

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS: A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Conflict is a universal organization process viewed by many people as unpleasant, while very few people believed to improve effectiveness in terms of individual or group contribution in the organization, depending how properly managed is the process considering the nature, quality and amount of resources at the organization's disposal. Therefore, this paper intends to review relevant literature to provide a conceptual perspective on conflict management as an instrument for organizational effectiveness, so as to assist managers, team leaders and individuals to be tactical in the way they handle conflict either at personal or interpersonal level such that different opinions, values, goals and expectations are harmonized for the accomplishment of general organizational objective.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict Management, Instrument, Organization, Organizational Effectiveness.

Introduction

Conflict literally weakens the ability of the individuals, group or organization to work together for the achievement of overall objective (Pondy, 1967); because many tagged it as unpleasant (Wall & Callister, 1995), but when properly managed, improves decision quality and group effectiveness (Amason, 1996). Conflict distorts organizational effectiveness considering the nature, quality and amount of resources at its disposal; thus the need for managers to be tactical in the way they handle conflict within their organizations such that different opinions and interests are harmonized to show how important every member of the organization is, so as to avoid unnecessary slowdown of work, cutting production, wastage, sabotage, loss and violence (Alabi, 2002).

Though the critical issue appears to be not conflict itself but rather how it is managed. In the words of Robbins and Judge (2013) conflict management is the use of resolution and stimulation techniques to achieve the desired level of conflict that supports peaceful coexistence and understanding in pursuing common objective which sustains effectiveness.

Thus, top management teams must maintain positive affective relationships among organizational members ([Amason, 1996](#)), and align role expectations with the type and pace of change in the environment to control organizational processes for effectiveness (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Recent studies have acknowledged the significant changes in the ways organizations manage conflict which have led to the development of strategies aimed at more efficient, less costly, and more satisfying resolution of conflict (Oni-Ojo, Iyiola & Osibanjo, 2014); hence this paper intends to review relevant literature to provide a conceptual perspective on conflict management as an instrument for organizational effectiveness.

Concept of Conflict

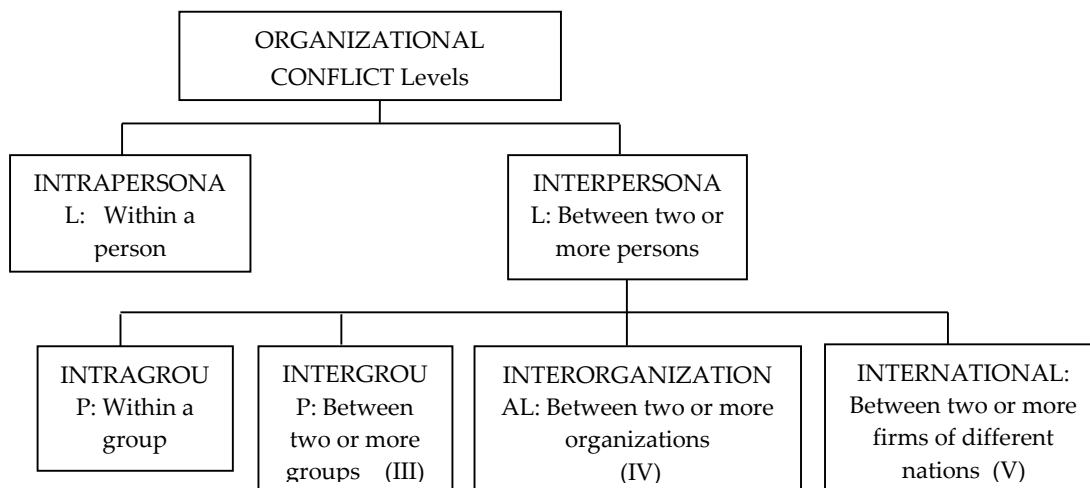
Rahim and Bonoma (1979) define conflict in terms of social process from three perspectives where one social entity perceives or is made to perceive that he (i) holds behavioral preferences, the satisfaction of which are incompatible with another person's implementation of his preferences, (ii) wants some mutually desirable resource which is in short supply, such that the wants of everyone may not be satisfied fully, or (iii) possesses values or attitudes which are salient in directing his behavior but which are perceived to be exclusive of the values or attitudes held by the other(s). Conflict has been with us for a long time and the organizational setup is not an exception because managers and shareholders disagree over such issues as the optimal size of the firm and the payment of cash to shareholders (Jensen, 1986), as rightly defined by Wall and Callister (1995) "conflict is a process in which one party perceives that its interests (activities, aims, values, and aspirations) are being opposed or negatively affected by another party." Its occurrence is said to be inevitable even in modern day organizations because of the diverse needs of different stakeholders (Wruck, 1990; Jehn, 1995; Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly & Konopaske, 2012). Given that organization is a collection of different people from different backgrounds and culture, such people may have difficulty working together effectively, even when they generally agree on goals and believe they should be working together; because conflict may develop primarily from people's normal attempts to cooperate or coordinate their efforts, that is, even when group members work on the same project, have mutual interests in completing it, and similar ideas of how to complete the project, they still may experience conflict (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Kabanoff, 1985 as cited in Jehn, 1997).

