001$).

Dependent variable: willingness to participate in mediation

To measure willingness to participate in mediation, four items were used. One example item: "How willing would you be in this situation to resolve your conflict in a mediation process facilitated by a trained mediator?". The answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale, where a 1 ("Not at all") indicated a low willingness and a 5 ("Very much") indicated a high willingness to participate in mediation. Factor analysis of the four items revealed one factor with an eigenvalue of 2.46, which explained 61% of the variance in the items. All factor loadings for the items were above 0.60. Together, these items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.86$; *Lambda2*= 0.86).

Potentially mediating variable: trust

To measure trust in mediation, nine items were used. One example item: "How much would you trust the mediation process to be fair, given the conflict you have at work?". This item was also measured with a 5-point Likert scale, where a 5 ("Very much") indicated a higher level of trust, and a 1 ("Not at all") indicated a lower level of trust. Originally, trust should have been assessed using three separate scales: trust in the process, trust in the opponent, and trust in the mediator. However, factor analysis revealed that all nine of these items loaded on the same factor with an eigenvalue of 4.20, which explained 47% of the variance. All factor loadings for the

items were above 0.63. Therefore, the items were grouped together into a single reliable scale to measure trust ($\alpha = 0.89$; *Lambda2* = 0.89).

Potentially mediating variable: uncertainty

Uncertainty was measured using 3 items. One example item: "I would feel uncertain about the mediation process for this conflict I have at work." This was again measured with the same 5-point Likert scale as for the other variables, with 1 indicating lower uncertainty and 5 indicating higher uncertainty. Factor analysis of the uncertainty scale revealed one factor with an eigenvalue of 1.31, explaining 44% of the variance in the items. All factor loadings for the items were above 0.47. The items formed a reliable scale to measure uncertainty ($\alpha = 0.66$; *Lambda2* = 0.66).

Potentially mediating variable: self-efficacy

Four items were used to measure self-efficacy that were adapted from the Short Version of the Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale (Rigotti et al., 2008). One example item: "If I would be confronted with a problem during this mediation, I am confident I could find several solutions." was also measured by the 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating lower self-efficacy and 5 indicating higher self-efficacy. The items exhibited a one-factor structure with an eigenvalue of 1.84, which explained 46% of the variance in the items. All factor loadings for the items were above 0.50. The items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.76$; *Lambda2* = 0.77).

Potentially mediating variable: locus of control

Locus of control was measured with 4 items that were derived from the Internal–External Locus of Control Short Scale–4 (IE-4) (Nießen et al., 2022), two of the items were reversed. One example item: "If I would engage actively in mediation, I could reach a satisfactory resolution for my workplace conflict.". This item was also measured with a 5-point Likert scale, where a 5

("Very much") indicated a high internal locus of control, and a 1 ("Not at all") indicated a high external locus of control. The locus of control scale displayed a one-factor structure with an eigenvalue of 1.27, explaining 32% of the variance in the items. All factor loadings for the items were above 0.43. The four items formed a marginally reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.64$; *Lambda2* $= 0.65$).

Potentially mediating variable: perceived loss of control

To measure perceived loss of control three items were used, one example item being: "I feel that my position would be weakened in the mediation process." Again, the same 5-point Likert scale was used with 1 indicating a lower perceived loss of control and 5 indicating a higher perceived loss of control. Factor analysis of the loss of control scale showed a one-factor structure, with an eigenvalue of 1.82, explaining 61% of the variance in the items. All factor loadings for the items were above 0.74. The scale displayed high reliability ($\alpha = 0.82$; *Lambda2* $= 0.82$).

Procedure

After filling out the informed consent, participants were explained the purpose and the process of mediation. The participants were then randomly allocated to one of two conditions and had to either imagine themselves in the high- or low-power position. Afterward, they responded to surveys analyzing the participants' willingness to engage in mediation, alongside measuring their levels of trust, uncertainty, self-efficacy, locus of control, and loss of control. Lastly, participants were debriefed and informed about the true purpose of the study and the manipulation of the relative power position.

