# Organizational conflict management

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**Abstract**

Conflict occurs in everyday human life. It is also inevitable in an organization. This paper discusses conflict management, resolution and the various strategies of addressing conflicts.

**Introduction**

Conflict is not an unusual part of human life. It is a perpetual gift of life, although different about it exist. Some see conflict as a negative situation which must be avoided at any cost while for others, it as a phenomenon which necessitates management. Although, others may consider conflict as an exciting opportunity for personal growth and could use it to their best advantage. Wherever one may fall on this continuum of viewpoints concerning conflict, seldom would one expect to be in a continual state of conflict as the basis for employment (Nebgen, 1978).

Conflict theory is significant to the role of the administrator, but it evolves from fields such as business, sociology, psychology, etc. Coser (1967) suggested that conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rivals. From a communication perspective, it is viewed as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from other parties in achieving their goals (Hocker and Wilmot, 1985). According to Wikipedia, organizational conflict is a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests between formal authority and power and those individuals and groups affected. There are disputes over how revenues should be divided, and how long and hard people should work. There are jurisdictional disagreements among individual departments and between unions and management.

Conflict may arise from several forms such as rivalries, jealousies, personality clashes, role-definitions and struggles for power and favour. There is also conflict within individuals – between competing needs and demands – to which individuals respond in different ways. Since conflict is seemingly unavoidable, it is obviously necessary for managers to be able to recognize the source of the conflict, to view it's constructive as well as destructive potential, to learn how to manage conflict and to implement conflict resolution technique in a practical way (Fleerwood, 1987).

In recent times, conflict is now seen as having the potential for positive growth. Deetz and Stevenson (1986), gave three assumptions that indicate that conflict can be positive. Their belief is that management of conflict serves as a more useful conception of the process of conflict resolution. Their assumptions are as follows: conflict is natural; conflict is good and necessary; and most conflicts are based on real differences.

The assumption that conflict is good and necessary is because conflict can stimulate innovative thinking when properly managed. When there are no conflicts, thoughts and actions are performed because they are habitual. Conflicts allow for evaluation of necessity of these thoughts and actions. The last assumption highlights the that people are frequently timid in facing the reality that legitimated differences may exist and instead blame conflict on poor or non-existent communication. It may seem easier to live with unresolved misunderstanding than to face the fact that real, fundamental differences do exist and so demand recognition and management (Deetz and Stevenson, 1986).

Organizational conflict is a regular occurrence. This view is a direct result of the non-existence of rules guiding an organization. Colleagues see one another as adversaries, and not as partners working towards a common goal as the case should be in any organization. There are potentials for conflict in practically every decision that the manger must make. Coping efficiently and effectively with potential and bonafide conflicts is possibly one of the most important aspects of the manager's position (Nebgen, 1978).

As a manager, conflict is very important. The concept of conflict is majorly found in the fields of business, sociology and psychology, but not in communication or education. It is complicated to define conflict as it is difficult to come to a consensus concerning the definition of this term (Borisoff and Victor, 1998).

According to an American sociologist, Lewis Coser (1967), conflict is defined as: "The clash of values and interests, the tension between what is and what some groups feel ought to be." To Coser, conflict served the function of pushing society and was leading to new institutions, technology and economic systems. The most important contribution of Coser to conflict resolution was determination of the functional and dysfunctional roles of conflict.

Cross, Names and Beck (1979) defined conflict as "differences between and among individuals. The differences are created by the conflict, for example, values, goals, motives, resources and ideas. Hocker and Wilmot (1985) defined conflict as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from the other party in achieving their goals" (Borisoff and Victor, 1998). Thomas (2005) defines conflict as a "disagreement in opinions between people or groups, due to differences in attitudes, beliefs, values or needs. In business, differences in such characteristics as work experience, personality, peer group, environment and situation, all lead to difference in personal attitudes, beliefs, values or needs".

**Positive side to conflict**

Conflict could have positive effects as follows:

·       Encourages individuals to do better and work harder. One's talents and abilities come to the forefront in a conflict situation.

·        Psychological needs including dominance, aggression, esteem and ego, are addressed and thereby provides an opportunity for constructive use and release of aggressive urges.

·        It provokes creative and innovative ideas. For instance, employee benefits of the present day are an outcome of the union-management conflict over the past decades.