In summary, conflict can be viewed as a situation and a process. As a situation it occurs where one individual or group attempts to influence the goals and decision making of an organization to advance its own interests at the expense of some other individual or group (George & Jones, 2012). As a process it begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first party cares about as a result of incompatibility of goals, differences over interpretations of facts, disagreements based on behavioral expectations, and the like (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Though many researchers have viewed conflict as an interruptive experience, but Gibson et al. (2012) opine that conflict is inevitable in organizations because it can be both a positive and a negative force, and so management should not strive to eliminate all conflict, only that which has disruptive effects on the organization's efforts to achieve its goals.

Previous research has shown that whether conflict is beneficial or influence group performance depends on the conflict level in the organization ranging from intrapersonal to

interpersonal level involving intragroup, intergroup, interorganizational and international conflict (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Deutsch, 1990 as cited in Wall & Callister, 1995); the type of conflict and the structure of the organization in terms of task type, task interdependence, and group norms (Jehn, 1995); or the influence of social category diversity, value diversity, and informational diversity and two moderators – task type and task interdependence on workgroup outcomes (Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999). Given the inconsistency of factors that lead to beneficial conflict, many writers were seen supporting one view or the other as specified in Robbins and Judge (2013) that conflict must be avoided because it indicates a malfunctioning within the group (the traditional view), or that conflict is not only a positive force in a group but also an absolute necessity for a group to perform effectively (the interactionist view), and that instead of encouraging good or discouraging bad conflict, it is more important to resolve naturally occurring conflicts productively (the resolution-focused view or managed conflict view).

Levels of conflict in an organization



Source: Managing organizational conflict: A model for diagnosis and intervention, p.1324 by Rahim and Bonoma (1979); Conflict and Its Management, p. 516 by Wall and Callister (1995).

Types of Conflict

Pondy (1967) and Ejiogu (1990) unanimously agree on the following types of conflict that exists in an organization:

- i. bureaucratic conflict: originates due to hierarchy of positions (subordinate conflict, superordinate conflict, and lateral/peer conflict);
- ii. systems conflict: originates on the basis of the relationship between the objective state of affairs and the perceived state of affairs; and
- iii. bargaining or goal conflict: originates on the basis of antagonistic source (disagreement between cultural values and institutional expectations, role expectation and personality roles).

Jehn (1997) in his study titled “a qualitative analysis of conflict types and dimensions in organizational groups” identifies three types of conflict as follows (i) task conflict: focuses on

the content and the goals of the work or an awareness of differences in ideas, viewpoints and opinions about the task; (ii) process conflict: focuses on how the work gets done or an awareness of controversies about aspects of how task accomplishment will proceed as it pertains to issues of duty and resource delegation, such as who should do what and how much responsibility different people should get; and (iii) relationship conflict: focuses on interpersonal relationships or an awareness of interpersonal incompatibilities such as dislike, annoyance, frustration, and irritation. Thus, teams performing well were characterized by low but increasing levels of process conflict, low levels of relationship conflict, with a rise near project deadlines, and moderate levels of task conflict at the midpoint of group interaction (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Conflict Categorization

Amason (1996) opines the need to distinguish between which category of conflict is beneficial or detrimental to the organization existence, so as to avoid concluding that conflict, in general, produces inconsistent effects. Distinctively, research has shown that conflict can be categorized into two – functional conflict and dysfunctional conflict, where functional conflict degenerates into dysfunctional conflict if not managed appropriately (Oni-Ojo et al., 2014).

