INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT: TO MANAGE OR NOT?

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Abstract:

Through this paper, I am intending to analyze and understand at least the importance, the functions, the nature and the outcomes of interpersonal conflict for organization in order to find out the answer to the question "why is important conflict to be managed?" Conflicts in itself is neither good or bad. Therefore, the key is how we understand and respond to the conflict. However, leaders must learn how to address and manage the conflict .Conflict can be healthy if it is managed efficiently. Managers should concentrate on building an atmosphere designed to reduce destructive conflict and deal with routine frictions and minor differences before they become unmanageable. They also should stimulate constructive conflict in order to encourage selfevaluation, creativity and innovation.

Key words: conflict, interpersonal, outcome, resolve, manage, stimulate.

1.Introduction

1.1 Definition of conflict

Hocker and Wilmot define 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.*"

This definition covers all types of conflicts and includes the triad perception, interaction and incompatibility.

Interpersonal conflict is a state of unresolved differences between individuals, an individual and a group, or two or more groups. It exists whenever people interact in some way to produce results or achieve goals because they differ however in many ways: attitude, personalities, values, goals, background, experience, etc.

The participants in a conflict establish the meaning of conflict with the results determined by the feelings, beliefs and values of those involved. Each of the parties involved in the difficulty desires something. Usually, those involved are frustrated because they cannot get what they believe they need or cannot give something they believe they should be able to give. It is also essential that the individuals to be involve into an interdependent relationship, where what one party does affects the other.

2.Why should be managed interpersonal conflict?

"*The potential for conflict exists whenever and wherever people have contact*"[2].The conflict isn't the problem, but when conflict is poorly managed that become the problem. Conflict is a crisis when it hampers output or decreases morale and when it causes more and ongoing conflicts or unsuitable behaviours.

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To be able to answer this question we need to analyze and understand at least the importance, the functions, the nature of conflict and the outcome for organization.

2.1 How important is conflict?

A conflict is important if it is essential for the function or survival of the organization. Therefore, the manager should be preoccupied about the conflict when the importance is big and it is compulsory for the outcome to lead to a beneficial solution to the organization.

2.2 The functions of conflicts

Conflicts can have many functions in organization. Among positive effects, it could be mentioned:
- Conflict establishes identity. Through conflict, people clearly define their positions on different issues.
- Conflict serves as a safety valve to maintain the unity of the group. Through conflict, individuals "let off steams", which increase the communication inside the group, leading to a better understanding.
- Conflict speed the needed change. The conflict resolution identifies the weak areas, which then hasten elimination of these problems.
- Conflict causes competition, which improve performance. Through conflict, individuals try to prove their competence.
- Conflict develops communication. The communication process improves because of the higher level of information exchanged and consequently a better level of understanding.
- Conflict ends non-productive associations. When differences of opinions or ideals are not addressed and resolved, the resulting association is useless for the organization.

2.3 The nature of conflict

From the perspective of the nature, the conflict can be essential (substantive) and affective. The difference between affective (relationship) and substantive (task) conflict is that affective conflict arises due to incompatibilities in feelings and/or emotions while substantive conflict is connected with incompatibilities in job duties and responsibilities of the conflicting parties.

In 1969, Deutsch come out with a view of conflict that remains a usable framework today. He stated that the negative or positive nature of conflict really is determined by individuals behaviors; it is not an intrinsic quality of conflict itself. Some behaviors lead to dysfunctional, destructive and unproductive effects; other behaviors have functional, constructive and productive outputs.

Behaviors that create and maintain a conflict until it seems to be self sustained are dysfunctional and destructive. Destructive conflicts may worsen sufficiently so that the conflict participants forget the substantive issues and convert their purposes into retaliation. In destructive conflict, no one is content with the outcome and at the end of one conflict the incident turned into the beginning of the next conflict--creating a degenerating or negative spiral. Destructive conflicts are more probably to occur when behaviors come from rigid, competitive systems.

Behaviors that are adaptive to the circumstances, persons and issues of the moment are functional and constructive. Many conflicts are a combination of competitive and

cooperative impulses. Constructive conflicts properly balance the interests of both parties to take advantage of the opportunities for mutual gains. Constructive conflicts contain an element of creative adaptation born from the fact that one should know both one's own and the other's interests and goals to be able to find a path both parties are willing to walk to discover a mutually acceptable outcome. Focusing on the process, not just the benefits one person desires is the answer to productive conflict management.