·        In a way, it adds variety to one's organizational life, otherwise work life would be dull and boring.

·        Brings about an understanding of the problems, people have with one another and leads to better coordination among individuals and departments, in addition to strengthening intra-group relationship.


**Negative side to conflict**

On the other hand, conflict can also lead to the following negative effects:

·        Conflicts negatively affect individual and organizational performance. Resolving conflicts takes a toll on managerial time and energy which could be more productively spent.

· In any conflict, people may promote their self-interests or personal gains at the cost of others or the organization.

· Serious conflicts over a prolonged period affect individuals emotionally and physically, and give rise to psychosomatic disorders.

· Conflicts give rise to time wastage, which if costed, could have been spent doing more productive things.

· Conflict may give rise to work sabotage, employee morale problems, decrease in the market share of product/service and consequent loss of productivity.

## Conflict resolution and management

Conflict resolution differs from conflict management. In conflict resolution, the conflict ends by satisfying the interests of both warring parties. Conflict management entails specialized interaction that prevents a dispute from becoming a battle. Managing a conflict attends to personal issues so as to allow for a constructive relationship, even though the objective issues may not be resolvable.

Conflict resolution involves great managerial skills. The goal in conflict resolution always should be to seek a resolution based on mutual gain. Realistically, however, resolution is not always possible. When this is the case, we must manage the conflict to ensure that the relationship is constructive and that open communication is maintained.

The success of conflict resolution depends on the ability to regulate stress and emotions. During conflict, strong emotions appear which can hurt feelings. When conflict is handled in an unhealthy way, it can be the cause of irreparable rifts, resentments, and break-ups. When a person deals with a conflict in a healthy way, it increases the understanding among people, builds trust and strengthens relationships.

## Strategies for managing and resolving conflicts

Resolving conflict between and among individuals can be one of the most frustrating and uncomfortable experiences for an administrator. Any attempt by an administrator to alter a specific conflict position requires that he/she be knowledgeable of its origin. An understanding of the source improves the probability that the proper resolution or stimulation technique will be selected (Robbins, 1974).

De Church, et al (2001) suggested that active conflict management allows groups to openly talk about issues and disagreements, allowing them to share information and confront a conflict together. In addition, Tjosvold, et al (2002) opined that openness makes it possible to contradict arguments. Studies have shown that there are great possibilities in open conversation and argument confrontation. The positive effects of conflict management are, according to De Church, et al (2001), a result of the active approach which benefits team effectiveness.

The most important element of the conflict management strategy is the early recognition of the conflict and paying attention to the conflicting parties. These elements are important when a manager deals with functional or dysfunctional conflicts. There should be early indication of the conflict and early evaluation of its impact on performance of employees. It is also necessary to make a plan to encourage functional conflict or manage dysfunctional conflict. The approach to the conflict and the conflict management style also depend on the participant's emotional involvement in the conflict (Brodtker, et al, 2001).

Brodtker, et al (2001), argue further that for a conflict to take place, these three elements must be present. Moreover, to resolve a conflict, one must identify and deal with all these elements, otherwise the attempt to manage the conflict will be unsuccessful.

Conflict can be either complex or simple. The more complex a conflict is, the more the potential for a creative, constructive transformation or solution of the conflict. If the conflict is too simple, the parties

will not be motivated to get engaged and they will tend to ignore it. This can lead to greater problems in the organization which can in turn, lead to poor performance. When there are more elements, the conflict becomes too complicated to manage. Darling and Fogliasso (1999) concluded that it is impossible to eliminate conflict totally. Managers who try to eliminate conflict will not last, while those who manage it well typically experience both institutional benefit and personal satisfaction.

**Pitfalls to avoid during conflict resolution**

When resolving conflicts, the following should be avoided:

·      Avoid being defensive

·      Avoid generalizations when addressing complaints

·      Avoid being a poor listener

·      Avoid attacker characters

·      Avoid trying to win the argument

·      Avoid disrespect

**Conclusion**

This study has reviewed and analyzed conflict management. Since conflicts are inevitable in any business organization, it is imperative that managers acquire the necessary managerial skills needed to effectively tackle and address conflicts. This will go a long way in ensuring that the benefits of conflicts are achieved and not the reverse.

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