

The Management of Conflict: Psychological, Organizational and Cultural Factors

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Conflict is a recurrent organizational form and is contrasted with competition. It is sometimes seen as functional, but more usually as dysfunctional. Its management involves the use of organizational and psychological techniques and a positive orientation towards cultural difference.

Introduction

In the writings of modern organizational theorists, conflict plays a central part. It has been defined as follows:

Conflict is a type of behavior which occurs when two or more parties are in opposition or in battle as a result of a perceived relative deprivation from the activities of, or interacting with another person or group (Litterer 1970:331).

Conflict is often contrasted with competition which emphasizes the mutual striving or contest for the same object which cannot be shared, such as first place in a race, or market supremacy. Competition does not necessarily involve the destruction of a rival, and can be friendly, gentlemanly or ladylike and in accordance with mutually agreed rules of conduct. Competition may generate positive emotions such as exhilaration, whereas conflict always produces the negative emotions of anger, resentment and fear. The victors in friendly and legitimate competition are accepted with grace by the vanquished and there is generally an opportunity at some future time to turn the tables. In conflict, the vanquished may feel a desire for revenge, to a degree reflecting the illegitimacy of the methods used to gain victory. Other aspects apply as well: Baron (1983:402) distinguishes competition from conflict in terms of the contrasting perceptions of the contest and the opponent as well as the emotions aroused.

The Philosophical Origins of Conflict Theory

From the time of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) who argued in his book *The Leviathan* that man is by nature selfishly individualistic and at constant war with all other men after being born into a state of nature where life is "nasty, brutish and short," European social philosophy has contained a strong tradition

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of conflict theory. This tradition was strengthened by Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) notion of the struggle for existence in the natural world as developed in his book *The Origin of Species*. The major conflict theorist of the 19th Century was Marx. In Marxist theory, the basis of conflict is found in the social relations of production which always must be between classes or "two great warring camps." All production involving technology and therefore capital must result in the economic and political institutions of any society being appropriated by the ruling classes to enable the exploitation of the working class, as capitalism requires, or in his later work published after 1875, the exploitation of colonies. There are of course other European traditions of social thought besides that of conflict; for example the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1785) whose model of the social contract provided for a society based on agreement, consensus and equilibrium, with government following the general will, which was the other leading tradition with particular emphasis in France and in America.

In more recent times, a conflict model was presented by Dahrendorf (1959) who suggested that intra-institutional conflicts occur about authority in all institutions but there need not be any overlapping between conflicts. For example, industrial conflict has become institutionalized or confined to a particular industrial context. In another approach, Coser (1956) argued that conflict is more endemic than contemporary theory had hitherto allowed and that a number of cross-cutting conflicts in modern society whereby one's enemy on one front could be one's ally on another contributes to greater social stability. Coser went on to argue that a looseness of institutional arrangements which could contain a certain level of conflict could provide a greater degree of organizational stability than one based on rigidity.

The Modern Management Approach

Mescon, Albert and Khedouri (1981:655-663) identified four types of conflict:

- (1) Conflict within an individual: typically a role conflict in which an individual is torn between conflicting roles or conflicting parts of the same role. For example maintaining production standards and customer relations within a finite time span.
- (2) Conflict between individuals: This conflict can arise within an organization. For example, a conflict between the branch managers, or two artists working on the same advertising campaign.
- (3) Conflict between the individual and the group: For a variety of reasons an individual behavior or even identity can be judged unacceptable to a formal or informal group. An unstable situation of conflict can arise particularly where the individual is a manager and his position by the formal organization reinforces his inacceptability.

- (4) Conflict between groups: Organizations contain many groups, formal and informal and conflict can occur over objectives, methods, prestige or style.

Milton, Entrekin and Stening (1984:479) list the defining characteristics for a situation of conflict (as distinct from one of competition). They are:

- (1) at least two parties, individuals or groups, in an interactive situation;
- (2) the existence of mutually exclusive goals or values or the perception of mutual exclusion;
- (3) interaction characterized by behavior designed to defeat, reduce or suppress the opponent;
- (4) the parties to the conflict face each other with mutually opposing actions and counteractions; and
- (5) each party attempts to create an imbalance or relatively favored position of power of the other.

