Creative Strategies for Managing Conflicts at Work

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ABSTRACT: Throughout the centuries, conflict has been observed as everyday phenomenon in private and working spheres of human activity. In modern times conflict when managed properly and carefully can become the most important tool in the development of organization. This study examines conflict management strategies in organizations, with an aim to determine the reasons underlying it, its sources, its handling styles, as well as the individual characteristics affecting the choice of conflict resolution style. The study, based on the literature review of some published works, reveals that although all conflict management styles are used within organization; the most frequently used conflict handling style among world population is compromising, as people's approval tend to compromise toward group mean. The work concludes that nobody can be characterized as showing a single inflexible style of dealing with conflict; that one's choice of a conflict management style is a function of the specific situation and one's basic orientation of behavioural disposition towards conflict. It therefore recommends that administrators must take it as a task to accept conflict evaluation as part of their role and develop creative abilities that are necessary to deal with it. Hence managers should ascertain the presence of conflict, its basic sources, the level of intensity and the ways of furthering the objectives of conflict resolution.

Key words: Conflict, organization, management strategies

Introduction:

Conflict is natural in everyday phenomenon in all private and working spheres.

It is an unavoidable component of human activity that may be viewed as a situation in which the concern of two or more individuals appear to be incompatible (Darling and Fagliasso,1990) and which tends to occur when individuals or groups perceive that others are preventing them from attaining their goals. It is an interactive process manifested in incompatibility,

disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities, that is, individual, group or organization (Ratim, 2000). In the 1930s, and 1940s, conflict was viewed as undesirable phenomenon. However, that traditional viewpoint of conflict gave way to the behavioural viewpoint of the 1960s in which conflict is seen as an inevitable fact of organizational life to be recognized and addressed

(Jones and White, 1985), and the contemporary integrationist viewpoint, in which conflict is viewed as potentially useful to energize a company, point out

problems and unify a group (Banner, 1985). Some managers and employees view conflict as negative and something to be avoided at all costs or immediately resolved (Darking and Fasliasso, 1999). Should this be the situation? Conflict today is not considered to be a creative force for the business and the individual, because if we regard differences of opinion as valuable

source of cross-fertilization, they begin to enrich our experiences. Managed in a positive fashion, because difficult situations and relationships are said to be ones that make people grow, conflict presents exciting possibilities about the future (Nina and Sanja, 2009). Today every successful management depends heavily on an ability to handle conflict effectively as observed by Ministers (1975). Moreover, it is important to note that managers are no longer the only ones

who need to shine their conflict resolution skills. The popularity of teamwork, increased market competition, globalization, resource shortages, more rapid business peace, changes in technology, job insecurity, and frequent restructuring processes, made efficient conflict management skill essential at all organizational instances. In order for someone to function effectively at any level within organizations, conflict management skills become important prerequisites (Nina and Sanja, 2006). Organizations worldwide are plagued with conflict and industrial unrest.

DEVELOPING CONFLICT LITERACY

To manage conflict effectively, an organization needs to develop a common language that helps people think effectively and communicate clearly about conflict and its management. The foundation of this language is a useful definition of conflict and a set of alternative ways of dealing with it.

What is conflict?

People often think of conflict as fighting. It's important to realize that fighting is only one way of dealing with conflict. Many experts in human Resource management have given several definitions of conflict in journals, textbooks and other academic /professional papers. According to follet (1940), conflict is an appearance of differences in operations interest.   A more useful definition of conflict is the condition in which people's concerns appear to be incompatible. A concern is anything people care about. In an organization, people's concerns might centre around such things as deciding how to allocate resources, determining what facts bear on an issue, and supporting different strategies.

Introducing the Conflict-Handling Modes

When people find themselves in conflict, their behaviour can be described in terms of where it lies along two independent dimensions—assertiveness and cooperativeness.

Assertiveness: Is the degree to which you try to satisfy your own concerns, and **Cooperativeness:**

Is the degree to which you try to satisfy the other person's concerns. The figure below shows the main choices you have

in a conflict—the conflict-handling modes

THE NATURE OF CONFLICTS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Conflict is any situation in which incompatible goals, attitudes, emotions, or behaviours lead to disagreement or opposition between two or more parties. Most organizational members will admit that conflict is inevitable, and that not all conflict is negative. Studies have confirmed that individuals typically avoid conflict. Other studies have revealed that even when the "devil's advocate" provides creative, innovative ideas, he or she is the first individual to deselect from groups.

Importance of Conflict Management Skills for the Manager

Estimates suggest that managers spend about 21 percent of their time dealing with conflict. Conflict management skills are a major predictor of managerial success and are related to emotional intelligence. Stimulating functional conflict can result in better decisions and more innovative thinking.

Functional versus Dysfunctional Conflict

➢**Functional conflict:** Is healthy, constructive disagreement between two or more individuals. By contrast,

➢ **Dysfunctional conflict:** Is a destructive disagreement. Many of the high-profile conflict situations are examples of dysfunctional conflict.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATIONS

Conflict causes are categorized into structural factors and personal   factors.

a.   Structural Factors

Structural factors include specialization, interdependence, common   resources, goal

differences, authority relationships, status inconsistencies, and jurisdictional ambiguities.

Jurisdictional ambiguity: Refers to unclear lines of responsibility in an organization. Such ambiguities may increase with team and groupwork, when conflict arises from confusion over group responsibilities.

b. **Personal Factors**

Personal factors include skills and abilities, personalities, perceptions, values and ethics, emotions, communication barriers and cultural differences. Communication barriers can be physical or value-related.

GLOBALIZATION AND CONFLICT

Hofstede's cultural differences study is useful analyzing conflict approaches globally. Cultures high in individualism, like the United States, would have a natural conflict tendency with countries that are more collectivism-oriented. Even within countries, cultures have distinct differences. Research shows that some ethnic groups in the United States are more willing to cooperate than compete, which would resemble collectivist traditions.

