

Conflict in organisations

[Business](#), [Organization](#)



To what extent do you accept the view that conflict is an inevitable feature of management and organizational behaviour? Suggest how management can attempt to avoid the harmful effects of conflict.

Introduction All organizations, by their very nature, have built in conflicts. Conflict is seen as an inherent feature of organisations and induced, in part, by the very structure of the organisation. The causes might stem from individual characteristics, interpersonal factors, communications, behavior, structure and previous interactions. Conflict, per se, is not necessarily good or bad but an inevitable feature of organisational life and should be judged in terms of its effects on performance. Even if organisations have taken great care to try to avoid conflict it will still occur. Conflict will continue to emerge despite attempts by management to suppress it. " J Mullins Pge 490. A more recent view of conflict is the interactionist perspective, which believes that conflict is a positive force and necessary for effective performance.

This approach encourages a minimum level of conflict within the group in order to encourage self-criticism, change and innovation, and to help prevent apathy or too great a tolerance for harmony and the status quo.

Conflict Defined Conflict is defined as an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in any relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other (Fisher, 1990). The incompatibility or difference may exist in reality or may only be perceived by the parties involved.

Nonetheless, the opposing actions and the hostile emotions are very real hallmarks of human conflict.

Main Causes Of Conflict In Organisations

Differences in Goals: In an organisation, functional departments or sub units

become specialised or differentiated as they develop different goals, tasks and personnel. Although the overall organisational goal is agreed upon, such specialisation or differentiation leads to conflicts of interest or priorities.

For example in a firm involved in manufacturing certain products, the sales and marketing department might want low prices to attract more customers or to gain a bigger market whilst the production department might want higher prices on those products to meet the production cost. Limited resources: Competition for limited resources is also a factor for conflict. The classic example here is the normal budgetary requirements that usually exceed available funds. This is probably the most prevalent and familiar source of conflict at the TRB.

Departments request more than what the budget can sustain. For example, replacement of obsolete laboratory equipment by the analytical services Division against the refurbishment of the tobacco curing barns by the Field Services Division. Departments fight to get preference as Heads of Departments attempt to present their problems as the most pressing and urgent. Communication barriers: This arises when two individuals or groups are unable to express themselves, verbalize their needs, state their case adequately, provide logical and structured argument, or listen effectively.

Miscommunication and misunderstanding can create conflict even where there are no basic incompatibilities. Lack of communication skills often results in confusion, hurt and anger, all of which simply feed into the conflict process. Language barriers and socio-cultural backgrounds can inhibit the intended meaning of a particular message. Perception differences or differences in the value system: Parties may have different perceptions as to

what are the facts in a situation, and until they share information and clarify their perceptions, resolution is impossible.

Self-centeredness, selective perception, emotional bias, prejudices, etc. , are all forces that lead people to perceive situations very differently from the other party. Because of this perception variation, people tend to value reality differently. As perceptions become a person's reality, value judgements can be a potential source of conflict. Ambiguity – the ambiguous purposes and objectives, the imprecision in establishing tasks, authority and responsibility of some jobs and compartments, lack of clarity in transmitting decisions or the deformed presentation of reality are causes of conflict at TRB.

Management sets unclear policies. These can cause much argument, confusion and wasted resources. When rules and standards are also inequitably applied e. g. one set for management and another for the workers, the credibility of management regarding its value system can be significantly undermined. At TRB, the policy states that work starts at 0700hrs. Some managers adhere to this policy together with the bulk of the employees, but others do not. The earliest that they are seen at work is at 0745hrs. No action is taken against them, but if lower level would dare to do the same, they will suffer the consequences.

Interdependent work activities: Wherever the input to one process is dependent on the output from another before the finished product is complete, the potential for conflict is high. The Accounts Department at TRB depends on the stock take figures that the Business Development Department among other departments submit at the end of each month.

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How, BD personnel have their own priorities that occupy them. The BD team may not particularly be aware of Accounts' deadlines and as such the moment Accounts tries to hasten their stock take process, and a conflict arises.

Unclear job boundaries: These result in employee confusion and criticism of one another, as well as management, and are extremely counterproductive. Responsibility for tasks is abrogated and it becomes virtually impossible to determine accountability. There is Business development as a department and on the other hand there is a interdepartmental committee called the PR and Marketing Committee. The leaders of these two groups, the AGM Business Development and the PR and Marketing Chairperson (a Head of the PlantHealthservices Division) are always in conflict as they sometimes duplicate tasks often, using different methodologies.

Some tasks are left undone or imperfect because of the diffusion of responsibility. These causes show that management might be to blame for some of the conflicts emanating mainly from communications and structure but has nothing to do with the individual characteristics and previous interactions. There is affective conflict i. e. one which refers to inconsistencies in interpersonal relationships, which occurs where organizational members become aware that their feelings and emotions regarding some of the issues are incompatible. Members would end up focusing on reducing threats and increasing their power to the neglect of work productivity.