Data Analysis

To provide an overview of the data the means, and frequencies for all variables were calculated in R (R Core Team, 2024). Factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha were conducted

using the „psych" R package (Revelle, 2024) to assess the reliability and validity of the scales. Internal consistency reliability coefficients were assessed using the „Lambda4" R package (Hunt, 2013). Linear regression analysis was performed to examine the relationships between the independent variable (power position: low versus high) and the dependent variable (willingness to participate in mediation), and the relationships between independent, dependent, and possible mediating variables. Afterward, mediation analysis was conducted to explore if any of the potentially mediating variables show significance on the relationship between power position and willingness to participate in mediation using the „mediation" R package (Tingley et al., 2014).

Results

Correlations

As can be seen in Table 1, in the high-power condition, Willingness showed significant positive correlations with Trust ($r = .74$, $p < .001$), Self-Efficacy ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), and Locus of Control ($r = .65$, $p < .001$). The low-power condition revealed similar results: Trust ($r = .71$, $p < .001$), Self-Efficacy ($r = .52$, $p < .001$), and Locus of Control ($r = .46$, $p < .01$) were positively correlated with Willingness. This means that higher trust in mediation, higher self-efficacy, and an internal perceived locus of control during the mediation process were generally associated with a higher willingness to participate in mediation.

While perceived loss of control seemed to be negatively associated with the willingness to participate in mediation in the higher power condition ($r = -.43$, $p < .05$), as well as in the lower power condition ($r = -.51$, $p < .001$), the mean was notably higher in the higher power condition, indicating that individuals with a perceived higher power seemed to have experienced more loss of control than individuals in the lower power condition.

Uncertainty only had a significant negative correlation with willingness to participate in mediation in the higher power condition ($r = -.43$, $p < .05$), not so in the lower power condition. Uncertainty also had a significant positive correlation with loss of control in the higher power condition, indicating that someone in a higher power position seemed to be more uncertain when perceiving more loss of control.

Furthermore, a significant negative relationship between perceived loss of control and locus of control in the high-power condition ($r = -.49$, $p < .01$) and in the low-power condition ($r = -.52$, $p < .001$) indicated that individuals with a more external perceived locus of control during the mediation process also perceived a greater loss of control regarding the mediation process.

Table 1

Correlations and Means of Dependent and Mediating Variables in the Low- and in the High-Power Condition

	Willingness	Trust	Uncertainty	Self-Efficacy	Locus of Control	Loss of Control	Mean HP	Total Mean	SD
Willingness	-	.74***	-.54**	.46**	.65***	-.43*	3.91	4.01	0.98
Trust	.71***	-	-.48**	.28	.57***	-.33	3.79	3.70	0.87
Uncertainty	-.15	-.12	-	-.36*	-.50**	.51**	2.28	2.44	0.97
Self-Efficacy	.52***	.25	-.16	-	.48**	-.15	3.95	3.87	0.83
Locus of Control	.46**	.58***	-.41**	.38**	-	-.49**	3.59	3.56	0.94
Loss of Control	-.51***	-.33*	.31*	-.31*	-.52***	-	2.68	2.24	1.15
Mean LP	4.08	3.63	2.56	3.82	3.54	1.93			

Note. $p < .001$ = ***, $p < .01$ = **, $p < .05$ = *, HP = high-power, LP = low-power. Correlations of the high-power Condition above the diagonal and low-power Condition below the diagonal.

Hypothesis Testing

A linear regression analysis was performed to test the hypothesis that the low- (versus high-) power position negatively influences the willingness to participate in mediation. The model, specified as Willingness ~ Condition HP, showed that the manipulated power position did not significantly influence Willingness (b = -0.162, SE = 0.19, t = -0.852, p = .397), and thus the hypothesis, that the power position has a direct effect on willingness to participate in mediation, was rejected.

Explorative Analysis

An explorative linear regression analysis with age as an independent variable and willingness to participate in mediation as the dependent variable showed significant results, which suggested that older participants are more willing to participate in mediation compared to younger participants (b = 0.03, SE = 0.012, t = 2.564, p = .012). However, the interaction between age and power position was not significant in influencing willingness to participate in mediation (b = 0.016, SE = 0.023, t = 0.679, p = .499). These findings suggest that while age alone may have influenced willingness to participate in mediation, the effect of age did not significantly differ across different power positions. This lack of interaction indicates that the relationship between age and willingness to participate in mediation is consistent regardless of whether the participants are in a high or low power condition.