Conflict within organizations can be seen from several different perspectives of level and form according to Szilagyi and Wallace (1983:Ch.8). From an organizational level perspective, there is an interpersonal form, where two individuals disagree on some matter or issue. Similarly, conflict can also be taken within or between groups in the form of intra-group or intergroup conflicts. A third level of conflict exists for the organization; that of intra or interorganizational conflict.

The Cyclical Nature of Conflict

A number of writers have drawn attention to the characteristics of conflict of escalation in a cyclical process.

Kenneth W. Thomas' (1976) model of the process of conflict within organizations states that conflict begins with a feeling of frustration by one or both parties over, in its or their ability to reach one or more goals. This prompts the frustrated party to conceptualize a subjective mental picture of the relationship which subsequently affects the behavior of that frustrated party. The behavioral changes in the frustrated party cause the other party to react, and that these reactions are also shaped by the second party's conceptualization of the situation. The changes combine to produce an outcome which may not solve the conflict or may even produce a fresh set of frustrations which will start of a new conflict process. If the conflict is to be reduced or eliminated, an intervention has to take place so that the cycle will not continue indefinitely.

The cyclical nature of this process of conflict escalation has also been identified by White and Vroman (1982:313) when they wrote that

Conflict is a dynamic occurrence that can be found in all organizations to a greater or lesser extent. Its nature is cyclical, with one conflict setting the stage for the next encounter. The more sensitive people become to repeated conflicts, the more subsequent conflict is likely to occur.

Conflict: Functional or Dysfunctional?

The interpretation placed upon organizational conflict is that it can be dysfunctional or, within limits, functional. Reflecting the view of the modern classical organization theorists, Litterer (1970:349) observes that conflict is undesirable and detrimental to the organization. Conflict should be eliminated through job description, the specification of relationships between positions, careful staff selection and exhaustive training of new appointees. Reinforcing the negative view of conflict, Williams (1978:346) has written that:

Traditional organization theorists assumed that conflict within organizations is pathological, a sickness to be treated with rational principles of organization and a heavy dose of formal authority

The classical theorists March and Simon (1958:112) also saw conflict as ... "a breakdown in the standard mechanisms of decisionmaking"

Reflecting the changes in social theory which later saw conflict as sometimes functional, organization theory began to question the earlier assumptions; these assumptions take conflict as always detrimental to organizations and the goals of stable organization and reduces rational goal maximization. The benefits and positive outcomes that can accrue from the constructive side of conflict in organizations have become increasingly recognized by writers in modern organization theory. For example Williams (1978:349) has written that:

Conflict within organizations like external conflict, serves as an energizer, although conflict within organizations is in many ways analogous to a civil war, its impact in most organizations is less destructive than the lethargy which exists where little conflict is present.

Mukhi, Hampton and Barnwell (1988:396) suggest a number of functional aspects to conflict. In their view, it can (1) arouse and stimulate, (2) test assumptions, arguments and arrangements, (3) determine the value of ideas, just as price may indicate value in the market for goods and services, and (4) scrutinize ideas as does a cross examination in court, facilitating evaluation and selection.

But seeing both types of consequences, Mukhi, Hampton and Barnwell (1988:395) were driven to conclude that:

Conflict can produce negative and positive consequences. It creates energy but, like nuclear fission, energy can yield bad or good consequences, and often some of each.

The Psychological Component of Conflict in Groups

Tajfel (1984) has pointed out that although social conflicts cannot be analyzed primarily in psychological terms, they do have important psychological correlates or counterparts. In reviewing social conflict theory, Spiegel and Levin (1976) considered that the psychological substrate of wants, desires, satisfactions and impulses were sometimes elusive and difficult to measure. They also pointed out that it was not clear whether intrapsychic, interpersonal, intergroup and international conflicts involve the same processes. However, there are parallels and a more complete analysis of conflict in organizations shows the interplay of multiple psychological and cultural factors.