FORMS OF CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations can have several forms of conflicts, such as inter organizational, intergroup, interpersonal, and intrapersonal conflicts.

➢ **Inter organizational conflict:** occurs between two or more organizations. Competition can heighten this kind of conflict. The most straightforward example of this form of conflict might be a corporate takeover attempt.

➢ **Intergroup conflict**: occurs between groups or teams. It can have both positive and negative effects within each group.

➢ **Intragroup conflict:** occurs within groups or teams. Functional intragroup conflict can help groups avoid groupthink.

➢ **Interpersonal conflict:** occurs between two or more individuals. The conflict varies with the power relationships among individuals.

➢ **Intrapersonal conflict** occurs within an individual.

➢ **Interrole conflict** occurs when a person experiences conflict among the multiple roles in his or her life.

➢ **Intrarole conflict** is conflict about how to perform a single role.

➢**Person–role conflict** occurs when an individual in a particular role is expected to perform behaviors that clash with his or her values.

INTRAPERSONAL CONFLICT

To avoid intrapersonal conflict (i.e., conflict within an individual), individuals should learn as much as they can about the values of the organization and they should utilize role analysis.

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

To manage interpersonal conflict, it is helpful to understand power networks in organizations, defense mechanisms exhibited by individuals, and ways to cope with difficult people.

Power relationships include equal versus equal (a horizontal balance of power), high versus low (powerful versus less powerful), and high versus middle versus low (conflicts typically felt by middle managers).

Defense Mechanisms

Over fifty percent of responses to criticism are defensive. Defense mechanisms are common reactions to frustration associated with conflict. They are categorized as aggressive (fixation, displacement, negativism), compromise (compensation, identification, rationalization), and withdrawal (flight, conversion, fantasy) mechanisms.

Fixation refers to a situation in which an individual continues a dysfunctional behavior that obviously will not resolve the conflict.

Displacement means directing anger toward someone who is not the source of the conflict. **Negativism** is active or passive resistance.

Compensation occurs when an individual tries to make up for an inadequacy by putting increased energy into another activity.

Identification occurs when one individual patterns his or her behavior after another's.

Rationalization is trying to justify one's behavior by constructing bogus reasons for it.

Flight is the act of physically escaping a conflict, while **withdrawal** involves psychological escape.

Conversion is a process whereby emotional conflicts become expressed in physical symptoms. **Fantasy** is an escape by daydreaming

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

Conflict may be managed through either cooperative or competitive strategies. One of the best known approaches to conflict management is the win–lose analogy. The cooperative (win–win) strategy is the most time consuming. The competitive approach (win–lose) often results in damage to both parties.

A.   **Ineffective Techniques**

Most individuals do not deal directly with conflict in the work situation. The **nonaction** approach is to do nothing, hoping that the conflict will disappear. **Secrecy**, or trying to keep a conflict out of view of most people, only creates suspicion.

Administrating orbiting is delaying action on a conflict by buying time. **Due process nonaction** is a procedure that is set up to address conflicts that is so costly and time consuming, or even personally risky, that no one will use this avenue.

Character assassination is attempting to label or discredit one's opponent.

Effective Techniques

Effective techniques include appealing to super ordinate goals, expanding resources, changing

personnel, changing structure, and confronting and negotiating.

A **super ordinate goal** is an organizational goal that is more important to both parties in a conflict than their individual or group goals.

Expanding resources simply means providing additional resources in situations where resources are scarce.

Changing personnel may be appropriate when conflict is prolonged and severe.

Changing structure can occur through the creation of an integrator, or liaison, role or by implementing cross-functional teams.

Negotiation is a joint process of finding a mutually acceptable solution to a complex conflict.

Distributive bargaining is an approach in which the goals of one party are in direct conflict with the goals of the other party.

Integrative negotiation is an approach in which the parties' goals are not seen as mutually exclusive and in which the focus is on making it possible for both sides to achieve their objectives.

SUMMARY

Obawusi,(2006) summarized some nature in the tertiary institution as:

➢ Conflict between management and staff over rewards salaries, allowances, promotion etc.

➢ Conflicts over recruitment, dismissal, training and award of punishment

➢ Conflicts over reconstitution of the committee and their membership as well terms of reference.

➢ Conflicts over the use of double standard by the chief Executives on issues that have sound antecedents and precedents.

➢ Conflict over the allocation of duties to others.

➢ Conflicts over redeployment of officers

➢ Conflict over the activities of students union and their approach to issues

➤ Conflicts over of the activities of students unions

➤ Conflict over allocation and utilization of the available resources

➤ Conflict over individual growth in the system.

➤ Conflict over tenure of appointment and associated benefits.

➤ Conflict over managerial incapability of staff.

➤ Conflict over inadequacy of financial resources and means of acquiring more.

➤ Conflict between the governing council and other government agencies.

➤ Conflict over the ineffective communication channels in the system .

➤ Conflict over the executive conspiracy at some stages of policy making and implementation.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored five key elements of a strategy for making conflict management a core competency in an organization: developing conflict literacy, measuring conflict styles, building conflict management skills, involving top management, and using conflict-focused team building and intervention.

These elements can be applied in a flexible manner, so that they can be adapted to the special conditions and needs of a given organization. Organizations can focus these elements on issues that have a special priority for them, such as innovation, retention, and productivity. They can introduce them in ways that fit their culture and overall strategy. They can also combine them with other

training and team-building initiatives that are already under way. However they are introduced, these elements provide powerful concepts, skills, data, personal and group insights, and constructive norms that can make conflict management a strategic advantage for an organization—with resulting improvements in productivity, decision making, and retention.

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