However, the correlations mentioned in Table 1 suggested that there is a possibility for an indirect effect since the correlations between the possible mediating variables and willingness to participate in mediation were almost always significant. To account for an indirect effect, the effect of the independent variable on the potentially mediating variables had to be calculated first. Without a significant effect of the perceived power position on any of the mediating

variables there could not have been an indirect effect on willingness to participate in mediation. Therefore, additional linear regression analyses were conducted to understand if the power position had a significant effect on the potentially mediating variables. None of the other analyses showed a significant effect of the power position on trust, uncertainty, self-efficacy or locus of control. However, the model, specified as Loss of Control ~ Condition HP, revealed a significant effect of power position on the variable perceived loss of control ($b = 0.74$, $SE = 0.21$, $p < .001$).

Mediation Analysis

Since there was a significant effect of the perceived power position on loss of control, and a significant effect of loss of control on willingness to participate in mediation ($b = -0.39$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$), a mediation analysis was conducted, to account for a possibly unexpected indirect effect of power position on willingness to participate in mediation, that was mediated by the variable perceived loss of control. Perceived loss of control significantly mediated the relationship between the power position and willingness to participate in mediation. The indirect effect was -0.31 (95% CI: -0.55 to -0.11, $p < .001$). The direct effect was 0.15 (95% CI: -0.2 to 0.52, $p = .36$). The total effect was -0.16 (95% CI: -0.52 to 0.21, $p = .36$). It is important to note that, unlike previous requirements for establishing full mediation, it is no longer necessary for the direct effect to be significant when the mediator is not included in the model. This mediation effect implied that when individuals were in a higher power position, they likely perceived a higher loss of control, which in turn reduced their willingness to participate in mediation.

Figure 1

Mediation Effect of Loss of Control
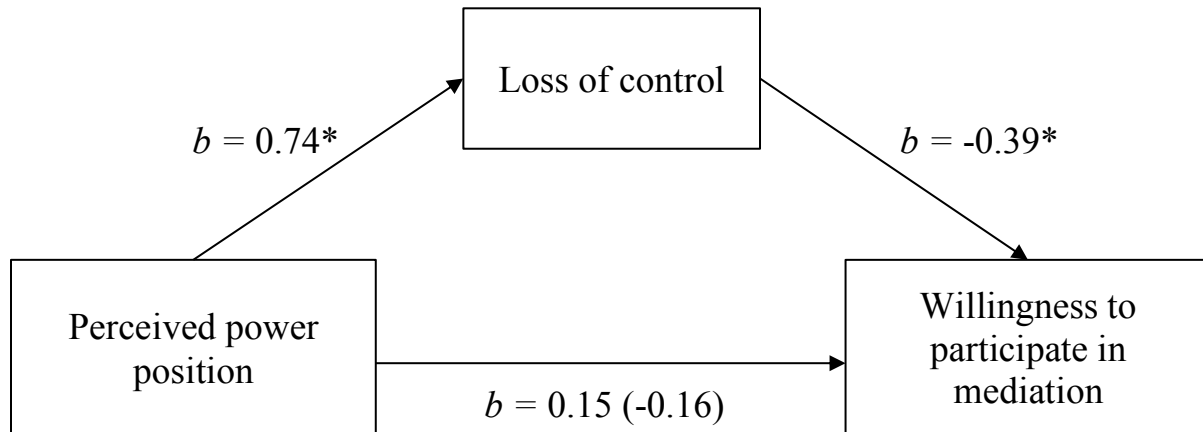
Note. This figure explains the unexpected indirect effect that the perceived power position has on willingness to participate in mediation through the mediating variable loss of control. The values on the arrows show the regression coefficients. * = $p < .001$

Discussion

The presented study aimed at exploring the influence that power dynamics have on the willingness to participate in a mediation in workplace conflicts. The hypothesis that a perceived high-power position in a workplace conflict leads to a greater willingness to participate in mediation than a perceived low-power position, was rejected. No significant total effect of perceived power position on willingness to participate in mediation was observed: Contrary to the hypothesis, individuals in lower perceived power positions were not less likely to participate in mediation than those in a higher power position.

