Conflict Management and Negotiation

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ABSTRACT: Within organizations, conflicts occur at different levels and their management and resolution are one of the important issues that need a lot of time and energy on the part of managers. On the other hand, in current management conditions, the occurrence of conflicts is an inevitable organizational fact and it is the managers who should undertake to manage organizations toward sustainability and progress. Therefore, managers must have efficient information and knowledge about how to deal with conflicts. According to new approaches to organization and management, conflict is inevitable and a certain level of conflict is inexorable for organizational effectiveness. Due to its nature, an organization is fertile ground for the growth and development of conflicts and disagreements. Negotiation is one of the techniques that a manager can use. The basis for dealing with conflicts is to remember that not all conflicts are destructive; rather, sometimes they are very useful and constructive. Thus, this article addresses the concept of conflict and its different types, methods of conflict management, techniques and strategies of conflict resolution - especially negotiation techniques - and finally, the role of negotiation in resolving conflicts.

Keywords: Management, Conflict, Negotiation

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Today, management experts believe that manpower is the main asset of organizations and a competitive advantage and that healthy relationships among valuable human resources based on cooperation and empathy are one of the most important factors for the success of all organizations including industrial, office, service, training and other organizations. On the other hand, due to the growing complexity of organizations and differences in ideas, attitudes and beliefs of individuals, conflict is considered an inevitable part of organizational life nowadays. The important point is that the inevitability of conflict is not a reason for its being adverse, rather if conflict is well managed, it can be beneficial for the organization. Hence, no doubt the ability to manage and control the phenomenon of conflict in organizations is among the most important management skills that today’s managers need.

What is conflict?

Conflict occurs when, in a social situation, there is disagreement on major issues or there is emotional antagonism that causes friction between individuals or groups. Managers spend up to 20 percent of their time to resolve conflicts: This includes the conflicts that the manager is directly involved in as one of the main parties. In other situations, managers may play the role of a mediator or a third party to eliminate the conflict between involved individuals. There are two common examples of conflict in the workplace: 1) Disagreement with the head of the project about the activities that are to be pursued, and, 2) Hatred of a colleague.

The former is the type of conflict that occurs often in the form of a fundamental disagreement in a group on the objectives of the work and the means to carry them out, and the latter is the emotional type of conflict which is related to problems among individuals. Emotional conflicts will destroy the energy of the individuals and distract them from work priorities.

Superior-subordinate conflict is the most distressing type of conflict for the individuals involved (Schermerhorn, 1999). Conflicts have two aspects: one destructive, the other constructive. Constructive conflicts have positive results for the he group or organization, such as improving the function or creativity. While, destructive
conflicts reduce efficiency and job satisfaction to the detriment of the organization or group. They even sometimes result in absenteeism and the high cost of staff replacement. An effective manager is able to detect the following conflict situations and to deal with it (Schermerhorn, 1999).

**Conflict Situations**

**Vertical Conflict**: occurs between different levels of the hierarchy and usually involves superior-subordinate disagreement over resources, objectives, due dates and performance results.

**Horizontal Conflict**: occurs between individuals or groups in the same organizational level and usually include a lack of consistency and compatibility over the objectives of the scarcity of resources and factors related to the relationships of individuals.

**Line and Staff Conflict**: occurs between the members of Line and Staff and usually involves disagreements over who controls and decides about specific issues such as personnel selection or measures related to the termination of service.

**Role Conflict**: occurs when job expectations are unclear, incomplete or distressing and typically involves suspicious expectations, high or low expectations or no expectation adjustment.

The term conflict refers to the interaction of individuals who interrelate with each other but disagree in the context of major or minor goals and values. This definition emphasizes three characteristics: interaction between individuals, interdependence, and incompatible goals (Robins, 1998).

**Types of Conflict**

**Institutionalized conflicts**: This type of conflict results from the specific nature of the goals and objectives of the organization. Conflict between the organization’s and the employee’s interests and goals is an institutionalized conflict.

