

Tata–Cyrus Mistry Conflict through the Lens of Conflict Expression Theory

Milin Rakesh Prasad & Rajasekhar David

This case study employs the Conflict Expression Theory (CET) to assess the Tata–Cyrus Mistry conflict by focusing on conflict communication modes, examining expression styles of stakeholders across four phases. The study shows how indirect and low-intensity signals fail to prevent escalation. The boardroom coup of ousting Mistry, when conflict expression became covert yet highly oppositional, led Mistry to adopt direct high-intensity responses through media and legal channels resulting in the escalation spiral. Using secondary data from corporate statements, court records and research the case shows the evolution of conflict expression and the conflict. This study emphasizes managing both organizational disagreements and their expression modes.

Milin Rakesh Prasad (E-mail: milin.rakeshprasad22eph@iimranchi.ac.in) is a Doctoral Scholar and **Rajasekhar David** (E-mail: rajasekhar.david@iimranchi.ac.in) is an Assistant Professor (OB&HR) at the Indian Institute of Management Ranchi, India.

Introduction

Transitions in organizational leadership can occasionally escalate into significant disputes that attract global attention. A notable example of such a corporate conflict is the widely publicized disagreement between Ratan Tata and his successor, Cyrus Mistry, within India's Tata Group in 2016. This boardroom confrontation not only raised critical questions regarding corporate governance practices but also offered a valuable case for analyzing the expression and escalation of conflicts within organizations. In this case study, we examine the Tata–Cyrus Mistry conflict through the lens of conflict expression theory (CET) proposed by Weingart et al. (2015). This theoretical framework emphasizes the manner in which conflict is communicated, particularly focusing on the directness of confrontation and the oppositional intensity of the parties' actions, rather than solely on the content or subject of the disagreement.

Board room conflicts in family firms are unique due to the intertwined

nature of task based conflict and relational conflict revolving around organisational growth and organisational control impacting strategic decision making and affecting overall performance (Perkins & Hendry, 2005), further exacerbated by conflicts of interest (Sorenson, 1999). According to Byrne, (2024) task-related conflicts can enhance board performance; however, they may also lead to dysfunctional relationship conflicts. Effective board governance necessitates an open attitude towards potential disputes, allowing for a clear focus on tasks while avoiding interpersonal skirmishes (Byrne, 2024). Relational conflicts often result in incompatibility, differences and feelings of discomfort, which initially latent, manifest as distress, irritation and aggression (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). It triggers emotional responses such as anger, frustration and hurt where one perceives the other as blocking the goals or needs (Kundi & Badar, 2021; Lalegani et al., 2019; Valitova & Besson, 2021). The propensity of task-related conflicts to escalate into relational conflicts, along with their adverse outcomes, underscores the importance of early mitigation of such conflicts. CET aids in identifying emerging conflicts by examining how they are expressed, emphasizing emotional and informational aspects rather than focusing on the specific content or classification of the conflict. This theoretical approach explores the expression of disagreement, as it significantly influences emotional responses, affects information processing, and determines whether the conflict spiral escalates or subsides. CET also provides predictability, as understanding conflict expressions helps fore-

see if conflicts will intensify, enabling targeted interventions (Brykman & O'Neill, 2023).

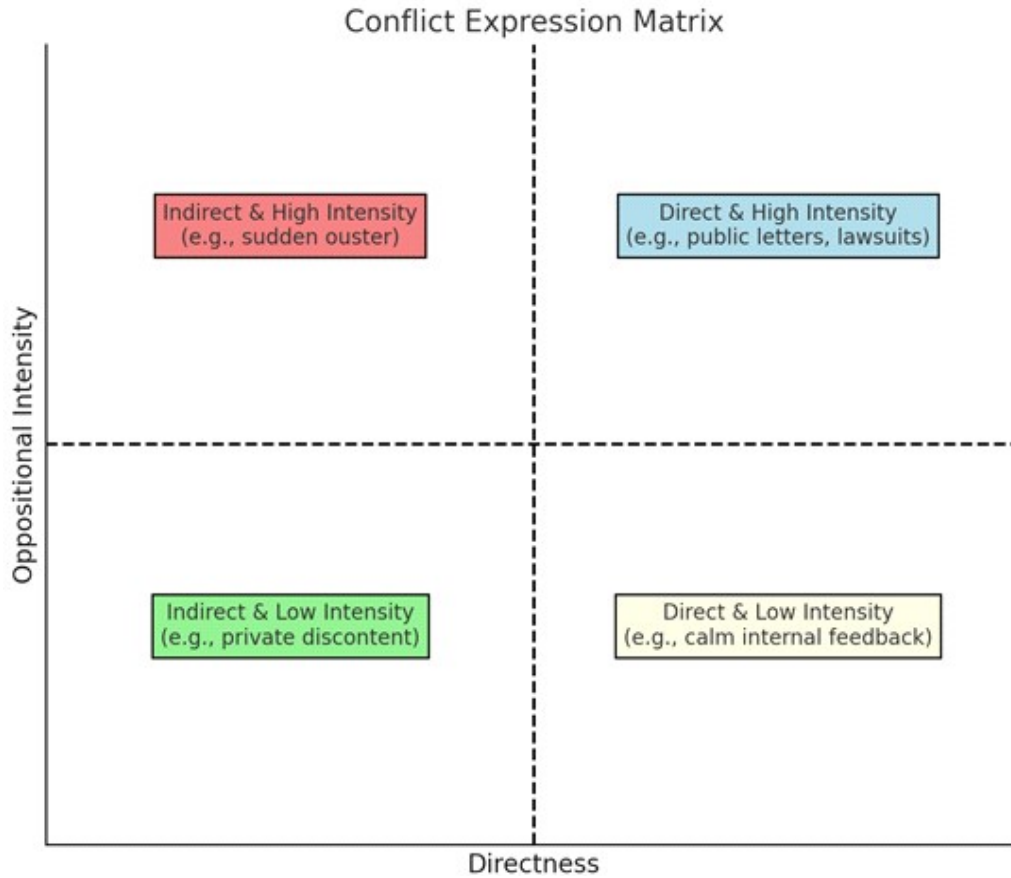
The key messages of this theory are : “how what is said has more weight than what is said?” and “ how conflict expression affects emotions and trust between individuals?”. The framework’s universality is highlighted by its applicability across different cultural contexts and individual characteristics (Weingart et al., 2015). Awareness of CET can enable leaders to recognize both their own and others’ emotional states, thereby facilitating the early identification of conflicts and allowing for their mitigation at initial stages.