Perceived Loss of Control

Instead, examining potentially mediating variables unveiled that perceived loss of control significantly mediated this relationship, in an unexpected way. The indirect effect indicated that individuals in higher perceived power positions report a heightened perceived loss of control during the mediation process compared to those in a lower perceived power position, which in turn predicted less willingness to participate in mediation. This unexpected finding may have

worked against the expected lower willingness among individuals in lower perceived power positions. Indications for this could be observed in the mediation analyses: when controlling for the loss of control, the remaining effect of the power position manipulation was positive, although not significantly. This suggests that the direct effect of perceived power position on willingness to participate in mediation would have aligned with the hypothesis. However, the significant indirect effect of perceived loss of control among those in higher power positions counteracted this, leading to conflicting results.

On one hand, it could be the case that the unfamiliarity with the process of mediation leads high-power individuals to perceive a threat to their control and thus lower the willingness to participate in mediation, since they may not understand that mediation aims at finding a common ground among all parties and rather see it as the mediator imposing a decision on both parties, similar to a judge. On the other hand, it could also be the case that only when people lack complete information about the mediation process, the expected differences between low and high-power positions may emerge, because the in the beginning mentioned worries or fears of the low-power party have not been invalidated yet. However, when mediation is explained in detail, as it was in this survey (see Appendix C), high-power individuals might perceive a threat to their control over the conflict, due to the idea of being in an equal position to the other party in a conflict where the high-power individual could previously have exercised his authority and thus cannot do so during the mediation process.

In other words, while individuals in higher power positions might inherently have been more willing to participate in mediation, their higher perceived loss of control during mediation significantly reduced this willingness, overshadowing the positive direct effect. This finding underscores the complexity of power dynamics in the workplace and highlights how the

interplay of various psychological factors can influence outcomes. Simply accounting for a high and a low perceived power position may not be sufficient to explain individuals' willingness to engage in conflict resolution processes. The significant positive correlations between willingness and trust, self-efficacy, and locus of control supported the thesis that these factors also seemed to play crucial roles in individuals' decisions to participate in mediation, regardless of the power position. Higher trust in the mediation process, confidence in one's own problem-solving abilities, and an internal locus of control were all associated with greater willingness to engage in mediation.

Trust, Self-Efficacy, and Locus of Control

Additionally, the correlation table revealed significant relationships between willingness to participate in mediation and several mediating variables. For instance, trust and self-efficacy showed positive correlations with willingness, suggesting that higher levels of trust and confidence are associated with a greater willingness to mediate. Conversely, perceived loss of control and uncertainty showed negative correlations, indicating that these factors reduce the willingness to engage in mediation. This suggested that among lower power individuals, higher trust and self-efficacy were the most important variables that might encourage participation, while among higher power individuals, perceived loss of control and an external locus of control were important variables that might have deterred it. These factors may have balanced each other out, leading to the finding that perceived power position alone does not significantly affect mediation willingness.

Influence of Age and Generational Differences

The significant positive effect of age on willingness to participate in mediation added another layer of complexity. This finding is important to consider in the context of generational

differences in the workplace. Younger generations, who have entered the workforce in a time of demographic change and a war for talent, might have different perceptions of power and work dynamics compared to older generations who experienced a more competitive job market due to the baby boom (Lyons & Kuron, 2013). Yuen (2016) stated that younger people are generally more prone to have the intention of leaving their employers. This shift in workplace culture could explain why the hypothesis, that low-power parties are less willing to participate in mediation, which was based on earlier literature, did not align with the findings of this study. Uncertainty or fear of consequences at the workplace, might not be an issue for the younger generations anymore. The relatively low mean age of the participants might also have influenced the results against the hypothesis, because the literature that led to the hypothesis might have used samples that consist of a broader spectrum of generations, with a higher mean age. This shift in perception could be due to the changing employment market, the "war for talent," and demographic changes. Consequently, the younger individuals' attitudes towards mediation and power dynamics may differ significantly from the older individuals' attitudes, since leaving an employer in the case of a workplace conflict might be the preferred choice to workplace mediation for younger people.