**Emergent conflicts**

Another form of conflict that results from formal and informal interactions in everyday work. This type of conflict may be caused by competition for organizational resources between individuals. Both conflicts are challenging with the difference that institutionalized conflicts are predictable and strong while emergent conflicts are potential and less predictable (Kiakajoori, 2004).

**Levels of Conflict**

**Intrapersonal conflicts**

This type of conflict within the organization appears in two forms:

- **Frustration**: This is the simplest type of intrapersonal conflict and occurs when the individual confronts an obstacle and loses his/her ability on the track to reach the target.
- **Conflict in target**: This is a more complex type of intrapersonal conflict and can be divided into three types:
  - **Demand-demand conflict**: Individuals try to choose between two desired targets.
  - **Avoidance-avoidance conflict**: Individuals have to choose between a desired target and an undesirable one.
  - **Demand-avoidance conflict**: This type of conflict occurs when the individual has positive and negative feelings toward the target at the same time because the target has positive and desirable features besides negative characteristics.

**Intergroup conflicts**

The second level of organizational conflict is interpersonal conflict that typically occurs between individuals or between an individual and a group.

**Intergroup conflicts**

This type of conflict, which is to be discussed in the articles, begins when a class or a group deems that another group leaves or is going to leave a negative impact on the group (Kabiri, 1995).

**Initial conditions resulting in conflicts within and between groups**

- **Competition for benefits**: Today’s organizations have limited resources and the groups within organizations compete for this limited amount of resources.
- **Interrelated tasks**: If two groups are mutually interdependent in an organization, more conflict will arise than when the two groups are independent of each other. The more diverse the objectives, priorities and staff in interdependent groups, the more the conflict.
Ambiguity in legal authority: This may involve deeply-rooted problems or an overlap of responsibilities.

Position conflicts: When a group tries to raise its position but another group sees it as a threat to its own position in the authorial hierarchy, conflicts arise.

Inter-organizational conflicts: occur because of disagreement between two or more organizations and stem from the fact that they share rare resources for operating or the fact that they have different values, objectives, situations or perceptions (Rezaeian, 2003).

**The evolution of conflict theory**

It is perhaps reasonable to say that the existence of conflict is because of the conflict that exists in the roles assumed by different groups and organizations. There are three approaches toward the evolutionary concept of conflict: 1 - In one of the schools of thought, it is argued that conflict must be avoided because it causes the destruction of the group. This is the traditional view. 2 - Another school of thought is related to the human relationships approach; that is if conflict is viewed from this perspective, it will be the natural and unavoidable result that occurs in the group and is not necessarily harmful or destructive; rather it can be a creative, positive and constructive force for the function of the group. 3 - The third view - which has recently been proposed - suggests that conflict is a positive force and can improve the performance of the groups and organization. This school of thought is called the interaction school -- interaction and understanding between two people or two systems (Robbins, 1994).

**The stages of conflict**

There are five stages in the process of conflict: potential disagreements, identification, purpose or intention (to act), action and results.

**Stage one: Potential disagreements**

The first phase in the process of conflict is the conditions that provide the context of the conflict. These conditions do not necessarily lead to conflict; however, the presence of at least one of them is necessary for the emergence of conflict.

**Stage two: The emergence of conflict**

If the conditions that we mentioned in the first stage cause desperation, then in the second stage, the context is provided for the raising of objections. These conditions will lead to a conflict only if several groups are exposed to the conflict phenomenon.

**Stage three: Purpose or intention**

The purpose or intention of acting is the distance between individual thought and feeling on the one hand and overt behavior on the other. Here, purpose or intention means the decision to act in a specific, defined manner.

**Stage four: Action**

When most people think about conflict or disagreement, they think of the fourth stage, but why? It is because this is where the conflict emerges. The action phase includes: the expression of dissent, action and reaction that the opposing sides show.

**STAGE FIVE: RESULTS**

Action and reaction between opposing sides lead to some results. These results can be either productive - that is, the conflict may improve group performance - or destructive, so that the function of the group will fail (Izadi Yazdanabadi, 2000).