- i. Functional (cognitive) conflict: This is task oriented in nature as it relates to differences about how best to accomplish a given assignment.
- ii. Dysfunctional (affective) conflict: This relates to emotional and personal disputes, that is, where differences lead to disagreement or perceived as personal criticism to gain advantage at the expense of another such that avoidance or counter-production is the only resort available for members of the organization.

Causes of Conflict

The divergent descriptions on causes of conflict have since been condensed into three sources by Pondy (1967), after a thorough search of the literature: (i) competition for scarce resources; (ii) drives for autonomy; and (iii) divergence of subunit goals. However, previous research has expanded the scope, believing that conflict can be triggered based on conflict level (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979); when individuals or groups are furnished with incomplete information, unjust distribution of wealth across managers, creditors, and shareholders (Wruck, 1990); may also stem from the characteristics of each party (Wall & Callister, 1995); factors such as limited resources, differences in perception, autonomy drives, role conflict, and political and national issues (Alabi, 2002); or even trying to collaborate in attaining a common goal but have contrary opinions and beliefs about the best plan of action to pursue (Oni-Ojo et al., 2014). For more elaborating causes, the researcher was keen to summarize the causes of conflict as given by some researchers:

Rahim and Bonoma (1979) summarize the causes based on conflict level as follows:

- i. Intrapersonal: As a result of misassignment and goal incongruence, inappropriate demand on capacity, organization structure, supervisory style, and position.
- ii. Intragroup: As a result of leadership style, task structure, group composition and size, cohesiveness and groupthink, external threats, and outcome of conflict.
- iii. Intergroup: As a result of system differentiation, task interdependency, dependence on scarce resources, jurisdictional ambiguity, and separation of knowledge from authority.

Wall and Callister (1995) summarize the causes based on three characteristics as follows:

- a. Individual Characteristics: As a result of personality, values, goals, commitment to position, stress, anger, and desire for autonomy.
- b. Interpersonal Factors: As a result of certain characteristics involving two or more persons such as
 - i. *perceptual interface* which involve perception that other has high goals, other's intentions counter to party's fairness norms, other's behavior seen as harmful, distrust of other, misunderstanding;
 - ii. *communications* involving distortions and misunderstandings, hostility, dislikes, high goals, insults, intended distributive behavior; *behavior* involving reduction of party's (other's) outcomes, blocking party's goals, low interaction, power struggles;
 - iii. *structure* involving closeness, power imbalances, creation of interdependence, distributive relationship, status differences, preferential treatment of one side, symbols; and
 - iv. *previous interactions* involving past failures to reach agreement, past history of conflict, locked-in conflict behaviors, other results of conflict.
- c. Issues: As a result of complex vs. simple, multiple vs. few, vague vs. clear, principled, size, divisibility.

Oni-Ojo et al. (2014) summarize the causes based on the prevailing category of conflict:

- a. Functional conflict: Factors that trigger this category of conflict are -
 - i. Differences in opinions, personalities, knowledge, education, and experience;
 - ii. Natural results of diversity based on such characteristics as age, ethnicity, and gender;
 - iii. Project or process differences;
 - iv. Virtual and/or self-managed work teams; and
 - v. Rapid change.
- b. Dysfunctional conflict: The triggers of this category include -
 - i. Different work methods where employees have the same goal but different approaches to achieve the goal;
 - ii. Different goals that is inconsistent with each other;
 - iii. Differences in personalities where people annoy each other because of who they are or how they act;
 - iv. Biases that people have against different groups of people;
 - v. Issues, actions, or comments that cause stress;
 - vi. Different viewpoints or perspectives about various issues that may relate to people's upbringing, gender, age, or other such characteristics;
 - vii. Different levels of interpersonal skills and verbal and/or written communication capabilities;
 - viii. Competition for financial or other resources; and
 - ix. Unique subcultures that establish "us vs. them" situation.