The existence of mutually exclusive goals or values or the mere perception of such existence by at least two parties may result in a situation of conflict. This is seen in a rivalry situation, where neither party is prepared to compromise. Examining the personalities involved may give a greater understanding of the reason why some individuals clash and some do not, without having to revert to Freudian explanations invoking sibling rivalry, oedipal conflicts or the like. The clash of two individuals are likely when their personalities have the following characteristics: obsessional, rigid and uncompromising; demanding for instant emotional or material gratifications; narcissistic given to strutting and posturing; excessively clinging and dependent or the antisocial with inability to conform to acceptable social norms. The likelihood of a conflict developing increase if these salient characteristics are not congruent with the group ethics. Personality disorder, in which individuals have long term behaviors and traits causing either significant impairment in social or occupational functioning or subjective distress are described in Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (1987).

The threat of territorial invasion or loss is a potent source of conflict as exemplified by many international crises. The perception of personal boundaries is shaped by personal experience and cultural expectations which may differ markedly. The area of living space per capita is reduced in many cities. A citizen reared in Tokyo, Manila or Hong Kong may expect little personal space, but become adept at not intruding into the personal space of others compared with his Sydney, Los Angeles or London counterpart. In a social environment such as the workplace, this skill may reduce the perception of intrusion into the personal space of others, with a decrease in the frequency of conflict.

The invasion of the "emotional territory" of a group may also be a potent source of conflict, as seen in the development of marked conflicts when the boundaries of cults are encroached on (Galanter 1989). The most dramatic example of this was the precipitation of the Jonestown mass suicide by the members of the People's Temple when an American Congressman arrived to investigate thereby breaching boundaries of the cult. Losses are powerful triggers to conflict. Haig (1990) has described how the loss of a job, status or position may lead to a grief reaction with characteristic symptoms and emotions which are found in diverse cultures. Anger is a common component of the grief reaction which increases the likelihood of an open confrontation. Retribution following the death or murder of a family or tribal member may lead to protracted blood feuds. Threatened loss leads to anxiety and an attempt to resist the loss by whatever means available. The

history of industrial relations is peppered with loss, threatened loss and manipulated threat of loss leading to intense conflicts. Losses of role, status quo or a familiar environment may all be grieved and resisted. "Grievances" occur in a context of loss or threatened loss.

Hsu (1981) in his comparison of the American and Chinese cultures compared at length the "individual-centered" American ethos which encouraged individual success, striving and the expression of individual emotion with the "situation-centered" Chinese way of life which encouraged adaptation to the situation and underplayed emotions. These cultural differences would have an impact on the individual within the workplace. A Confucian emphasis on adapting harmoniously to the social milieu and the importance of retaining "face" would also result in a different style of industrial relations.

Scapegoating, or the projection of undesirable qualities onto another member of a group, which helps to emphasize one's own good qualities, is a commonly occurring situation in all groups. This may be actively manipulated and affects the development of conflict. Projecting onto or scapegoating an "outgroup" may promote intragroup cohesion and decrease intragroup conflict. The promotion of a corporate or nationalist sentiment and the scapegoating of outsiders as "inferior" may promote cohesion and decrease intragroup conflict. However, when the process of conflict is no longer able to occur or corrected by accurate feedback, the internal conflict within the organization will increase greatly. The apparent cohesion and low internal conflict of certain industrial enterprises may depend on the scapegoating and derision of rivals, sometimes utilizing nationalist or racist sentiments.

The Management of Conflict: Organizational Techniques

Modern management literature is now swinging back to an awareness of the dysfunctional effects of conflict and is consequently concentrating on overcoming the problems arising. The earlier concept of conflict resolution has given way to a less optimistic but more realistic concept of 'conflict management.'

