

Leadership and conflict management in project-structured telecommuting business e...

[Business](#), [Management](#)



Telecommuting is a work arrangement in which the employee works from outside the office; often working from home or any convenient location including coffee shops, libraries, etc. rather than making a daily commute to the office. Employees who have access to this arrangement utilize telecommunication links, keeping in touch with coworkers and employers via telephone, email, video conferences and other options for distance conferencing.

In Kenya, the development of a fast and reliable variety of internet infrastructure including mobile internet, fiber optic connections and satellite internet means that an ever increasing number of people are getting access to internet connectivity. In response to this, many organizations have begun experimenting with and embracing the idea of allowing a percentage of total work hours to be able to be done using telecommuting as a means. In other organizations where employees handle different regions in isolation but all aligned towards a common objective, this scenario has become inevitable. However, with these developments, there comes the inherent need for strong leadership and conflict management to ensure a harmonious working environment where the employees themselves do not have adequate interaction to engage in building their teams. Being a relatively new undertaking in the country, not much research has been done to investigate the role of leadership and its effect on conflict management in such scenarios.

Telecommuting is a growing concept that poses new challenges for leaders and managers in efficiently handling the workforce. Telecommuting (also

known as remote work, homework, virtual work, telework or distributed work) is work that occurs outside of a traditional office setting, but that is connected to it via telecommunications or computer technology.

A 2017 study by firms FlexJobs and Global Workplace Analytics shows that in the United States of America (USA) only, about 3.9 million employees (2.9% of the total USA workforce) worked from home at least half of the time in 2015. This was due to the benefits associated with telecommuting which have been found to include increased productivity and reduced costs of operations associated with renting out office spaces and all carried expenses that come with an office.

However several drawbacks have also been observed; mainly being that employees have to be extremely self-motivated; and the isolation from minimum personal touch with coworkers most times leads to conflict in high-pressure jobs. These drawbacks multiply when the business is operational across several time zones, diverse cultures and with a project-structured approach which requires multiple collaborations within and among different project teams.

This review seeks to find out the role of leadership and establish its effect on conflict management in telecommuting businesses; where accomplishment of tasks is heavily reliant on the ability of individuals working in a project team, which is strewn across different time zones and cultures, to be able to cooperate and collaborate with a focus of meeting their project demands.

Rationale for literature review

Cooperative game theory deals with how coalitions, or cooperative groups, interact when only the payoffs are known. It is a game between coalitions of players rather than between individuals. The key to game theory is that one player's payoff is contingent on the strategy implemented by the other player. The game identifies the players' identities, preferences, and available strategies and how these strategies affect the outcome.

Cooperation and competition between individual members and project teams in organizations and businesses plays an integral part in the realization of objectives, just as it does to players in a multiplayer online game. In the context of online multiplayer games, most player organizations can be considered as collaborative groups – that is, they are (typically) trying to reach for a shared goal (Siitonen, 2009).

Taking this into consideration, it can be considered that teammates in an online multiplayer game can be considered as a project team given that: (1) the group has a shared goal that cannot be reached by any group member alone, (2) cooperation requires communication between group, (3) cooperation can overstep individual functional borders, (4) cooperation is not tied to a place or time, and (5) the group can operate as a team, with a formal leader. In this setup, conflict is inevitable.

The Concept of Conflict

Conflict within an organization is regarded as the presence of disagreements that happen when the goals, interests or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible and frustrate each other's work towards achieving

set objectives. When conflicts arise they typically need to be resolved by management for the sake of the organizational growth, survival and enhance performance.

We are all born with conflicts and for conflicts. Conflicts are part of human consciousness in all aspects of life. One cannot avoid conflict, whether at home, at the office, or when watching television news. The consequences of organizational conflict reach further today than ever before, as the interface between work and organizations experiment with flatter and more decentralized structures (Kazimoto, 2013).

In project-structured telecommuting setups, leadership is of utmost importance to ensure proper team collaboration towards set goals. The loss of face-to-face communication means there is a reduced level of personal interaction without which effective personal working relationships cannot be formed. This can form throughout the project team and beyond to the leadership of the different project teams. In situations where operations are decentralized to different regions and different time zones, the situation is further worsened by the need for more compromise in collaboration.