Conflict Management

According to Rahim and Bonoma (1979) "the management of organizational conflicts involves diagnosis and intervention to maintain a moderate amount of conflict and help the organizational members learn various styles for effective handling of different conflict situations." The most pronounced styles include joint problem solving, persuasion, smoothing, domination, harsh words, arbitration (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). Research has shown that managing conflict could result into either of the following outcomes: a) integrative (with both sides benefiting), or b) distributive (with one side benefiting at the other's expense), and as such, with or without resolution, conflict can produce very negative residues like frustration, mutual distrust, lack of commitment and physical harm, most especially where resolution leads distributive outcome (Wall & Callister, 1995), which tends to be more virulent and destructive given its implications (Ofodile, 2011). This curtailment could be achieved through meaningful interactions and effective communication; and resourcefulness and resource management (Alabi, 2002).

Conflict Management Strategies

Rahim and Bonoma (1979) after interpolating the findings of other researchers finally described five (5) strategies that organization often apply in managing or resolving conflict but it is worth noticing that one strategy may be more appropriate than another depending upon the situation.

- i. Integrating/Problem-solving: This involves exchange of information and examination of differences to reach a solution acceptable to both parties.
- ii. Obliging/Smoothing: Associated with attempting to play down the differences and emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. This style is useful when a party believes that he may be wrong or the issue is much more important to the other party.
- iii. Dominating/Forcing: This strategy is identified as win-lose orientation or with forcing behavior to win one's position. It is suitable where decision by the boss, may be appropriate or a competing person goes all out to win his objective and, as a result, often ignores the needs and expectations of the other party.
- iv. Avoiding/Withdrawal: This is sidestepping situations, where a person fails to satisfy his own concern as well as the concern of the other party, that is, lose-lose situation.
- v. Compromising/Sharing: This is where both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision (no win/no lose situation). It is useful when the goals of the conflicting parties are mutually exclusive or when both parties are equally powerful, like in the case of labor and management.

Moore, Jayasundere and Thirunavukarasu (2011) in their quest for peaceful coexistence outline some procedural options for dispute resolution, where some options involve collaboration between people in dispute in order to preserve, restore or establish new positive relationships (these tend to be informal and voluntary in nature), while other options tend to be more formal and adversarial in nature, as each party presents its best case argument to a third party decision maker who is empowered to make a decision. The formal options usually result in win-lose or guilty or innocent outcomes, and rarely consider the importance or quality of the relationships between the parties or potential impacts the decision may have on

them in the future. To support the above assertion, Oni-Ojo et al. (2014) consider six (6) important stages or options used in resolving conflict, which include facilitation, conciliation, mediation, peer-review, arbitration, and negotiation.

Organizational Effectiveness

An effective organization is one that achieves its purpose by meeting the needs of its stakeholders, matching its resources to opportunities, adapting flexibly to environmental changes and creating a culture that promotes commitment, creativity, shared values and mutual trust (Armstrong, 2006). Organizational effectiveness is simply the sum of the contributions of all organizational members, that is, when the sum of individual contributions exceeds the simple summation of them or when organization does more work than is possible through individual effort. This organizational effectiveness is said to be triggered by factors like environment, technology, processes, structure, strategic choices, and culture (Gibson et al., 2012). Previous research has suggested that disagreements concerning the execution of routine tasks is detrimental to organizational effectiveness, but where the disagreements is on the execution of non-routine tasks, it tends to improve organizational effectiveness (Jehn, 1995); emotionality reduces effectiveness, resolution potential and acceptability norms increase effectiveness, because groups with norms that accept task but not relationship conflict are most effective (Jehn, 1997). This assertion was clearly supported by Armstrong, as accentuate one of those areas that need to be tackled to ensure effectiveness is the aspect of teamwork throughout the organization; with win/lose conflict well under control.