Practical Implications

These findings have practical implications for workplace conflict resolution strategies. They further highlight the importance of pre-caucusing as mentioned by Bollen and Euwema (2014). Pre-caucusing, namely the process in which the mediator sets out to meet with the conflicting parties separately before the joint meetings to inform them about the steps, rules and address any concerns or wishes the individuals might have, could eliminate concerns and misconceptions of both parties. But considering especially the potential worries about giving up

a position of control in a hierarchical conflict, could positively influence the willingness to participate in mediation from the perspective of a high-power position. High-power parties might exhibit reluctance towards participating in mediation due to concerns about perceived threats to their authority. Latreille and Saundry (2013) highlight that supervisors typically hold decision-making power but feel that they give up some control during mediation sessions. This perceived loss of authority could contribute to a lower willingness to engage in mediation among individuals holding higher perceived power positions.

To enhance participation in mediation, especially among higher-power individuals, it may be beneficial to address and mitigate their concerns about loss of control through pre-caucusing. Mediators can emphasize the benefits of mediation in achieving mutually beneficial outcomes, potentially eliminating fears associated with power loss. However, it is important to note that the power imbalances should also not be encouraged while doing so. This could in turn lead to the high-power party behaving dominantly or overshadowing the low-power party during the mediation. The mediator must behave cautiously to mitigate fears and concerns of the high-power party, while also encouraging the mutual ground, where both parties see eye-to-eye and setting their power differences aside. Additionally, fostering a culture of trust and enhancing employees' self-efficacy could further encourage mediation participation. Training programs focused on building trust in mediation processes and developing conflict resolution skills may prove to be effective.

Limitations, Strengths and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that have to be considered. The high dropout rate might be due to participants' proficiency in English, as the study was conducted in English with a predominantly German sample. It is unknown if there were any specific

commonalities between these dropout participants that could have distorted the results. Additionally, the small sample size and the young mean age limit the generalizability of the findings. The study's sample was primarily German, which may not represent the diversity of the workforce in other contexts.

The study's strengths include a comprehensive analysis of multiple mediating variables and significant findings on the role of perceived loss of control. These insights can inform future research and practical interventions in workplace conflict resolution. Future research should also investigate the influence of generational differences and work experience on willingness to participate in mediation. Understanding other mediating variables better can help tailor more effective interventions for conflict resolution.

The unsupported hypothesis and the resulting findings suggest that previous literature cannot fully capture the nuances of workplace mediation dynamics yet, and that there are further areas that should be researched regarding workplace mediation, but especially regarding willingness to participate in mediation. There are likely additional variables, not accounted for in this research, that contribute to these dynamics. These variables may balance each other out, leading to the finding that perceived power position does not significantly affect mediation willingness. Variables such as whether the mediator is from within or outside the company, and the evolving view of employees' power due to the changing employment market, might play significant roles. The "war for talent", work experience and the perspectives of different generations, as well as the values different generations possess towards their work-life: organizational commitment, the intention to leave the company, and overall job-satisfaction, should all be considered. Another suggestion for further research is to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of the amount of information and the type of information given to

the parties before starting the process of workplace mediation on their willingness to engage in the process.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the complex relationship between power dynamics and willingness to participate in mediation in workplace conflicts. While power position alone did not directly influence mediation willingness in this study, perceived loss of control plays a significant mediating role. To eliminate any misconceptions about the mediation process and to make every party feel seen and accounted for, addressing the concerns of higher power individuals about loss of control, fostering trust, and enhancing self-efficacy are crucial steps toward encouraging mediation participation and resolving workplace conflicts more effectively.