General Styles for Handling Conflict

According to the Thomas-Kilmann Model, in situations that bring about conflicts, intentions of the parties involved can be described as stretching along two independent dimensions; cooperativeness and assertiveness. Cooperativeness deals with attempting to satisfy the other party's concern while assertiveness involves attempting to satisfy one's own concerns irrespective of the position of the other party. Five common styles that

leaders use in handling conflict are defined in terms of those dimensions as below.

- i. Competing – is the attempt to satisfy one's own concern at the other's expense. It is characterized by low levels of cooperativeness, and high levels of assertiveness.
- ii. Accommodating – this is the opposite of competition. It is characterized by high levels of cooperativeness with low levels of assertiveness. It involves individuals sacrificing their own concerns in favor of the views of the other party.
- iii. Avoiding – this neglects both parties' concerns by sidestepping or postponing a conflict issue. This is generally regarded as low cooperativeness and low assertiveness.
- iv. Collaborating – is an attempt to find a win/win solution that fully satisfies both people's concerns. It falls under high cooperativeness and high assertiveness.
- v. Compromising – This is an attempt to find a middle ground settlement that only partially satisfies each person's concern. It is categorized as intermediate in both cooperativeness and assertiveness.

It has emerged that females use collaborating styles more frequently compared to males. On the other hand results have revealed that males use competing styles more frequently compared to female and that age

significantly influence the preferred style. Younger males use competing style more commonly than the older males. (Kaimenyi, 2014).

Causes of Conflict in Telecommuting Environments

Telecommuters are exposed to different environmental characteristics as compared to workers who operate from the normal concept of an office space. This is mainly because they work by using technological means from other environments which may not be optimized for their work, such that the source of stress might differ. Acknowledgement of differing individual points of view is one of the most important principles in management of conflicts by leaders. “ This principle stipulates that conflict resolution is facilitated when parties in conflict acknowledge their mutual needs.” (Doucet, Poitras, & Chenevert, 2009).

In telecommuting environments it is important to understand the operating frameworks of individual project members and their leaders with regards to their environment. Communication therefore plays a very critical role in managing conflicts in this system of organization. “ The demands on communication and collaboration increase with the complexity of the tasks at hand. It is not surprising, then, that leadership, both formal and emergent, is an integral element of the social organization of many player organizations.” (Siitonen, 2009)

Conflicts within player organizations can be born out of simple misunderstandings, but it is the motive conflicts seem to have special potency for destruction. Players can have differing motives for participating in the game or the group effort, and balancing these or negotiating the

group's values and goals can be exceedingly difficult (Siitonen, 2009). In this empirical study, we identified three main factors that lead to development of conflicts in telecommuting organizations. These have been discussed below.

Loss of personal gestures

Face to face communication is often more about non-verbal cues when compared to the message being communicated. More than what is being communicated, how it is communicated often has a bigger implication on the overall effect of the message. Signs in body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. communicate more than the message being relayed. This non-verbal communication is often lost in telecommuting setups that often leads to conflict.

Loss of situational awareness

In telecommuting environments, it is often the little things about working with others that are missed. Guesses about others' intentions are often rooted in our own experiences and perceptions. Unless you actively practice and know someone well enough to "walk a mile in their shoes," it is generally hard to see something from someone else's point of view. Combining this loss of context with poor guessing creates the right environment for conflict to ensue.

Miscommunication Triggers

These are triggers that may arise from miscommunication or taking of relayed information out of the initial context that they were meant for. The affected in these cases are mainly triggered by a feeling of personal attack on their persona or their work. These include miscommunication on:

Questioning of Competence

Triggers arising from perceptions that intelligence or skill is being questioned.

Exclusion

These are triggers arising from feelings of exclusion from a group, event, committee, etc. or due to implications that question companionship.

Loss of Autonomy

These are triggers from apparent attempts at excessive control over tasks, impositions, or threats on self-reliance of individuals.

Threats to Status

These are triggers arising from the perception of threats on individual intangible assets, including power, position, economic worth, attractiveness, etc.

Reliability and Integrity

These are triggers resulting from individuals' perception of the questioning of their trustworthiness, dependability, moral values or integrity.

Role of Leadership in Conflict Management

The main work-related benefit to conflict resolution in telecommuting organizations is the creation and restoration of approachability. The need to be listened to and understood in order to move past a conflict remains essential to a healthy and productive work environment. In remote settings, approachability means teammates don't hesitate to table their questions or

concerns. When problems get solved faster, productivity isn't stalled, and creativity is allowed to flourish.