By applying this framework, we aim to elucidate how different conflict expression styles contributed to escalation that better communication and governance could have mitigated. We utilize secondary data from news reports and prior case research to construct the narrative of events and employ conflict expression theory to evaluate key moments in the conflict. Tables and figures are included to illustrate the timelines and theoretical concepts. Finally, we discuss the implications for corporate governance and conflict management in family-controlled firms.

Conflict Expression Theory

Conflict expression theory examines organizational conflicts by focusing on expression modes rather than conflict types. As Weingart et al. (2015) note, two dimensions characterize conflict expression: directness and oppositional intensity. Fig. 1 illustrates these dimensions.

Fig. 1. Each quadrant exemplifies a different style for expressing disagreement.



Directness of Expression: Directness refers to how openly opposition is communicated to the recipient. High directness involves explicit expression of disagreement, making the opposing stance clear. Low directness uses implicit or ambiguous indicators of conflict through subtle suggestions, storytelling, sarcasm, or third-party communication. For example, high directness means telling a colleague “I disagree with this decision,” while low directness involves expressing discontent to others or hinting at disagreement. Directness is characterised by the

message clarity and the parties involved in communication.

Oppositional Intensity: This dimension reflects the intensity of expressed opposition. High oppositional intensity involves a firm stance with aggressive actions to undermine opponents, manifesting in heated arguments, personal attacks, or sabotage attempts. Parties show little willingness to compromise. Low oppositional intensity exhibits milder conflict expression, with parties remaining open to alternatives through polite debate

or constructive criticism. High-intensity expressions typically provoke defensiveness by threatening status or goals, while low-intensity expressions encourage dialogue.

These two dimensions represent universal aspects of conflict behavior, though their manifestations vary by context. Weingart et al., (2015) argue that directness and intensity in conflicts affect participants' reactions, leading to escalation or de-escalation. A conflict with high directness and intensity (Fig. 1: upper-right quadrant), like an accusatory shouting match, typically provokes similar responses and escalates. Conversely, low-intensity indirect (Fig. 1: lower-left quadrant) conflicts may delay resolution while avoiding immediate confrontation.

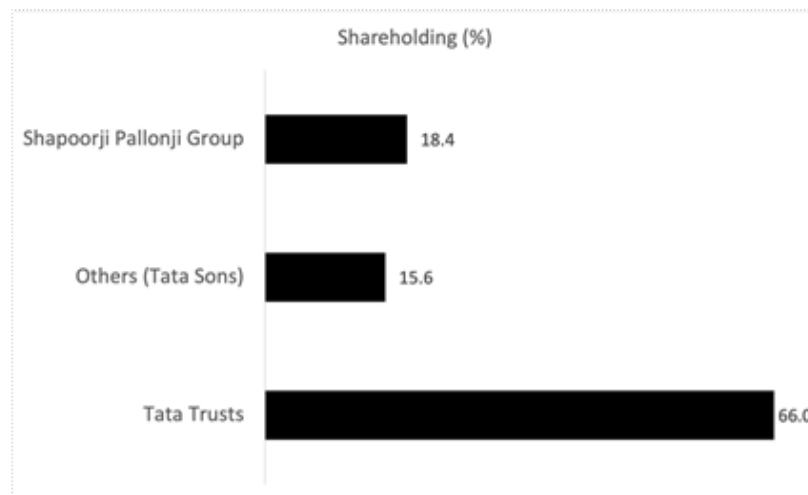
In the Tata–Mistry case, this framework will analyze how they articulated grievances or exerted influence, whether overtly or covertly and mildly or asser-

tively at various stages. By correlating key events with these dimensions, a comprehensive understanding of the conflict's origins and escalation can be achieved.