Mescon, Albert and Khedouri (1981:653-667) identified two major classes or techniques in managing conflict: structural techniques and interpersonal styles. The employment of structural techniques recognizes that conflict is often structural in origin, that is, relating from the way power and other resources is held. In the structural category they suggest:

- (1) Clarification of expectations, particularly relating to jobs and roles, responsibility and performance levels;
- (2) Creation of coordinating mechanisms. Referring to the founder of modern sociology Max Weber (1864-1920) the value of his approach to administration is that it showed that a hierarchy of authority gave a sense of order to human interaction, decisionmaking and information flows. Superior officers within

an organization can make rulings which will eliminate a conflict that may arise between equals. The unit of command principle creates absolute certainty as to whose orders must be followed, and conversely, the breakdown of authority opens the way for conflict.

- (3) Formulation of superordinate objectives. The setting of objectives and goals for an organization automatically requires the collaboration of individual members and groups of members of the organization.
- (4) Institutionalization of reward structure. Rewards can be used to manage conflict by giving people an incentive to follow conflict avoiding behaviors. But the reward system must not be allowed to positively sanction dysfunctional behavior such as conflict.

Among the interpersonal styles, five techniques have been suggested.

- (1) Avoidance. The avoidance of subjects and issues known to lead to conflict may not resolve the problems underlying those issues, but it may allow them to be programmed rather than tackled all at once.
- (2) Smoothing. This technique attempts to remove the emotional heat from a conflict, by depersonalizing it and emphasizing the points in common such as overall objectives to the benefit of both parties. At the same time, the causes of a conflict, particularly if they are structural, should not be smoothed over excessively, as this can lead to a build-up of emotion with an even bigger explosion to follow.
- (3) Enforcement. Where the enforcement is done by a superior organizational and moral authority whose legitimacy is accepted, this technique can manage conflict. Where these preconditions are not met, the technique is not effective.
- (4) Compromise. The compromise style is highly valued in Western management theory because power is shared in a solution, face is saved and emotional expenditure is minimized, giving this technique the benefit of economy.
- (5) Problem Solving. This technique involves an open acknowledgment of the differences of opinion and values and an understanding of the reasons for the conflict, with an emphasis on finding the best solution regardless of whichever protagonists may support or oppose it. In complex situations, this may involve the compiling and analyzing of a great deal of extremely accurate information. Undoubtedly, the problem solving technique is the superior one, in that it is the best way of finding a lasting solution.

Conflict within organizations differs from conflict between organizations in that it is more susceptible to change in attitude. As Mitchell, *et al.* (1988:405) emphasize:

When the conflict between two or more groups persists over even a moderate length of time, there is a tendency for the conflicting groups to adopt a win-lose orientation.

The attitude of "winners and losers," "victors and vanquished," or even only "us and them," should be replaced with the view of everyone winning, or "win" through constructive and creative leadership. The widespread use of the expression "win-win" in management literature in the late 1980s reflected the earnest desire to find a new approach to the problem of conflict in organization and the damaging nature of the situation where "everyone's a loser."

Psychological Approaches to Conflict Management

The contribution of psychology to the understanding of conflict is in an understanding of the effects of fear—real, imaginary or manipulated—of loss. However, if a loss is not regarded as a loss such as when goods or status are transferred "within the family" or when a culture of common ownership prevails, it is no longer necessary to grieve and resist and a conflict is less likely to develop. A paternalistic industrial enterprise, as found in many Asian countries, may foster a sense of "belonging to the family" with an emphasis of "working together for the good of the family" with fewer resulting conflicts.

The study of group processes and the development of conflict in therapy groups has added to knowledge which may be applied to other situations. Individuals attending therapy groups are often seeking a form of treatment or help with emotional problems and may be wishing to change their manner of coping or lifestyle so that the situation (superficially) differs from other organizations or groups which have been established with different goals. However, the same underlying processes may occur in different types of groups.

Yalom (1975) regarded group cohesion as an important ingredient in therapy groups. Kellerman (1979) suggested that group cohesion may refer to the balance of conflicts in the group. He expanded on group tension, which he considered to be regulated by the nature of the leader, rules, communication, the dominant hierarchy and the absence of narcissism (or the absence of "need to save face"). He considered the absence of narcissism as an attribute which make conflict resolution more possible. Foulkes and Anthony (1965) described focal conflict:

the group tends to speak and react to a communication as if it were a living entity... All contributions are variations on this single theme even though the group is not consciously aware of that theme and do not know what they are really talking about.