2.4 The outcome of conflict

Over the years, in the literature of organizational management, al least three distinct perspectives have evolved about conflict in organizations. The traditional view (dominant until the mid-1940s) assumes that conflict is bad, always has a negative impact, and leads to decreases in performance as the level of conflict increases. Conflict must therefore always be avoided. In this view, conflict is strongly associated with such terms as violence, destruction, and irrationality.

The reaction to conflict in the traditional view is to reduce, suppress, or eliminate it. The manager was responsible for freeing the organization of any conflict, often using an authoritarian style. Although that style worked sometimes, it was not generally effective; when they are suppressed, the root causes cannot be known, and the potentially positive aspects of conflict cannot emerge.

This traditional vision of conflict is still broadly spread especially in industry. This negative perspective of conflict played a role in the emergence and development of labor unions. Violent or disruptive confrontations between workers and administration led people to conclude that conflict is always damaging and should therefore be avoided.

The behavioral or contemporary theory, also known as the human relations view, has been developing starting with the late 1940s. From this perspective, conflict is normal and inevitable in all organizations and that it might have either a positive or a negative consequence, depending on how the conflict is handled. Performance of the entire organization may be enhanced with conflict, but only up to a certain stage, and then decline if conflict is allowed to increase further or is left up in the air. This approach advocates acceptance of conflict and rationalizes its existence. Because of the potential benefits from conflict, managers should focus on managing it successfully rather than suppressing or eliminating it.

The newest perspective, the interactionist view assumes that conflict is indispensable to increase performance.

While the behavioral perspective accepts conflict, the interactionist view encourages conflict based on the idea that a harmonious, peaceful, tranquil, too-cooperative organization is likely to become static, stagnant, and unable to respond to change and innovation. This approach encourages managers to stimulate and sustain an appropriate level of conflict—enough to keep structures self-critical, viable, creative, and innovative.

A synthesis of these theories regarding the usefulness of conflict is necessary. A realistic view of conflict is that it has productive as well as destructive potentials.

"Therefore, the functional and dysfunctional outcomes of conflict in organizations are as follows:
- *Functional outcomes:*
   • *Conflict might stimulate innovation, creativity, and growth.*
   • *Decision making process may be improved.*
   • *Alternative solutions to a problem could be found.*

• Conflict may lead to solutions to common problems.
• Individual and group performance may be enhanced.
• Individuals and groups may be forced to search for new approaches.
• Individuals and groups may be required to articulate and clarify their positions.
- *Dysfunctional outcomes:*
• Conflict may cause job stress, dissatisfaction, and exhaustion.
• Communication between individuals and groups may be reduced.
• A climate of distrust and suspicion can be developed.
• Relationships could be damaged.
• Job performance may be reduced.
• Resistance to change can increase.
• Organizational commitment and loyalty may be affected."[3]

Consequently, in order to benefit from a conflict the positive aspects of the conflict must be enhanced and the negative effects must be reduced.

Managers must not only be aware of well-known five interpersonal conflict resolution modes (integrating, obliging, avoiding, dominating and compromising) in order to choose the most appropriate approach but also manage conflict using some realistic guidelines that involve preparing for the conflict, planning it, facing it, and then resolving it. They must also recognize that it is sometimes good opportunity to stimulate constructive conflict in order to encourage self-evaluation, creativity and innovation. They must gain knowledge of how and when to kindle conflict and how to use it to increase the performance of organizations.

3. Conclusion

When members of any organization, interact during the course of completing their tasks and responsibilities, there is always a potential for conflict. In fact, it is almost impossible for people with diverse background, skills and norms to work together make decisions and try to meet goals and objectives without conflict.

To summarize, organizational conflict has both positive and negative consequences. Due to the bad consequences of it, interpersonal conflict must always be managed.

Unmanaged conflicts are linked with bad communication and are always leading to stress among organization, refusal to cooperate, disruption of workflow, distrust and even violence.

If a system is to benefit from conflict, the negative effects of conflict must be reduced and positive effects must be enhanced.

Managers must identify, analyze, and evaluate both positive and negative values of conflict and their effect on organization's performance. They must deal with the source of conflict; to resolve it permanently, they must address the cause of the conflict not just the symptoms of it.

They must learn how and when to stimulate conflict and how to use it to increase the overall performance. Attitudes and conflict management styles play an important role in determining whether such conflict will lead to destructive or mutually beneficial outcomes.

The whole notion of stimulating conflicts is difficult to accept probably because conflict, traditionally, has a bad connotation. Stimulating conflict is a proactive approach that requires initiative. Some individuals may be keen in pushing their ideas. Managers

should play devil's advocate in order to develop and clarify opposite points of view. These approaches should program conflict into process of planning, decision-making and risk analysis in order to make the conflict legitimate and acceptable.

References:

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