Case Background

The Tata Group is India's largest conglomerate, spanning industries like steel, automobiles, software, and consumer goods. Tata Sons Pvt. Ltd. acts as the holding company, with 66% ownership (Fig. 2) held by philanthropic trusts endowed by the Tata family (Faster Capital, 2025). Tata family members have led the group for decades, with Ratan N. Tata serving as Chairman from 1991 to 2012. His tenure saw expansion through acquisitions like Jaguar Land Rover, Corus Steel and domestic projects like Tata Nano "people's car" simultaneously emphasizing social responsibility and nation building philosophy. By 2011, as Ratan Tata neared 75, successor identification began.

Fig. 2 Shareholding Structure (2012-2016)



Cyrus Mistry was unexpectedly selected as successor. Though not from the Tata lineage—making him the first non-Tata family head—originating from the Shapoorji Pallonji family (SP Group), which held an 18.4% stake in Tata Sons (Davies, 2016). Having served as a director with TATA Sons, Mistry was familiar with the conglomerate. In 2011, Ratan Tata announced him as Deputy Chairman and by December 2012 Mistry became Chairman of Tata Sons. The transition was smooth with Ratan Tata moving to an emeritus role while leading the Tata Trusts. Media characterized this “magical Mistry tour” as challenging, given the need to revitalize underperforming businesses and maintain Tata’s legacy (The Economist, 2016).

Mistry’s Tenure: During Mistry’s tenure (2012-2016), he implemented initiatives to enhance the financial performance and operational efficiency, including asset divestment, loss write-downs, and questioning projects driven by Tata’s legacy over profitability, like the Nano car and Corus acquisition. Mistry’s approach was more conservative than Ratan Tata’s expansive style (Balabhaskaran, 2019). While initial years showed no open discord, governance issues emerged. Mistry claimed he became a “lame duck” chairman, with Tata and trustees micro-managing his decisions (Financial Express, 2016). He alleged continuous interference from Ratan Tata and Trusts’ nominees impeded his leadership (FasterCapital, 2025). Due to the hierarchical culture and Mistry’s reserved nature, these disagreements remained private. Mistry communicated opposition through internal channels rather than open confrontation, while Tata and trustees expressed

concerns only in private board discussions. This phase represented latent conflict with implicit signals.

The Tata Sons Board dismissed Cyrus Mistry as Chairman during an urgently convened meeting and reinstated Ratan Tata as interim chairman.

The Boardroom Coup (October 2016): The conflict emerged abruptly on October 24, 2016 (Sudhakar, 2018). In a surprising development that unsettled the Indian corporate sector, the Tata Sons Board dismissed Cyrus Mistry as Chairman during an urgently convened meeting and reinstated Ratan Tata as interim chairman (moneycontrol, 2021). Mistry received no prior notification or clear rationale for his removal, which he subsequently characterized as “unprecedented in the annals of corporate history” and akin to an ambush. Table 1 provides a timeline of key events in the conflict and its aftermath.

Conflict intensity escalated after October 2016’s ouster, transforming discontent into public allegations and courtroom clash (Table 1 and Fig. 3). We now analyze the Tata-Mistry conflict through directness and intensity framework across key phases.

Analysis: Conflict Expression in the Tata–Mistry Feud

Phase 1: Latent Conflict and Indirect Expression (2013–2016): In the early phase of Cyrus Mistry’s chairman-

