

# THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

## Departmental Research Seminar

### When the Firefighter Flees the Scene: A Leader-Centric Investigation of Team Conflict and Team Leader Role Disengagement

By



**Prof. Zhenyu Yuan**  
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**Date : 28 May 2025 (Wed)**  
**Time : 10:30 am – 12 noon**  
**Venue : M802, PolyU**

#### Abstract

In light of the predominantly negative effect of team conflict for team functioning, scholars have explored enlisting team leaders to help resolve conflict. However, research evidence so far has been inconclusive. We challenge the prevailing assumption implied in this body of research—namely, that team leaders are immune to the fallout of team conflict and can act as a neutral third party. Instead, we draw from Kahn's (1990) theory of (dis)engagement and posit that team conflict may erode team leaders' psychological safety and trigger those leaders' disengagement from their leadership roles. Moreover, we incorporate team leader organizational politics perceptions and conflict symmetry to explicate the joint influence of the extra-team and within-team contexts, respectively. Multi-source, time-separated data from a sample of work teams provide good support for our hypotheses. Specifically, both task conflict and relationship conflict are associated with higher levels of team leader laissez-faire conflict management behavior, lower levels of team leadership behavior, and higher levels of team leader work withdrawal via the mediation of psychological safety. Moreover, organizational politics perceptions and conflict symmetry accentuate the detrimental impacts of relationship conflict and task conflict, respectively. Overall, our model suggests that team conflict can negatively affect team leaders.

**Prof. Zhenyu Yuan** is an Associate Professor of Managerial Studies and the Bielinski Family Faculty Scholar in the College of Business Administration at the University of Illinois Chicago. He received his PhD in Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management from the University of Iowa (2019). His research focuses on job stress and employee well-being, workplace relationships, and quantitative research methods. He has published over 20 peer-reviewed articles, in such journals as the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Psychology*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Management Studies*, and *Human Resource Management*. His work has been covered in mainstream media outlets, including Harvard Business Review, Scientific American, CBS, and the Wall Street Journal. He currently serves as the editorial board member of *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Personnel Psychology*, and *Management and Organization Review*.

**All interested are welcome.**



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