



Conflict Management

Arnab Ghosh

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Introduction to Conflict:

Conflict is difficult to define, because it occurs in many different settings. The essence of conflict seems to be disagreement, contradiction, or incompatibility. Thus, CONFLICT refers to any situation in which there are incompatible Goals, Cognitions, or Emotions within or between individuals or groups that lead to opposition or antagonistic interaction. The definition recognizes three basic types of conflict:

Goal conflict is situation in which desired end states or preferred outcomes appear to be incompatible.

Cognitive Conflict is a situation in which ideas or thoughts are inconsistent.

Affective Conflict is a situation in which feelings or emotions are incompatible; that is, people literally become angry with one another.

Conflict is very common in organizational settings. This is not necessarily a negative feature; the resolution of conflict often leads to constructive problem solving.

Conflict exists in many forms other than the form that can result from competition, and managers should understand the different ways of conflict resolution. Thus examines conflict from a variety of viewpoints. It first considers the positive and negative aspects of conflict. Next, it discusses the levels of conflict that can occur within organizations. Finally, it identifies some of the basic strategies for managing conflict.

Levels of Conflict

The five levels of conflict are intrapersonal (within an individual), interpersonal (between individuals), intragroup (within a group), intergroup (between groups), and intraorganizational (within organizations).

Intrapersonal Conflict

Intrapersonal Conflict, which occurs within an individual, often involves some form of goal conflict or cognitive conflict. Goal conflict exists for individuals when their behavior will result in outcomes that are mutually exclusive or have compatible elements (both positive and negative outcomes).

- Approach-approach conflict is a situation in which a person has a choice between two or more alternatives with positive outcomes; for example, a person can choose between two jobs that appear to be equally attractive.
- Avoidance - avoidance conflict is a situation in which a person must choose between two or more

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alternatives and they all have negative outcomes. For example, employees may be threatened with punishment in the form of demotion unless they do something they dislike spend much time travelling on their job, for example.

- Approach-avoidance conflict is a situation in which a person must decide whether to do something that had both positive and negative outcomes, for example, being offered a good job in a bad location.

Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflict involves two or more individuals rather than one individual. Two managers competing for the same promotion, two executives maneuvering for a larger share of corporate capital - examples of conflict between individuals are legion and quite familiar.

Reasons

1. **Personality differences:** Some people have difficulty in getting along with each other. This is purely a psychological problem and it has nothing to do with their job requirements or formal interactions.
2. **Perceptions:** Varied backgrounds, experiences, education and training result in individuals developing different perceptions of similar realities; the result being an increase in the likelihood of interpersonal conflict.
3. **Clashes of values and interests:** Conflict that so commonly develops between engineering and manufacturing personnel shows how differences in values might underlie conflict. Members of the engineering department might place a premium on quality, sophisticated design and durability while members of the manufacturing department might value simplicity and low manufacturing costs.
4. **Power and status differences:** As pointed out by Abraham Zelenznik "Organizations are political structures". They operate by distributing authority and setting a stage for the exercise of power. Similarly status inconsistencies lead to conflict.
5. **Scarce resource:** Interpersonal conflict is almost automatic anytime there is scarcity. Conflicts over scarce resources are exceedingly common in organizations. Where the scarcity is absolute (the resource level cannot be enhanced) it is very difficult to manage interpersonal conflicts. For example if three qualified individuals i.e. for superior positions in the organization and there is only one such position, interpersonal conflict may develop to an unmanageable level.

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Intragroup Conflict

A group experiencing intragroup conflict may eventually resolve it, allowing the group to reach a consensus. Or the group may not resolve the conflict, and the group discussion may end in disagreement among the members. A study of a large number of groups engaged in business and governmental decision making, tried to identify some the conditions that lead to (1) the successful resolution of conflict (consensus or (2) the failure to resolve conflict (disagreement). This study showed that conflict within groups is not a simple, single phenomenon. Instead, intragroup conflict seems to fall into two distinct categories:

- (1) substantive conflict and
- (2) affective conflict.

Substantive conflict refers to conflict based on the nature of the task or to "content" issues. It is associated with intellectual disagreements among the group members. In contrast, affective conflict derives primarily from the group's interpersonal relations. It is associated with emotional responses aroused during interpersonal clashes.

Inter-Group Conflict

An organization is a collection of individuals and groups. As the situation and requirements demand, the individuals form various groups. The success of the organization as a whole depends upon the harmonial relations among all interdependent groups, even though some intergroup conflicts in organizations are inevitable. The idea is to study intergroup behaviors within an organization so that any conflict can be recognized and dealt with by the management.

Intra-Organizational Conflict

Four types of intra-organizational conflict exist:

- (1) vertical conflict
- (2) horizontal conflict
- (3) linestaff conflict and
- (4) role conflict. Although these types of conflict can overlap, especially with role conflict, each has distinctive characteristics.

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Vertical Conflict: Vertical conflict refers to any conflict between levels in an organization; superiorsubordinate conflict is one example. Vertical conflicts usually arise because superiors attempt to control subordinates and subordinates.

Horizontal Conflict: Horizontal Conflict refers to conflict between employees or departments as the same hierarchical level in an organization.

Line-Staff Conflict: Most organizations have staff departments to assist the line departments. The line-staff relationship frequently involves conflict. Staff managers and line managers typically have different personal characteristics. Staff employees tend to have a higher level of education, come from different backgrounds, and are younger than line employees. These different personal characteristics are frequently associated with different values and beliefs, and the surfacing of these different values tends to create conflict.

