Conflict management in the workplace: causes and effects

INTRODUCTION

What is conflict?

Conflict is a process that involves people disagreeing. It is usually a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. Conflict could be created due to different opinions of the interested parties, or due to the " show" of authority that some of the involved parties might have.

It can be separated in substantive conflict and emotional conflict. Substantive conflict is a disagreement over ends or goals and the means for their accomplishment. Emotional conflict is usual coming out over feeling of anger, mistrust, fear, etc. In addition, conflict may be classified in three types:

Intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict and intergroup conflict.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

- Intrapersonal Conflict

Intrapersonal conflict arises within a person. It is a fight you have to give with your ego, in front of several solutions for a decision you have to take. For example, if you are a sales manager and you are in front of a deal that you have to make on time with a customer, you might have to decide, either to close it according to your company's usual policy, or based mostly on your customer needs. In this occasion you are facing an intrapersonal conflict. To be more specific, in case you proceed with the first choice you will be ok with your company, but you may disappoint your customer and this can cause

problems either in your personal relationship with him, or in your sales volumes. If you follow the second option, then you might have problems with your company, but you will probably improve your relationship with your customer and as a result the sales volumes as well. But, of course, you're taking a big risk, in case the sales results will not come as you have planned. This example could be a typical, usual, daily intrapersonal conflict of many employees in several organizational environments.

- Interpersonal Conflict

Many companies suffer because of interpersonal conflicts, due to high competition (internal or external), different personalities of those who are decision makers in a company, authority showing, etc.

Interpersonal conflict is arriving between colleagues, CEOs, boards of director, etc. and actually can be created in any level of a company. It is a usual reason which tends employees to resign. We have all faced during our working experience colleagues and managers fighting each other. Most of the times " these fights" or strong disagreements guide to problematic relationships between staff and finally in resign of those that " don't want to go a step back". It is important to refer that according to one research, " 31. 9% of CEOs quitted from their jobs, because they had conflicts with the board of directors". (Whitehouse, K. 2008, January 14).

" CEOs of competing companies might also have public conflicts. For example, in 1997, Michael Dell was asked what he would do about Apple Computer. " What would I do? I'd shut it down and give the money back to shareholders." Ten years later, Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple Inc., indicated

he had clearly held a grudge as he shot back at Dell in an e-mail to his employees, stating, " Team, it turned out Michael Dell wasn't perfect in predicting the future. Based on today's stock market close, Apple is worth more than Dell". (Haddad, C. 2001, April 18)".

- Intergroup Conflict

Intergroup conflict takes place among different groups. Types of groups may include different departments in a company, employees and management, or competing companies in a market. Departments may conflict over budget planning. For example marketing budget or equipment budget usually creates a big conflict between marketing or production management or the general management.

Employees and management may disagree on work rules and procedures.

Suppliers may conflict with each other on the quality of goods, or in the pricing policy they're promoting in the market.

" For example, we will refer below a typical labor issue when a joint venture between two airline companies has taken place:

Canadian Air and Air Canada pilots were facing long term personal and legal conflicts when the two airlines' seniority lists were combined following the merger Seniority. This fact is a valuable and scarce resource for pilots, because it helps to determine who flies the newest and biggest planes, who receives the best flight routes, and who is paid the most. In response to the loss of seniority, former Canadian Air pilots picketed at shareholder

meetings, threatened to call in sick, and had ongoing conflicts with pilots from Air Canada" (Stoykewych, R. E. 2003, March 7).

POTENTIAL CAUSES OF CONFLICT

- Organizational Structure

Conflict can be created depending on the organizational Structure that a corporation follows. " For example, if a company uses a matrix structure as its organizational form, it will have decisional conflict built in, because the structure specifies that each manager report to two bosses" (Jaffe, D. 2000).

" For example, global company ABB Inc. is organized around a matrix structure based on the dimensions of country and industry. This structure can lead to confusion as the company is divided geographically into 1, 200 different units and by industry into 50 different units." (Taylor, W. 1991, March-April).