Table 1. Timeline of Key Events in the Tata–Cyrus Mistry Conflict

Date (2016–2021)	Event
Dec 2012	Cyrus Mistry succeeds Ratan Tata as Tata Sons Chairman. Ratan Tata retires but remains Tata Trusts Chairman.
2013–2015	Mistry leads Tata Group amid interference from Ratan Tata and trustees in decisions on aviation ventures and Tata Nano. No public conflict occurs.
Oct 24, 2016	Tata Sons Board removes Cyrus Mistry as Chairman, citing loss of confidence. Ratan Tata named Interim Chairman (moneycontrol, 2021).
Oct 25, 2016	Mistry's leaked email to Tata Sons board alleges governance failures, "shadow control" by Tata Trusts, and \$18 billion potential write-downs (Davies, 2016).
Oct 26–27, 2016	Tata Sons rebuked Mistry's letter as "unsubstantiated" and "malicious" (Davies, 2016). The statement criticized his public release of a private letter. Ratan Tata assured employees of stability, while media framed it as a family feud.
Nov–Dec 2016	Tata Sons holds EGMs to remove Mistry from boards. Mistry resigns from Tata directorships by 2016. Two Mistry firms file NCLT petition alleging minority oppression at Tata Sons, who counter with notice for confidentiality breach (moneycontrol, 2021).
Jan 2017	Natarajan Chandrasekaran takes over as Tata Sons Chairman in February 2017 (moneycontrol, 2021). Legal battles follow.
2017–2018	NCLT hears the case. Tata Sons removed Mistry citing performance issues. Mistry alleges governance lapses, with Tata Trusts nominees taking Ratan Tata's instructions during meetings (Financial Express, 2016). NCLT upholds Mistry's removal in 2018.
Dec 2019	NCLAT overturns NCLT, restores Cyrus Mistry as Executive Chairman of Tata Sons, declaring his 2016 removal illegal. The order is suspended for 4 months pending Supreme Court appeal (moneycontrol, 2021).
Jan 2020	Mistry states he won't return as Tata Sons Chairman but will fight for minority shareholders and governance reforms (moneycontrol, 2021).
Sept–Oct 2020	SP Group announces plans to end its 70-year Tata partnership, seeking buyout of their 18.4% stake (moneycontrol, 2021). Their proposed



Fig. 3 Tata–Mistry Conflict Timeline

Sept 2022	<p>share-swap deal is rejected by Tata, while Mistry's advocate claims the 2016 ouster violated governance principles (moneycontrol, 2021). Mar 2021 The Supreme Court unanimously upholds Tata Sons' actions, overturning NCLAT's Mistry reinstatement. The Court found no wrongdoing against minority shareholders, ruling in Tata's favor.</p> <p>Cyrus Mistry dies in a car accident. The Tata-Mistry relationship had ended, with the Mistry family exiting Tata Sons shareholding.</p>	<p>ship, conflicts existed in latent form. Mistry avoided criticizing Ratan Tata's prior decisions, while Tata did not openly question Mistry's decisions. Mistry's strategy of shedding financially</p>
-----------	--	--

Table 2: Conflict Escalation Phases — Directness vs. Intensity

Conflict Phase	Period	Intensity (1-5)	Directness (1-5)
Latent Tension	2012-2014	2	2
Ideological Clash	2015-mid 2016	3	3
Direct Expression	Oct-Dec 2016	5	5
Legal Escalation	2017-2020	4	4
Institutional Closure	2021	2	2

bleeding “legacy hotspots” implicitly critiqued previous expansion moves through business reviews. Tata and board members grew unhappy with Mistry’s lack of aggression in expansion and consideration of shutting down iconic projects like the Nano car. Instead of direct confrontation, discontent developed among trustees. Mistry noted that Tata Trusts’ representatives took instructions from Ratan Tata during board meetings (Sudhakar, 2018), indicating indirect conflict through third parties.

The oppositional intensity was moderate during this phase similar to the lower-left area of Fig. 1. However, both sides maintained decorum while the conflict remained private. It remained polite but with underlying frustration - a “cold conflict” where civility masked divergence. From a theoretical perspective, the risk associated with low-directness in

communication is the potential for misinterpretations and unresolved grievances. When conflict signals are subtle, parties may not comprehend the issue’s magnitude, hindering early resolution. In the Tata-Mistry case, each party underestimated the other’s determination. Mistry may not have anticipated that signs of dissatisfaction from Tata would lead to a coup, while Tata’s side assumed Mistry would quietly acquiesce if removed, given his non-confrontational stance. Consequently, the situation was primed for dramatic escalation.

Tacit Knowledge & Leadership Style: During the initial phase of latent

The transfer of tacit knowledge is crucial in leadership succession, particularly in organizations with strong legacy cultures.

conflict, a frequently neglected aspect was the transfer, or lack thereof, of tacit knowledge (TK). TK is characterized as the knowledge or skills conveyed exclusively through personal interaction, as opposed to being communicated via formulas, diagrams, verbal descriptions, or instructional manuals (Collins, 2005). Ratan Tata's leadership was deeply rooted in decades of informal practices, nuanced interpersonal understandings and unspoken norms regarding the operations of Tata Sons. Cyrus Mistry may not have been fully immersed in these subtleties. As Nonaka (1994) contends, the transfer of tacit knowledge is crucial in leadership succession, particularly in organizations with strong legacy cultures. Consequently, the conflict extended beyond strategic disagreements to encompass underlying assumptions that were neither fully articulated nor shared.

Phase 2: The Coup and Ambush: A High-Intensity Action of Indirect Nature: Cyrus Mistry's dismissal on October 24, 2016, represents a pivotal moment in conflict expression. His removal, executed without notice, demonstrated minimal directness but maximum intensity through this extreme boardroom measure.

Low Directness: During a board meeting, Mistry was voted out in absentia without the opportunity to defend himself. There was no direct confrontation; Tata and allies used majority control and board votes to resolve the conflict unilaterally, bypassing dialogue with Mistry. Mistry described it as an "ambush" and was "shocked beyond words" having not

anticipated confrontation. The dismissal came as a complete surprise—a hallmark of low directness and ambiguous conflict expression.