Role Conflict

A role is the cluster of activities that others expect individuals to perform in their position. A role frequently involves conflict.

Managing Conflict

Except in very few situations where the conflict can lead to competition and creativity so that in such situations the conflict can be encouraged, in all other cases where conflict is destructive in nature, it should be resolved as soon after it has developed as possible, but all efforts should be made to prevent it from developing.

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Preventing conflict

Some of the preventive measures that the management can take, according to Schein are:

a) Goal structure: Goals should be clearly defined and the role and contribution of each unit towards the organizational goal must be clearly identified. All units and the individuals in these units must be aware of the importance of their role and such importance must be fully recognized.

b) Reward System: The compensation system should be such that it does not create individual competition or conflict within the unit. It should be appropriate and proportionate to the group effort and reflect the degree of interdependence among units where necessary.

c) Trust and communication: The greater the trust among the members of unit, the more honest and open the communication among them would be. Individuals and units should be encouraged to communicate openly with each other so that they can all understand each other, understand each other's problems and help each other when necessary.

d) Co-ordination: Co-ordination is the next step to communication. Properly co-ordinated activities reduce conflict. Wherever there are problems in co-ordination, a special liaison office should be established to assist such co-ordination.

Resolving Behavioral Conflict

Various researchers have identified five primary strategies for dealing with and reducing the impact of behavioral conflict. Even though different authors have given different terminology to describe these strategies, the basic content and approach of these strategies remain the same. These are:

1. Ignoring the conflict. In certain situations, it may be advisable to take a passive role and avoid

it all together. From the manager's point of view, it may be specially necessary when getting involved in a situation would provoke further controversy or when conflict is so trivial in nature that it would not be worth the manager's time to get involved and try to solve it. It could also be that the conflict is so fundamental to the position of the parties involved that it may be best either to leave it to them to solve it or to let events take their own course. The parties involved in the conflict may themselves prefer to avoid conflict, especially if they are emotionally upset by the tension and frustration created by it. People may intrinsically believe that conflict is fundamentally evil and its final consequences are never good. Thus people may try to get away from conflict causing situations.

2. Smoothing: Smoothing simply means covering up the conflict by appealing for the need for unity rather than addressing the issue of conflict itself. An individual with internal conflict may

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try to “count his blessings” and forget about the conflict. If two parties have a conflict within the organization, the supervisor may try to calm things down by being understanding and supportive to both parties and appealing them for co-operation. The supervisor does not ignore or withdraw from the conflict nor does he try to address and solve the conflict but expresses hope that “everything will work out for the best of all.” Since the problem is never addressed, the emotions may build up further and suddenly explode. Thus smoothing provides only a temporary solution and conflict may resurface again in the course of time. Smoothing is more sensitive approach than avoiding in that as long as the parties agree that not showing conflict has more benefits than showing conflicts, the conflict can be avoided.

3. Compromising: A compromise in the conflict is reached by balancing the demands of the conflicting parties and bargaining in a give and take position to reach a solution. Each party gives up something and also gains something. The technique of conflict resolution is very common in negotiations between the labour unions and management. It has become customary for the union to ask for more than what they are willing to accept and for management to offer less than what they are willing to give in the initial stages. Then through the process of negotiating and bargaining, mostly in the presence of arbitrators, they reach a solution by compromising. This type of compromise is known as integrative bargaining in which both sides win in a way. Compromising is a useful technique, particularly when two parties have relatively equal power, thus no party can force its viewpoints on the other and the only solution is to compromise. It is also useful when there are time constraints. If the problems are complex and many faceted, and the time is limited to solve them, it might be in the interest of conflicting parties to reach a compromise.

4. Forcing: As Webber puts it, “the simplest conceivable resolution is the elimination of the other party – to force opponents to flee and give up the fight – or slay them.” This is technique of domination where the dominator has the power and authority to enforce his own views over the opposing conflicting party. This technique is potentially effective in situations such as a president of a company firing a manager because he is considered as a trouble-maker and conflict creator. This technique always ends up in one party being a loser and the other party being a clear winner. Many professors in colleges and universities have lost promotions and tenured re-appointments because they could not get along well with their respective chairpersons of the departments and had conflicts with them. This approach causes resentment and hostility and can backfire. Accordingly, management must look for better alternatives, if these become available.

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5. Problem solving: This technique involves “confronting the conflict” in order to seek the best solution to the problem. This approach objectively assumes that in all organizations, no matter how well they are managed, there will be differences of opinions which must be resolved through discussions and respect for differing viewpoints. In general, this technique is very useful in resolving conflicts arising out of semantic misunderstandings. It is not so effective in resolving non-communicative types of conflicts such as those that are based on differing value systems, where it may even intensify differences and disagreements. In the long run, however, it is better to solve conflicts and take such preventive measures that would reduce the likelihood of such conflicts surfacing again.

If there is a single contributory factor that helps in reducing and eliminating negative conflict, it is "trust". Our ability to trust each other has great impact on our working lives, on our family interactions and our achievement of personal and organizational goals. In order to create trust and be trustworthy, it is necessary to avoid aggressive behaviors and at the same time develop supportive behaviors where people are respected for what they are or what they believe in and are treated equally without bias or prejudice. In case, a conflict develops at any level, it should be resolved with mutual benefit in mind.