- Employees' Benefits differentiation

Resources offered from corporations as extra benefits to their employees such as money, time, and equipment are often a " problem". Competition among people or departments for different benefits is a frequent cause for conflict. For example, cars, mobile phones, credit cards, laptops are benefits that are offered not in all the employees, or not with the same value. For example salesmen might have different car according to their position in the company. This small issue can cause big conflicts. Differentiation in salaries of people in the same position level, but with different performance can as well create conflicts. Human beings are always jealous and feel unfair.

- Task Interdependence

Task interdependence could be another cause of conflict. This issue is coming when your success or your achievement in your objectives is also depending on other people performance. For example, when you are a project engineer and you have to complete a building construction in timelines with the correct way and the planned resources, it might be a big success for you, but you have to be supported for example, from the electrician, the plumper, the builder, the supplier of the materials, etc. If you lose control, you will probably have big conflicts with all your above coordinators.

- Incompatible Goals

Sometimes conflict arises when two parties think that their goals are exclusively in their responsibilities. Within an organization, incompatible goals often arise because of the different ways department managers are approaching them. For example, a sales manager who' s bonus system depends on sales figures, believes that he has to offer higher credit periods in a big client, in order to earn bigger sales volumes. But the financial manager whose bonus terms, might depend on how fast the clients pay their amounts is disagreeing with this option. Then these two managers may conflict each other, because they focus on their personal interests and not on the company's common goal. Unless this issue is not resolved with the intervention of someone who has the authority to overlap those two, they might continue conflict without coming up to a solution.

- Personality Differences

Personality differences among personnel are something common and usual. Many times you're arguing with your colleagues, because you see things and issues in different way based on your ethics and your growing environment. Matching of the personalities and team spirit is a difficult thing, through a corporation and needs a special care from the Human Resource management department.

- Communication Problems

In many occasions conflict arises out of problematic communication system, such as unread-forgotten emails or dealing with people who don't give feedbacks in your inquiries, or they often forget to reply. Then conflicts are a typical result, usually from the involved parties who try to drop the fault each one in the other. Consequently, many working hours are lost in finding where the mistake in the communication history was.

OUTCOMES OF CONFLICT

Conflict can be dysfunctional if it affects negatively an organization, leads to low performance, or in the worst case, to workplace violence. To understand how to get to a positive effect of conflict, we first need to understand its causes, consequences, and tools to help manage it. " If conflict is too low, then performance is low. If conflict is too high, then performance also tends to be low". (www. flatworlfknowledge). The positive thing is to keep conflicts in the middle of this " thin line". Most of us might have the opinion that it is quite strange to try in leave conflicts existing in middle levels, but as we will see in the following paragraphs, we can definitely have positive outcomes.

Positive outcomes include the following:

- Creation of bigger range in quality ideas

- Identifying and bring in the surface the " dark" inaccurate cases

- Clarification of individual views that build learning

- Improvement of participation and creativeness

- Motivate your employees in participate in useful discussions and improve their negotiations skills within healthy procedures

Examples of negative outcomes

- Increased stress and anxiety among personnel, which guide in low performance and personal satisfaction

- Feelings as being defeated and humiliated, which affect negatively individuals' morale

- A mistrust climate, which reduce working relationships, collaboration and teamwork.

CONFLICT STAGES

- Latent Conflict. Latent conflict is visible conflict waiting to happen.

- Felt Conflict. Felt conflict is experienced as discomfort and tension.

- Perceived Conflict. Perceived conflict is the awareness that we are in a conflict situation.

- Manifest Conflict. After conflict is perceived and felt, it may or may not become open, or manifest.

- Conflict Aftermath. Conflict is likely to breed more conflict and, when it does, that conflict is likely to take on a life of its own. (Gholipour A. 2006).

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

Everyone in his personal life has his own style in facing conflicts. In the following paragraphs you can see the most well known – frequent and usual approaches in conflict management.

- Avoidance

Avoidance is a conflict style, where the involved parties or groups are pretending that everything is fine, while " inside of them" they feel that there is a serious problem. Avoidance can also be an occasion where some of the parties are quitted from the conflict issue, not so much interested in find the solution, since it might considered from their side as a non personal obligation, or because they " unlike" the other parties' opinion. In low levels and not so important issues, this style can be sometimes a good solution, but usually it finally guides in bad working environment and relationships.