High Intensity: Though executed indirectly, the coup was a high-intensity strike as removing a chairman signals a complete loss of trust, embodying a "take no prisoners" approach. The intensity was underscored by Ratan Tata's assumption of the interim chairman role, marking a decisive reclamation of control. Tata's camp communicated that Mistry's leadership was unacceptable. Such a measure ranks among the highest levels of oppositional intensity, as Mistry lost his chairmanship instantly. High-intensity conflict expressions often provoke strong emotional responses, and Mistry's aggrieved reaction and retaliation will be discussed next.

The combination of low directness and high intensity is particularly volatile. Without direct engagement, Mistry lost expectations of fairness intensifying perceived injustice and prompting strong counter-responses. Weingart et al., (2015) note that indirect expressions leave more room for interpretation and severe negative outcomes may trigger escalating responses. This occurred when Cyrus Mistry's reactions propelled the conflict into open confrontation.

Cultural Dimensions: Mistry's dismissal conflicted with Indian values of respect, hierarchy, and dignity. His removal without dialogue was seen as a public slight in a society where disputes are settled indirectly and loss of face

causes conflict. According to Hofstede (1984), India's high power-distance culture made Mistry's public response notable, favoring transparency over discretion.

Phase 3: Open War of Words – Direct and High-Intensity Conflict After his ouster, Mistry made grievances public by writing a detailed email to the Tata Sons board, accusing the leadership of mismanagement and ethical lapses (Davies, 2016). This letter and subsequent exchanges marked intense opposition between both sides.

Explicit Communication (High Directness): Mistry's leaked letter identified problems: "total lack of corporate governance" at Tata Sons, decisions made without board processes, and his claim that Ratan Tata "supported bad business decisions," including AirAsia partnership (Davies, 2016). He cited losses of Rs. 1,18,000 crore and ventures like Tata Nano, Power's project, and Teleservices' Docomo deal (Financial Express, 2016). This conflict marked a shift from earlier deference, as Mistry challenged Tata's legacy before shareholders, regulators, and press.

Mistry's leaked letter identified problems: "total lack of corporate governance" at Tata Sons, decisions made without board processes,

Tata Sons' response was explicit. While stating it was "beneath the dignity of Tata Sons to engage in a public spat"

(Davies, 2016), they issued a rebuttal of Mistry's claims. They accused Mistry of making "unsubstantiated claims and malicious allegations" (Davies, 2016). Tata's language—"malicious allegations," "unforgivable" behavior, "besmirch the image of the group" (Davies, 2016)—aimed at undermining Mistry's credibility. Ratan Tata's letter stated the chairman change was "absolutely necessary" and suggested Mistry's inadequate performance, with reasons shared with the court.

In conclusion, both parties have commenced direct communication with each other and the global audience. The previous use of diplomatic language has been entirely abandoned, replaced by direct and confrontational discourse.

Entrenchment and Aggression (High Intensity): The content had become highly oppositional. Mistry's letter criticized Ratan Tata (previously taboo in Tata culture) and accused the leadership of fraudulent transactions in the AirAsia venture. He claimed emotional reasons prevented closing the loss-making Nano project, and Tata's airline passion led to investments against his objection (Financial Express, 2016). These points show Mistry was defending his decisions while criticizing Tata's.

Tata's rebuttal defended the Trusts and board, stating Mistry had lost board confidence and failed to address trustee concerns (Davies, 2016). They portrayed Mistry as an ineffective leader, citing financial decline and information leaks. Both sides remained firmly opposed, refusing to compromise.

The personal stakes were intense. Tata's side called Mistry's letter "unseemly and undignified" and "a betrayal of trust" (Davies, 2016). Mistry responded through courts, with his firm invoking minority shareholder oppression clauses. His counsel used terms like "blood sport" and "ambush" (moneycontrol, 2021). Tata Sons claimed Mistry damaged their brand value. This aligned with Direct & High-Intensity conflict expression.

Conflicts expressed in this manner are difficult to resolve, as they elicit strong emotional reactions. Once escalated, the relationship between Tata and Mistry became irreparably damaged, with both parties losing trust and preparing for prolonged confrontation. The conflict progressed from written communications to media confrontations and shareholder meetings, where Ratan Tata personally attended to advocate Mistry's removal, before culminating in legal proceedings.

Even during direct confrontation through court proceedings, indirect strategies continued. In 2017, Tata Sons sought to change from a public to private company status, reducing disclosure requirements and limiting Mistry's faction's ability to sell shares (moneycontrol, 2021). Mistry's representatives argued this undermined minority shareholder rights. This represented an indirect tactic to weaken their adversary's position. Conflict expression theory explains such behavior, where parties employ indirect maneuvers while engaging in overt confrontations.

Mistry's vision of the chairman as a professional steward conflicted with Ratan Tata's traditional, family-driven model.