While previous research by Bollen et al. (2010) found that subordinates are less satisfied with mediation and thus it was expected that they would also be less willing to participate in mediation, this study could not support this finding. This highlights the importance of further research in this field, and it emphasizes that multiple factors influence the perception and willingness to participate in mediation

The study's insights have practical implications for organizational leaders and mediators. By understanding the factors that influence willingness to participate in mediation, they can develop strategies to address concerns and promote more effective conflict resolution. For instance, providing detailed information about the mediation process and emphasizing the benefits of mediation could help mitigate fears of losing control among higher power individuals and might also help in mitigating any hesitation in participating in mediation with imbalanced power positions.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of understanding the multifaceted relationship between power dynamics and willingness to participate in mediation. While perceived power position alone may not significantly affect mediation willingness, perceived loss of control seems to be playing a crucial mediating role. By addressing the concerns of higher power individuals, fostering trust, and enhancing self-efficacy, organizations can promote greater participation in mediation and more effective resolution of workplace conflicts, and hopefully prevent disasters like those of the Boeing 737 Max from happening again. Further research is essential to uncover additional factors that influence mediation willingness and to develop targeted strategies for improving conflict resolution outcomes in diverse workplace settings.

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Appendix A

Scenario for the Low-Power Condition

At a workplace, you and your boss are involved in a conflict regarding project deadlines. Your boss, under pressure to meet company targets, wants to set tighter deadlines for completion. However, you are already feeling overwhelmed with existing tasks and potential quality compromises, since your colleagues are not a big help with those projects. You believe that a more realistic timeline is necessary for successful project delivery. You feel stressed and underappreciated, and you are blaming your boss for the stress since he is not offering enough support. Your boss on the other hand accuses you of not managing your time efficiently and not knowing how to prioritize important tasks. This conflict has led to several heated debates, and you even yelled at each other. Whenever you see each other now, there is so much negativity that you either ignore or refuse to talk to your boss. Your boss seems to handle the situation the same way you do. It has come to a point where neither of you knows how to solve this conflict anymore.

Appendix B

Scenario for the High-Power Condition

At a workplace, you and your subordinate are involved in a conflict regarding project deadlines. You, under pressure to meet company targets, want to set tighter deadlines for completion. However, the subordinate, feeling overwhelmed with existing tasks and potential quality compromises, believes that a more realistic timeline is necessary for successful project delivery. However, you are confident that the workload is acceptable, as long as they spend their time at work in a productive manner. You also made sure that you assigned your subordinate enough people and resources to meet the deadlines in time. Your employee has started blaming you for their personal stress and accused you of not offering enough support. You, however, blame your subordinate for not putting any effort into managing their time and not knowing how to prioritize important tasks. This conflict has led to several heated debates, and you even yelled at each other. Whenever you see each other now, there is so much negativity that you either ignore or refuse to talk to your employee. Your employee seems to handle the situation the same way you do. It has come to a point where neither of you knows how to solve this conflict anymore.

Appendix C

Explanation of the Mediation Process to the Participants in the Survey

Please carefully read the following information to understand what mediation is:

Mediation is a process where a third person, called a mediator, assists people in resolving their conflicts. The mediator contacts both parties first, sometimes separately, to understand their expectations and to explain the rules and requirements of the mediation process. For instance, if a party needs a time out, they can indicate this, and the mediator will safeguard this request.

The mediator sets some ground rules to ensure a smooth process. These rules might include respecting each other's speaking time, avoiding personal attacks, and maintaining confidentiality.

The mediation process typically involves several phases. The first is the exploration phase, where people express their interests and issues. They meet in a neutral place to talk about the issue, while both parties are encouraged to express their opinion and feelings honestly and openly. The mediator attempts to help both parties understand each other's perspectives. The mediator guides the conversation in such a way that the parties reflect on the issues and develop further a desire to resolve the conflict.

The mediator listens to both sides and creates an environment for them to find a solution that works for everyone. The mediator doesn't take sides but helps them consider different options they might not have thought of.

However, it's important to remember that mediation is not a guaranteed solution for all conflicts. Its effectiveness depends on the specific circumstances of the conflict and the willingness of the parties to engage in the process and work towards a resolution. It's always important to consider multiple approaches when dealing with conflicts and to choose the one that

is most appropriate for the situation. Mediation is one of many tools available for conflict resolution and its suitability varies depending on the context. It's up to each individual to decide whether mediation is the right approach for them.