- Accommodation

The accommodating style of conflict management is more cooperative than the previous one. In this style, the one party offers or accepts, what the others believe that it is correct. This type of person is usually afraid to argue with their opponents because either they believe that they will destroy their relationships with them, or they feel that they will not come up to a solution. We can say that from one side they're giving up their proposals. This style is a good way to manage conflicts, but you might lose proposals or ideas, which could be interesting from the person that always go a step back in front of the most dominant persons.

- Compromise

The compromising style is always referred as the " middle-level solution". In this style all the involved persons are " giving a little" of them in order to come up in the best solution. We can say that it is a kind of bargaining. It is a quite effective in overpass conflicts usually without negative outcomes.

- Competition

People often show a competitive style to in order to achieve their goals or to perceive the other parties following their ideas. Competition may create bad relationships with others, if one is always trying to maximize his own outcomes at the expense of others' well-being. " This approach may be effective if one has strong moral objections to the alternatives or if the alternatives one is opposing, are unethical or harmful". (www. flatworldknowledge. com)

- Collaboration

Collaboration is a conflict management style that is almost similar to effective negotiation or to win-win solutions. In this occasion both of the involved parties may conflict each other, but they always try to find the best solution, which can satisfy all of them and also serves the common goal. For example if an employee is performing well in his job obligation and he is asking to attend an MBA program in order to improve more his management skills, then he may ask from his company to pay the program for him. Then the manager can propose to him: " Yes I will pay your MBA program, but you have to stay 2 years more in the company, after you will have finished it. Otherwise you will return back our paid amounts". It sounds like a fair solution for both of the sides.

APPROACHES TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

- Change the Composition of the Team

If the conflict is between colleagues then a good solution could be, separating the personalities that are creating the biggest problems. " In circumstances where conflict is attributed to the widely different styles, values, and preferences of a small number of members, replacing some of these members may resolve the problem. If that's not possible because everyone's skills are needed on the team and substitutes aren't available, consider a physical layout solution. Research has shown that when known antagonists are seated directly across from each other, the amount of conflict increases. However, when they are seated side by side, the conflict tends to decrease". (Howat, G., & London, M. 1980)

- Create a Common Opposing Force

Group conflict within a corporation can be reduced by turn their attention on a common enemy such as the competition. For example, two product managers might argue in which of their two products are going to spend more marketing expenses, each trying to get more resources in order to promote more his product to the market. Then instead of fighting each other, it would be better someone to turn them in focusing on a competitive product and get them responsible how to develop their products together, much more than the competition to the market.

- Consider Majority Rule

Group conflict can be dramatically reduced by using the " traditional" majority rule process. In this case every one of the involved parties is

proposing an idea and then all together vote in order to choose the one with the higher votes. Majority rule could be a creative process, but it has to be followed always with creative discussions and not operating as an easy solution for decreasing conflicts, through groups or persons. Sometimes it has negative outcomes, when most of the times the same persons' ideas frequently " pass". Then the other members of the procedure might feel that something unfair is going on, as for example the " cliques" creation between persons that voting all the time their personal ideas.

- Problem Solve

" Problem solving is a common approach to resolving conflict. In problem-solving mode, the individuals or groups in conflict are asked to focus on the problem, not on each other, and to uncover the root cause of the problem. This approach recognizes the rarity of one side being completely right and the other being completely wrong". (www. flatworldknowledge. com).

CONCLUSION

Summarizing all the above described in this assignment, we can easily realize that conflict management is a very important issue in workplace. We cannot evaluate how it could be solved, or which is the best way to manage or approach to its resolution. It would be definitely positive for companies to set up conflict policies, so they can control better such problems. But the assured thing is that, even policies would be set up, every manager, every employee has to be careful and try to take advantage of the positive effects that conflict can give. Thus, in order to achieve this, everyone has to " do it" with his own style, since he has to adapt his behavior depending on the

working environment he is occupied. If we think again that conflict guides in violence in workplace, but can guide also to creative solutions, integrative negotiations, passion for participating in problems solving, we have to individually think and drive ourselves at the positive part of conflict results.

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