Leadership Framing: Leadership identity emerged as a key issue. Mistry's vision of the chairman as a professional steward conflicted with Ratan Tata's traditional, family-driven model. These opposing views of legacy versus modernization remained unnegotiated. Conflict expression and leadership framing theories suggest such conflicting frames intensify threats and escalate expression.

Phase 4: Resolution Attempts and De-escalation (2019–2021): After a few years, both parties showed signs of dialing back, especially once the matter was sub judice. In late 2019, when the NCLAT ruled in Mistry's favor, the conflict took a moderated tone. Mistry stated he was not interested in reinstatement as Tata Sons chairman, focusing instead on protecting minority shareholders. Tata Sons initiated talks of a possible buyout of Mistry family's stake (moneycontrol, 2021). Communication shifted to the courtroom and negotiation tables rather than media.

In Supreme Court hearings in 2020, the Mistry family's statement that "a separation of interests would best serve all stakeholder groups" (moneycontrol, 2021) showed a direct desire to end the conflict through a split. This expressed finality rather than aggression, suggesting lower intensity. Tata's willingness to buy the stake represented a concession on their terms (moneycontrol, 2021).

The Supreme Court's 2021 verdict provided resolution. Ratan Tata claimed vindication but no ill-will, seeing it as a governance victory. Mistry accepted the judgment. Both sides showed measured responses compared to 2016-17, with conflict moving to lower-intensity (lower right quadrant of Fig. 1), as fatigue led parties to soften.

Culture and context influenced this conflict significantly. The Tata Group received strong public support due to its iconic status in India. Mistry's public dispute, though principled, was seen as inappropriate airing of internal matters in Indian business culture. This pressure led Mistry to focus more on shareholder rights than personal criticism. Tata maintained statesmanship, protecting the group's reputation. The conflict evolved as power dynamics and potential consequences shifted.

Discussion: Theoretical Insights & Implications for Governance

Examining the Tata–Cyrus Mistry conflict through conflict expression theory provides insights into the theory and conflict management in family-controlled enterprises.

The Tata camp's intense action prompted equally intense reaction from Mistry's side.

The Impact of Expression Style on Conflict Trajectory: This case demonstrates how conflict expression affects escalation. Tata and Mistry's indirect com-

munication and avoidance prevented early resolution of issues around role boundaries and strategy. Instead, mistrust grew until the ambush-style removal triggered rapid escalation. The Tata camp's intense action prompted equally intense reaction from Mistry's side (Sudhakar, 2018). This supports Weingart et al., (2015) view that conflict expressions create self-reinforcing loops, trapping parties in public feuds.

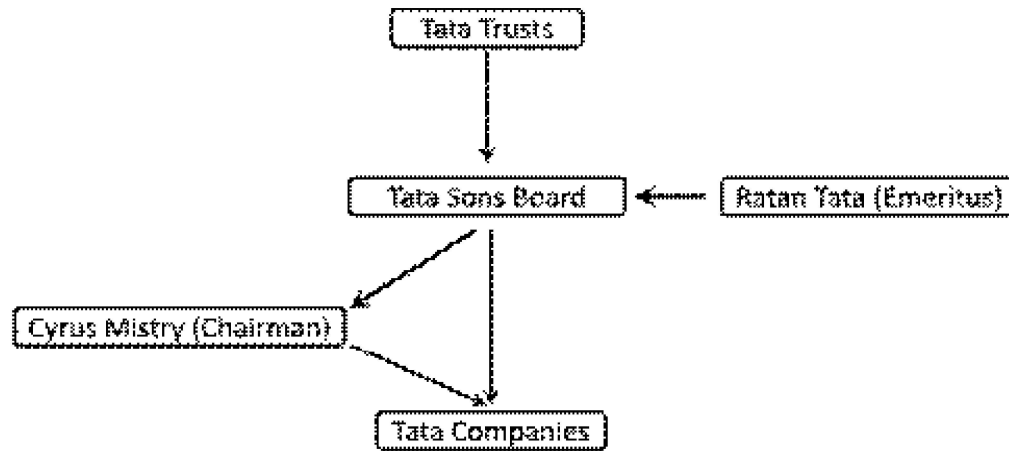
Directness, Face-Saving, and Culture: The hesitation to be direct stems from cultural respect and "face-saving." In Asian and family-business cultures, confrontation with elders is avoided for harmony. Mistry's indirect responses reflected this norm. Conflict expression varies culturally, and within Tata, top-level dissent was considered improper. However, avoiding direct conflict can worsen later confrontations. Organizations need norms for respectful but direct communication. Clear protocols on Tata Trusts' involvement could have prevented trust issues. The Tata Group has since adjusted governance roles (FasterCapital, 2025). The feud demonstrates how hierarchical norms and respect for seniority delayed resolution, while public disputes clashed with Indian cultural norms.