Organizational Effectiveness Approaches

Gibson et al. (2012) opine that differences in the definition of effectiveness are a reflection of one's adherence to any of the following approaches:

1. Goal approach: This approach defines effectiveness in terms of the accomplishment of recognized objectives through cooperative effort. The degree of accomplishment indicates the degree of effectiveness. The fundamental tenets of effectiveness rely on purposefulness, rationality, and achievement, even though some goals ordinarily are hard to measure, conflicting in nature, and often not followed.
2. Systems theory approach: This approach views an organization as comprising of parts that individually establish relationships with each other and that interact with their environment both as individuals and as a collective. This approach describes effectiveness in terms of identifying how the various parts (individuals, groups, structure, and processes) of organizations relate and interact with each other. It also stresses the organization's connection to the larger system of which it is a part. Every organization is part of an industry (a larger system), a society (a yet larger system), and, increasingly, a global economy (perhaps the largest system of all). Therefore, organizations must satisfy the demands that their actions contribute to viable environments by promoting clean air and water, and so on. It implies that, the organization cannot simply produce a product or service to satisfy its customers; it must also produce actions and behaviors to satisfy other important components of the larger environment, the larger systems.
3. Stakeholder approach: This approach means achieving balance among the various parts of the system by satisfying the interests of the organization's constituency (all those

individuals and groups of individuals who have a stake in the organization – employees, customers, shareholders, suppliers, creditors, government and competitors). Each of these individuals and groups of individuals expects the organization to behave in ways that benefit them; these expectations may or may not be compatible with those of other individuals and groups. This approach is of the opinion that an organization is effective to the extent that it satisfies the interest of the group controlling the most important resource.

Conflict Management as an Instrument for Organizational Effectiveness

Conflict management it involves matching the individual goals and role expectations with the needs of the task and role demand to optimize the individual and organizational goals; channeling the energies, expertise, and resources of group members toward the formulation and/or attainment of group goals; and channeling the energies, expertise, and resources of the members of conflicting groups for synergistic solutions to their common problems or attainment of over-all organizational goals (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). This by implication depicts consensus among team members to facilitate implementation of decisions made at the top level, middle level and lower level management of the organization, which in turn influences organizational performance (Amason, 1996). However, consensus should be more than just simple agreement, but instead allow participation of major players or all the aggrieved parties in settling gray areas where a no win or lose situation occurs to secure the cooperation of parties concerned for successful implementation of established objectives.

The cooperation encourages parties to express their views directly, listen open-mindedly, and accurately take each other's perspective so as to improve interpersonal attitudes and the beliefs that they can solve future problems together; and as such they understand each other and the opposing positions, to help team members develop trust in each other. Specifically, conflict management is very instrumental in ensuring organizational effectiveness in the following ways: reducing conflict increases productivity; the organization is less likely to have wrongful dismissal claims or human rights or other complaints; any received complaints can be resolved quicker and more effectively; conflict-related absenteeism rate decreases; management demonstrate commitment to employees and foster their trust and loyalty; and staff are accountable for their actions (Tjosvold, 1998; Williams, 2001).

Conclusion

Though previous studies have shown that, there is no specific method for identification, typology or classification of conflicts occurring within an organization; clear set of rules to suggest when conflicts ought to be maintained at a certain level, when reduced, and when ignored; and clear set of guidelines to suggest how intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts ought to be handled in different situations (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Nevertheless, every organization needs to understand the first step to resolving differences or disagreements is to recognize that conflict comes in at least two distinct but related forms (functional and dysfunctional) and that to address one while ignoring the other is to invite trouble (Amason, 1996). This is because conflict is an inherent feature of organization that demands quick handling, because any organization that fails to address conflict properly and timely is indirectly inviting problem which would serve as deterrent to organizational effectiveness.

Thus, managing conflict is an important aspect of managing organizational behavior so as to achieve effectiveness (Gibson et al., 2012). However, to attend effectiveness, competition within organization must be carefully checked especially where special benefit is attached to the required behaviour, leading to beneficial results or negative results. Organizational effectiveness through conflict management primarily begins with selecting managers and team leaders with well-developed leadership qualities; training them in leadership skills and in methods of resolving conflict and dealing with grievances; introducing better procedures for handling grievances and disciplinary problems, and training everyone in how to use them in order to move away from a one size fits all tactic for conflict to be managed effectively, resolved or eliminated to ensure organizational effectiveness through positive contribution (Armstrong, 2006; Oni-Ojo et al., 2014).

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