From the employee perspective, telecommuting is associated with higher job satisfaction and has been widely advocated as a solution to the challenges individuals face in reconciling their personal and work lives. Telecommuting can allow individuals to have greater control over work— family boundaries and to schedule work at times of peak efficiency or around family needs (Lautsch & Kossek, 2010).

An important factor in creating an inclusive culture is ensuring that supervisors assist workers in maintaining their performance in their project teams while they are taking advantage of telecommuting. In this respect, there are five main issues that must be confronted in order to be an effective leader in the context of telecommuting: gate-keeping, monitoring, social integration, work-life boundary management, and project team culture.

Gate-keeping

Managers have to consider three factors when deciding whether or not a given individual will be permitted to telecommute: (1) work-related considerations; (2) personal characteristics; (3) technological limitations. Work-related factors include the suitability of the job for telework, particularly the extent of face-to-face interaction required. Personal characteristics that are often considered include an individual's ability to work independently based on the evaluation of the manager from their evaluation of the employee. Technology is heavily dependent on the training

and qualification of the individual and the access that they have to infrastructure that will enable them to perform their duties effectively.

In order to avoid the possibility of occurrence of conflicts, it is important for leaders to ensure that from the onset they evaluate the positions, the people and the environment in which they are going to operate in. Setting up the telecommuting environment in the right way from the onset reduces the possible instances where conflict will be experienced.

Monitoring

Telecommuters can feel excluded and penalized for working in alternative ways if supervisors treat them differently from workers who work a traditional schedule in the office. Similarly, non-teleworkers raise different equity concerns if they feel teleworkers have a different “ employment deal” than non-teleworkers (Lautsch & Kossek, 2010).

When telecommuters feel as though they are being fairly treated, they perform better in their jobs and experience less stress about how they are juggling their work and personal lives. Supportive management and leadership in telework require that managers create and run good communication lines that ensure provision of good feedback. This acts as protection against the possible conflicts that can occur.

Social integration

One simple step that managers and leaders may take to support telecommuters and ensure the success of new work arrangements is to engage in frequent contact with their employees. While some telecommuters

may find intensified attention from their supervisors as intrusive and interpret it as undermining their autonomy, others may find a lack of it as being isolated. More frequent contact with a leader may be a support that effectively eliminates this problem by integrating team members into their work groups.

Organizations that combine telecommuting and non-telecommuting effectively, have a shared awareness of others, and help with work sequencing and member coordination of inputs and outputs (Lautsch & Kossek, 2010). It is critical to be available and to make telecommuters a natural participant in all organizational activities in order to build a strong social hive in which individuals who form a project team can thrive in.

Work-life boundary management

Leaders should try to support their telecommuting employees by influencing how workers jointly manage the demands of work and home when they are working in the home (how employees manage the work-family boundary). Efforts to influence work-life boundaries of telecommuters are intended to benefit them by reducing the conflict and strain experienced in juggling work and family roles.

Project team culture

One important item that leaders have to address with remote teams in order to reduce occurrences of conflict is to create a good project team culture. Common knowledge suggests that teams operating from a common physical office space have an easier time building culture as compared to teams that cooperate remotely.

Leaders have to create a culture that is based on how every individual works and how everyone's contribution sums up to the meeting of objectives; adoption of tools and technology that allows for collaboration and fun at work; creating personal meet-ups that are meant at building teams and building a foundation that is based on trust and getting tasks accomplished. All this is geared towards preventing occurrence and providing avenues for resolution of conflict.

New ways of working are only useful if they are effectively implemented and supported by leaders and managers. The results of this research confirms that successful conflict resolution in the operation of a collaborative project-structured telecommuting business environment is only possible if there is a leadership that has authority, legitimacy, impartiality, neutrality and the necessary communication and mobilization skills to involve all the stakeholders in the process.

Overall, leaders and managers need to develop new approaches focused towards the needs of workers in new flexible arrangements. These include increased information sharing and assistance in boundary management, while at the same time remaining attentive to fairness issues within work groups. The way in which leaders implement telecommuting heavily determines whether or not it will have positive effects on employee performance and conflict management.