Paraphrasing this, the group speaks as one, but the hidden agenda is so hidden that the participants do not really understand what it is about. In a group therapy situation, the hidden agenda is, hopefully, made more explicit as treatment proceeds.

Stock and Lieberman (1962:12, 312-325) refer to the "focal conflict," which is never expressed in direct, explicit or succinct terms and characterizes the group rather than any single patient.

The seemingly irrational impasses in which groups and their members become bogged down may derive from the "focal conflict" described by the group therapists.

Bion (1961) provided some clues as to what constitutes the focal conflict of the group. He was interested in examining the themes underlying the group and proposed that there are "assumption cultures" common to all groups. These cultures determine the predominant emotional and interactional nature of a group at any given time and help the members avoid the experience of anxiety. Based on the type of culture, groups are categorized into three: (1) dependent groups in which the thrust is to find a leader for security; (2) pairing group in which hope and sexuality characterize the group interaction and members form alliances, clandestine, sexualized or otherwise; and (3) fight-flight group in which hate and anger result in the group either by continually attacking the leader with little justification or by demonstrating withdrawal or avoidance behavior. These assumption cultures fluctuate in the course of a group with one being replaced by another. The group may also shift into a "work group" mode in which there is a desire to know, gain insight and understand.

Bion's model could be applied to other groups and organizations in which finding a leader to be dependent on alternates with hopeful pairing and alliance formation, fighting the leader or withdrawal. The mature group, Bion's "work group," is able to put these other maneuvers into abeyance and "get on with the job."

An understanding of the irrational underpinning of many conflict situations in organizations may be necessary before the presenting surface conflict can be resolved.

Managing Cultural Differences

Writers in management have also been aware that the techniques of conflict management are to some extent culture-bound such that no universal scheme can be proposed. For example, Mukhi, Hampton and Barnwell (1988:397) questioned the value of direct confrontation in other cultures

Chinese culture, for example, has been functioning a great deal longer than Australian, American and European cultures, on sharply contrasting attitudes about how to handle conflict. Being relatively collectivist and having a relatively weakly felt need to avoid uncertainty can give a society greater concern with maintaining "face" and harmony by smoothing and refraining from expressing disagreement... a greater sensitivity to maintaining harmony through smoothing may work better in some cultures than advocates of universally confronting conflict seem to realize.

Other writers have also taken up this theme. Khan and Pepper (1979:83) also distinguish a "Confucian tradition" in culture, which also imbues industrial organization and presents a stark contrast to the Western model:

All the Confucian cultures emphasize harmony and cooperation, rather than confrontation and adversary procedures and highly value order and conformity.

Khan and Pepper identify this tradition in Japan and also in countries such as South Korea which are taking Japan as a model, in preference to Western models of industrial organization.

The presence of cultural differences must, therefore, be recognized and there should be a willingness to accept that there is no anthropological or moral basis to the belief that one culture is inherently superior to another. In fact all cultures have their stronger and weaker points, reflecting the differing values they have come to emphasize.

Conclusion

Conflict is a permanently recurring feature of intra- and interorganizational functioning, as has been observed by the classical philosophers and the modern theorists. When contrasted with competition, which is seen as good, conflict has been assigned varying degrees of dysfunctionality. Although organizational conflict is not primarily psychological, it does have important psychological components. Individual behavior such as strutting and posturing, the presence of psychological disorders and managed perceptions can all increase the likelihood of conflict. Threats of loss, grief and grievance will lead to highly intensified conflict. Another component of conflict is culture which might vary from one group to another in basic values and perceptions and facilitate the scapegoating mechanism. Often the Confucian tradition has been compared and contrasted with the Western individual tradition. Psychological, organizational and cultural components can combine to produce an explosive situation of conflict. Conflict management can therefore be seen only as a matter requiring a combination of organizational, psychological and cultural skills.

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