**Conflict is constructive when it**

explains and clarifies the problems.
contributes to solving the problems.
gets individuals involved in resolving matters that are important to them.
contributes to communication.
helps individuals to develop understanding and skills.
creates a sense of cooperation among individuals by helping them to get to know more about each other.
And conflict is destructive when it
undermines self-esteem.
distracts attention away from important activities.
polarizes individuals and reduces cooperation.
leads to harmful and irresponsible behavior (Erfurt, 2002).

The concept of conflict management and its necessity
Conflict management is the process of planning to avoid conflict where it may occur and
the process of organizing for conflict resolution where it is occurring (Oslocom, 2002). One of the main goals of
conflict management is to achieve conflict resolution or to arrange for it; that is, a situation in which the main causes
of conflict are excluded. Conflict occurs when two or more individuals confront one another because they have
different needs, desires, goals, and values (Tommy, 1999). The important point here is that although conflict is
inevitable because of difference in goals, values, beliefs, and ideas, it can be managed, minimized and resolved
(Erfurt, 2002). Therefore, the knowledge and awareness of conflict management skills seem to be necessary (Åland
Islands Peace Institute, 2002).

Conflict management and its styles
As mentioned, conflict management is the method that drives organizational conflicts toward
organizational objectives and diminishes its non-functional aspects while enhancing the functional aspects (Jones,
2000). Overall, there are five ways to react to conflict, referred to as conflict management styles, and usually each
person is dominant in one of these styles (Hurnang & Vertim, 2002). These styles can be specified on a chart: The
horizontal axis
represents personal goals, interests, and needs and the vertical axis represents the goals, interests and
needs of others. Different combinations of these two axes produce different conflict management styles (Axtin, 1998).
Here is a brief explanation of each of the styles:

Competition: The style in which an individual seeks his/her own goals and interests without paying attention
to others. Characteristics of this method include non-participation first and power-orientation second.
Acceptance (submission): In this style, an individual ignores his/her own interests and goals to achieve the
goals and satisfy the needs of others. An important feature of this method is devotion and seeking participation.
Avoidance: When an individual seeks neither his/her own interests and objectives nor those of the others,
and mostly tries to evade the conflict situation.
Cooperation: In this style, cooperation includes efforts to work with other people and to find a solution so that
the goals of both sides are realized. The main feature of this style is therefore seeking participation.
Compromise: The purpose of this style is to find acceptable measures for both parties that result in the partial
fulfillment of the goals and interests of both sides. This style is relatively participatory (Hurnang, 2002).
The remarkable thing is that none of these styles is rejected but each of them can be used for different
situations. The fine point of conflict management is the art of applying the appropriate style in its proper situation.
According to Maslow (1982), “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” (Quoted
by Axtin, 1998). If you tend to use one dominant style of conflict management, then you will confront major limitations
in the field. Therefore, you need to expand your utilization of other styles for this purpose (Hozoori, 1992).

Appropriate situations for the application of each conflict management style
Appropriate situations for the application of the Competition Style
When you are in need of immediate decisions.
When you know that you are right.
When quick and decisive action is critical

Appropriate situations for the application of the Acceptance Style
When something does not matter to you but for other people is very important.
Once you have understood that you were wrong.
When persistent competition is harmful and you know that you will not be the winner.
When harmony and stability are important.

Appropriate situations for the application of the Avoidance Style
When you do not have the time to deal with it.
When the context is not appropriate.  
When there are issues that are more important to you.  
When you have no chance to meet your demands.  
When the problem is trivial.  
When data collection replaces immediate decisions.  
When others can resolve the conflict in a more efficient way.

**Appropriate situations for the application of the Cooperation Style**  
When you do not want to take full responsibility.  
When there is a high level of confidence.  
When you want to obtain people’s commitment.  
When the aim is learning.

**Appropriate situations for the application of the Compromise Style**  
When the goals are important but are not worth the conflict.  
When the opposition parties have equal power.  
In order to achieve an interim agreement on complex issues.  
As an auxiliary solution when cooperation or competition is not successful.  
When there is time pressure and you need to achieve appropriate solutions (Hurnang, 2002).