This has a negative effect on both organizational members and the organization itself. Members become resentful, negative, irritable and

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suspicious. Group performance and group loyalty are also impeded as the members are antagonistic to each other and have high levels of stress and anxiety (Rahim 2002). There is also substantive conflict i. e. where people disagree on their task or content issues. This occurs when there are disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions (Jehn 1995).

This has a positive effect on group performance if it is moderate as it stimulates discussions and debates which usually lead to more efficient ways of performing the tasks. Such debates lead to a better understanding of the issues resulting in more informed decisions. It has been found to be more effective among groups that are involved in non-routine tasks than in those carrying out standardized activities. However, like affective conflicts, they usually diminish group loyalty, job satisfaction, and workgroup commitment (Jehn 1995).

The challenge for management is to maintain a level of substantive conflict so as to increase group performance but reduce affective conflicts avoid job dissatisfaction. Negative Effects of Conflict The negative effects of conflict are that communication breaks down, individual needs are not heard or met, creativity is stagnated and relationships with others usually deteriorate. Therefore, organizations which don't encourage the effective resolution of conflict will usually have lower staff morale, strained relationships, higher levels of fear and tension among staff and lower productivity. This has a negative effect on both organizational members and the organization itself. Members become resentful, negative, irritable and suspicious. Group

performance and group loyalty are also impeded as the members are antagonistic to each other and have high levels of stress and anxiety (Rahim 2002). Management can attempt to resolve these harmful effects of conflict through the following methods and approaches. Effective Resolution of Conflict According to J. A. F. Stoner and R. E. Freeman, the three most frequently used conflict resolution methods are dominance or suppression, compromise and integrative problem solving.

The methods differ in the extent to which they yield effective creative solutions to conflict. There are various methods and approaches to conflict resolution but this paper shall evaluate the effectiveness of the above three methods under different approaches. Dominance and Suppression Method The dominance and suppression methods usually suppress conflict rather than settle it, by forcing it underground and they create a win-lose situation in which the loser usually gives up and ends up in a disappointed and hostile state.

Dominance and suppression can occur in the following ways; Forcing / Coercing: this is a tendency to punish or reward the other party to agree with one's position. This is a power orientated, assertive and often uncooperative approach where the interests of one individual or group are put ahead of other individuals' or groups' interests. This approach is most suited when quick decisions are to be made, say in an emergency, or as a last resort to resolving a long standing conflict.

Smoothing; smoothing is a common tendency to emphasize common interests while minimizing or suppressing perceived differences. It is a more diplomatic way of suppressing conflict. The approach can help protect more

important matters by giving up on less important matters and this gives an opportunity to assess the situation at a later stage from a different angle and in a different environment. The disadvantage is it can be abused by some employees taking advantage of the accommodating nature of the other employees.

Avoidance; is the tendency to withdraw from conflict situations or remain neutral. This approach defers, sidesteps or simply does not address the conflict at hand. Another form is refusal to deal with the conflict by stalling and repeatedly postponing action. This can be applied where the potential costs of resolving the conflict outweigh the benefits of its resolution or when it is not the right time to address the conflict. Compromise; through compromise, managers try to resolve conflict by convincing each party in the dispute to sacrifice some objectives in order to gain others.

It is suitable when goals are moderately important and decisions need to be made quickly. This approach is common in organizations, particularly in resolving employee-employer conflicts, for example, wage negotiations where employees may require a 20% increment and the employer offers 10%, the parties may eventually agree to compromise and settle for 15%.

Integrative problem solving This method involves creating a shared goal that cannot be attained without the cooperation of each of the conflicting parties.

Intergroup conflict is converted into a joint problem solving technique.

Together, parties to the conflict try to solve the problem that has arisen between them. Instead of trying to find a compromise or suppressing the conflict, the parties openly try to find a solution they can all accept. There are three different methods of integrative conflict resolution methods namely

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consensus, confrontation and use of sub-ordinate goals. The major drawback is that this strategy is time consuming and requires an environment where parties can build mutual trust. Conclusion Conflicts are inevitable in any organization. A modest level of conflict can be useful in generating better ideas and methods, inspiring concern and ingenuity, and stimulating the emergence of long-suppressed problems. Thus I strongly agree and support the view that conflict is an inevitable feature of management and organizational behavior. Conflict management strategies should aim at keeping conflict at a level at which different ideas and viewpoints are fully voiced but unproductive conflicts are deterred. If conflicts are not managed properly, they can be damaging, as they waste a lot of energy and time, and invoke tension, which reduces the productivity and creativity of those involved.

A manager should be able to see emerging conflicts and take appropriate pre-emptive action. The manager should understand the causes creating conflict, the outcome of conflict, and various methods by which conflict can be managed in the organization. In this context, the manager should evolve an approach for resolving conflicts before their disruptive repercussions have an impact on productivity and creativity. Therefore, a manager should possess special skills to react to conflict situations, and should create an open climate for communication between conflicting parties.

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