Oppositional Intensity and Stakes: High oppositional intensity in this conflict stemmed from the stakes – control of India's largest conglomerate and its future direction. With existential stakes (family legacy for Tata, reputation and ownership value for Mistry), neither side would yield. The intensity manifested in entrenched positions. Mistry stood on principle (governance

reform, business strategy), viewing compromise as failing stakeholders. Tata sought to protect the group from a leader he distrusted, seeing it as defending the Tata ethos. Their incompatible goals fueled the conflict’s intensity. One lesson for boards is the need for early conflict resolution mechanisms before positions harden. Though mediation by neutral directors might have helped, given the power dynamics, neutral arbitration was never attempted.

Governance Structures as a Context for Conflict: The dual authority structure within Tata Sons—majority ownership by Tata Trusts and governance by Tata Sons Board—created potential for conflict. Fig. 4 shows the roles of Tata Trusts, Tata Sons Board, Cyrus Mistry, and Ratan Tata during the conflict. Mistry’s removal for implementing governance changes demonstrates how structural modifications can trigger conflicts (FasterCapital, 2025). This case shows how undefined governance roles

Fig. 4 Power Dynamics within Tata Group Structure



lead to dysfunctional conflicts (M. C. & Rentala, 2018). Clear governance norms should be established when a new leader takes office, especially if the predecessor maintains influence, to prevent power struggles.

Clear governance norms should be established when a new leader takes office, especially if the predecessor maintains influence, to prevent power struggles.

Absence of Tacit Knowledge Transfer as a conflict context: The Tata-Mistry case shows limitations of tacit knowledge transfer in succession. When unwritten norms are not documented, new leaders may breach them, causing dissatisfaction. Leadership succession in hybrid legacy firms must include tacit knowledge transfer and cultural integration alongside strategic handover. Understanding implicit cues and shared history is crucial to prevent conflicts.

Public Relations and Conflict Expression: Once the conflict became public, communications had to address both stakeholders and public, leading to extreme rhetoric. Mistry made accusations about governance failures, while Tata Sons emphasized his shortcomings to protect confidence. Public conflicts escalate as reputations become at stake, creating situations where neither side backs down. The Tata-Mistry dispute damaged both parties and diverted management attention, demonstrating the destructive nature of public confrontations.

Role of Leadership and Conflict Outcomes: Compare this saga with Infosys Ltd's 2017 corporate governance conflict, where founder N.R. Narayana Murthy's public criticism led to CEO Vishal Sikka's resignation. Like the Tata-Mistry case, it involved a powerful former leader and new professional leader with public confrontation (FasterCapital, 2025). However, Infosys stabilized faster due to the board's mediation and Murthy's decision to avoid legal action. The Tata case was prolonged due to ownership stake and family ties. Both cases highlight the need for companies to manage transitions when influential leaders step down. Formalizing founders' advisory roles with clear boundaries could prevent such conflicts. The Tata case now serves as a key corporate governance example illustrating the importance of such clarity (Balabhaskaran, 2019).

Conflict Expression Theory Validation: This case substantiates Con-

flikt Expression Theory's propositions. The directness and intensity of conflict acts influenced subsequent actions, with escalation continuing until court intervention. The case supports the theory's view on cultural differences in perceiving directness. Mistry viewed board communication as appropriate, while Tata saw the leaked letter as betrayal, showing mismatched expectations about conflict venues. The theory's prediction of threat rigidity manifested as both parties became inflexible after personal attacks and aggressive tactics began.

One might ask if reducing oppositional intensity could have disrupted the conflict cycle. If Tata's statement after the ouster had been conciliatory rather than combative, acknowledging strategic differences while appreciating Mistry's contributions, perhaps litigation could have been avoided. Similarly, if Mistry had sought amicable negotiation given his stake, the conflict might have ended sooner. While trust was broken on both sides, this case demonstrates that de-escalation by one party is crucial to break conflict spirals. Third-party arbitration can help, though in the Tata-Mistry case, settlement attempts only emerged in 2020.

Conclusion

We analyzed directness and oppositional intensity evolution in the TATA-Mistry boardroom conflict using CET. The conflict progressed from indirect tensions to direct confrontation, intensifying through public exchanges before judicial resolution. Initial avoidance of dialogue

led to hostile public attacks, while uncompromising tactics from both sides required external intervention.

From a practical perspective, this case highlights the importance of proactive conflict management in family businesses and corporations. Implementing effective governance mechanisms, clear role definitions, and communication norms (including expressing disagreements) could have mitigated the Tata–Mistry conflict. Boards should foster an environment where disagreements can be expressed directly yet constructively, rather than being suppressed. When conflicts arise, parties should avoid conflict spirals as retaliatory actions often lead to detrimental outcomes. The mechanisms of tacit knowledge transfer in succession planning remain critically important.

While the Tata Group has transitioned under new leadership, this episode remains a key example of boardroom conflict demonstrating the importance of balancing respect and communication in family businesses.