**Conflict management techniques and strategies**

In the face of conflict, the first and the most important step is conflict analysis as some believe that conflict analysis is conflict resolution (Åland Islands Peace Institute, 2002).  
We need to answer three questions for conflict analysis:  
Who are the conflict parties? As mentioned before, conflict may occur between individuals, within individuals, between units and the like.  
What is the source of conflict? Conflict may result from a lack of resources, competition, incompatible goals, etc.  
What level is the conflict? Is it moderate? Or is it too high and does it demand immediate action? (Plunkett & Utner, 1997).  
After analyzing the conflict, it should be resolved. For this purpose, there are various methods some of which include:  
Negotiations: is one of the techniques for conflict resolution in which the two sides discuss different solutions in order to resolve the conflict and achieve a solution that is acceptable to both (Jones et al., 2000). Negotiation is a process of joint decision-making, when the parties involved have different desires and tastes. In other words, negotiation can be seen as a way to achieve what you want from others through the decision making process. Managers in particular should be prepared to negotiate in at least four situations (Robins, 1998).

**Types of negotiation situations**

Bilateral negotiation – the manager directly negotiates with another person.  
Group negotiation - the manager is a member of the team or group whose members negotiate with each other to reach a joint decision.  
Inter-group negotiation - the manager is a member of the group that negotiates with another group to decide over a problem or situation that affects both of them.  
Negotiation with the representatives of different domains: the manager participates in negotiations with other individuals and each of these individuals represents a large domain (Schermernhorn, 1999).  
Negotiation issues that are of special concern to managers include: understanding common obstacles in negotiation, communication difficulties in negotiation and discussion, and the ethical aspects of discussion. Negotiation process is undoubtedly complex and sometimes because of ambiguous individual and group dynamics, the complexity is even increased. Therefore, it is necessary that every negotiating individual be careful of the common mistakes (kabiri, 1995).

**How managers can manage conflicts efficiently**

Conflict management should follow the objective of conflict resolution (the situation where the factors led to a negative conflict)  
Indirect conflict management approaches include recourse to common goals, hierarchical referral and
organizational restructuring through building a buffer or mediating groups.

Direct conflict management styles include cooperation and problem solving (win - win), direct competition, or ordering (win - lose) and, avoidance and compromise (lose - lose).

**How do good managers handle negotiations?**

Managers should avoid the supposition that with the victory of one group, the other group should lose. They should also avoid conflict escalation by hurting the feelings of either parties or being insensitive to the needs of others.

Managers should raise questions about the subject of negotiation, actively listen to others and try to see things from the others’ viewpoints too.

Managers must act according to high ethical standards even when the negotiating parties express differing opinions and preferences (Robins, 1998).

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Conflict is inevitable in today’s personal and organizational life and appears in different forms including: interpersonal, interpersonal, intra-group, inter-group and inter-organizational. Despite the common negative perception of conflict, it is not necessarily a negative phenomenon and an average level of conflict could raise the performance level. What is important in the context of conflict is how to cope and deal with it. Generally, there are five methods referred to as conflict management styles. These include: competition, avoidance, acceptance, cooperation, and compromise. The important point is that none of these styles is rejected; rather, the proper handling style should be selected for the conflict situation. In addition, for conflict resolution, managers should first analyze it and then use various techniques that are used for conflict resolution such as negotiation, mediation and arbitration, and the like. Among these techniques, negotiation can help solving conflicts more effectively than the others and allows the manager to handle conflicts more efficiently. Since the manager participates in a joint decision-making process of negotiation to handle the conflict, he/ she will not be accused of favoring certain individuals or parties. In addition, there is an interactive dialogue between the two sides in negotiations and both sides can speak for the sake of their interests in the process and finally reach a joint, mutual decision. This, in a way, implies that if negotiations are implemented effectively and if ethical issues are observed in them, they can be more effective and more successful than the other methods of conflict resolution.

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