Acknowledgement: The authors acknowledge the use of Paperpal (<https://www.paperpal.com>), a generative AI language model, to assist in the process of converting research findings into academic writing styles for this article. While the AI tool aided in refining the sentence structure and clarity, all interpretations and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

References

- Balabhaskaran, P. (2019), “Tata Group: Trauma of Transition” *South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases*, 8(1): 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2277977918803250>
- Brykman, K., & O’Neill, T. (2023) “How conflict expressions affect recipients’ conflict management behaviors” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2022.104208>.
- Byrne, D. (2024, March 22), How should a board deal with conflict and division between directors? The Corporate Governance Institute. https://www.thecorporategovernanceinstitute.com/insights/guides/how-to-deal-with-conflict-in-the-board-room/?srsltid=AfmBOoq5bTzKY2_zTtOdSHVdKcpY2TEPoO335a-gXVPTvsZENdiK7aRAa
- Collins, H. M. (2005), “What is tacit knowledge?”. in T. R. Schatzki, K. Knorr Cetina, & E. von Savigny (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory*, Routledge.
- Davies, R. (2016, October 27), “Tata hits back at Mistry over leaked letter criticizing board”, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/oct/27/tata-hits-back-at-cyrus-mistry-over-leaked-letter-criticising-board>
- De Dreu, C. K. W., & Gelfand, M. J. (2008), “Conflict in the workplace: Sources, functions, and dynamics across multiple levels of analysis”, in C. K.W. De Dreu, & M. J. Gelfand (Eds.), *The psychology of conflict and conflict management in organizations*, New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- FasterCapital. (2025, March 30), “Corporate Governance: Examining the Framework on the Bombay Stock Exchange”, <https://fastercapital.com/content/Corporate-Governance—Examining-the-Framework-on-the-Bombay-Stock-Exchange.html#Examining-Corporate-Governance-Practices-on-the-Bombay-Stock-Exchange.html>

- Financial Express. (2016, October 26), "Cyrus Mistry letter makes shocking revelations; from fraud in AirAsia deals to Tata Nano losses, here's a blow-by-blow account", <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/industry-cyrus-mistry-writes—letter-to-company-directors-says-shocked-beyond-words-at-removal-430962/>
- Hofstede, G. (1984), *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Kundi, Y., & Badar, K. (2021), "Interpersonal conflict and counterproductive work behavior: the moderating roles of emotional intelligence and gender", *International Journal of Conflict Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCM-10-2020-0179>.
- Lalegani, Z., Isfahani, A., Shahin, A., & Safari, A. (2019), "Developing a model for analyzing the factors influencing interpersonal conflict", *Management Decision*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-08-2018-0857>.
- Maria, A. V., & Singh, K. D. P. (2021), "Decoding corporate governance and insolvency related issues in India". in H. Kaur (Ed.), *Facets of Corporate Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility in India*. Springer, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4076-3_5
- M. C., A. B., & Rentala, S. (2018), "Role of Leadership and Corporate Governance: The Case of Tata Group and Infosys", *FIIIB Business Review*, 7(4): 252–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2319714518813589>,
- moneycontrol. (2021, March 26), "Cyrus Mistry vs Tata Sons: A timeline of events that led to the split", <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/cyrus-mistry-vs-tata-sons-a-timeline-of-events-that-led-to-the-split-5872701.html>
- Nonaka, I. (1994), "A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation", *Organization Science*, 5(1): 14–37. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.5.1.14>
- Perkins, S. J., & Hendry, C. (2005), "Ordering top pay: Interpreting the signals", *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(7): 1443–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00550.x>
- Pulles, N. J., & Loohuis, R. P. A. (2020), "Managing Buyer Supplier Conflicts: The Effect of Buyer Openness and Directness on A Supplier's Willingness to Adapt", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 56(4): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jscm.12240>
- Sorenson, R. L. (1999), "Conflict management strategies used by successful family businesses", *Family Business Review*, 12(4): 325–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-6248.1999.00325.>
- Sudhakar, G. P. (2018). "Tata: The biggest boardroom coup", *Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies*, 8(3): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eemcs-03-2017-0041>
- The Economist (2016a, October 24), "Cyrus Mistry is ousted as Tata's boss"
- The Economist. (2016b, October 29), "Cyrus Mistry hits back at being ousted from Tata", <https://www.economist.com/business/2016/10/29/cyrus-mistry-hits-back-at-being-ousted-from-tata>
- Valitova, A., & Besson, D. (2021), "Interpersonal communications at core of conflicts' escalation in organization. The interplay of interpersonal communication escalation, people's habitus and psycho-sociological processes are more important than contextual factors", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 34: 3-27. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jocm-04-2017-0131>.
- Weingart, L. R., Behfar, K. J., Bendersky, C., Todorova, G., & Jehn, K. A. (2015), "The Directness and Oppositional Intensity of Conflict Expression", *Academy of Management Review*, 40(2): 235–62. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2013.0124>