

# ROLE OF MANAGER IN MANAGING CONFLICT

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## I. INTRODUCTION:

Conflict is an inevitable element of organizational life. This is particularly so in the modern-day workplace, which is splendidly diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, culture, and gender, and which practically faces more conflict than a more standardized workforce (Prause & Mujtaba, 2015). Researchers have attributed conflict in the workplace to multiple factors, including differences in goals, personality differences, differences in people's ways of thinking, biases that people have against employees of other groups, and differences in capabilities (Ini-Ojo et al, 2014).

What is clear from the literature, however, is that workplace conflict, if not properly-managed could have damaging effects on employees' physical, mental, and emotional well-being, ultimately harming the organization's goals and mission (Ini-Ojo et al, 2014; Prause & Mujtaba, 2015). However, if handled properly, conflict could be beneficial to both employees and the organization. Understanding conflict and effective ways of managing it is, therefore, essential for the well-being of employees and the organization (Singleton et al, 2011). This paper examines the different approaches that managers could use to manage and resolve conflicts in their organizations. It begins with a brief description of what conflict and conflict management is, and the main reasons of conflict in the modern-day in the workplace.

## II. WHAT IS CONFLICT?

The term 'conflict' has been defined differently by different researchers. According to Suppiah and Rose (2006), conflict in the workplace is a result of contact between colleagues, departments, work groups, as well as between managers and their subordinates. Conflict means the disagreement that arises when the values, interests, and goals of different groups/individuals are mismatched, causing those groups/individuals to prevent or attempt to block one another's attempt to achieve the organization's goal's (Jones & George, 2014). It is inevitable whenever components of the human element are involved (Suppiah & Rose, 2006). Conflict arising between individual colleagues is referred to as interpersonal conflict, whereas that arising between within a team, group, or department is referred to as intra-group conflict. When conflict spreads outside a group or department, and involves members of different groups, it is referred to as inter-group conflict (Prause & Mujtaba, 2015).

## III. REASONS OF CONFLICT AT WORKPLACE:

Conflict in the organizational setting arises when groups or individuals are trying to pool their effort towards achieving a common goal, but have contrary beliefs/opinions on the best plan of action. According to Utleg (2012), workplace conflicts could be categorized as either functional or dysfunctional.

Functional conflict is healthy, constructive disagreement between individuals or members of a group/team (O'Rourke & Collins, 2008). The conflicting parties differ in terms of opinion or ideas, but discuss their points of disagreement with an element of collaboration (Utleg, 2012). In an organizational setting, this kind of conflict is caused by such factors as:

a) competition for resources; b) differences in members' communication or interpersonal capabilities' c) personality differences, where people annoy each other because of how they act or think; d) comments or actions that cause stress; e) biases that members have against people of other groups; f) differences in viewpoints about issues relating to people's age, gender, religion, or upbringing; g) members having goals that are inconsistent with each other; and h) differences in work approaches, where members have a common goal, but different plans of actions (Ini-Ojo et al, 2014).

Functional conflicts are particularly prominent in the modern-day workplace because of the rich diversity in terms of age, nationality, gender and religion occasioned by globalization. In case of this kind of conflicts, the manager's responsibility is not to eliminate the conflict, but to manage it over time so that it enhances both the conflicting individuals and the organization (Utleg, 2012).

Dysfunctional conflict is the opposite of functional conflict – it is unhealthy, destructive disagreement between groups or individuals. Dysfunctional conflict is embedded in the notion that organizations achieve their objectives by creating structures that perfectly define job functions, authorities, and responsibilities (Utleg, 2012). Conflict arises when these systems go contrary to employees' expectations. In the workplace setting, this kind of conflict is triggered by such factors as stifling bureaucracy, disabling and disempowering cultures, unclear job requirements, heavy workloads, warring egos, favoritism, system problems, and dysfunctional work teams (Ini-Ojo et al, 2014).

It is prudent that managers adopt effective approaches for managing both functional and dysfunctional conflicts within their organization. This would help to ensure high levels of job satisfaction and increased productivity. Understanding the specific causes of conflict is fundamental to effective conflict management.

#### **IV. TACTICS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT AT THE WORKPLACE:**

Thomas and Killman (as cited in Huan & Yaznadifard, 2012) identified five tactics/strategies that individuals could use to respond to conflict, and make decisions in an environment marred by conflict:

**1) COMPETING:** This is whereby an individual pursues their own interest at the expense of the other party. The individual forces, or uses their power and authority to satisfy their own desires, with total disrespect for the wishes of the other party. The core advantage of managing conflict in this way is that enhanced organizational decisions could be chosen if the enforcer is right. The core weakness of this strategy, however, is that ethical dilemmas are likely to result as the 'forced' party may be reluctant to act in a way that compromises their interests and principles (Jones & George, 2014). Moreover, anger and aggressions could develop between the conflicting parties, resulting in decreased productivity. My personal opinion is

that this is a retrogressive way of managing conflict at the workplace because it ignores the fact that conflict exists, and does not eliminate the source of conflict in the end.

2) **ACCOMMODATING:** This is whereby an individual neglects their own concerns in favour of the other party's. This conflict-management style works best in cases where one of the conflicting parties is an expert in the given situation, and better-placed than the other party to present effective solutions. The core benefit of managing conflict in this way is that the relationship between conflicting parties is maintained. On the other hand, there is the likelihood that the more effective ideas may be missed (Huan & Yaznadifard, 2012).

3) **AVOIDING:** In this case, an individual neither pursues their own concerns nor those of the other party. This is often the case when one of the parties either pays no attention to the conflict or is not interested in winning. It could also occur when one of the parties is unwilling to create tension, and only wishes for the problem to pass by (Prause & Mujtaba, 2015). This tactic assists to maintain the relationship between the conflicting parties; however, it does not resolve conflict. A study by Montoya-Weiss and his colleagues (2001) found that employing this conflict-management strategy hurts the relationship of a team in the long term. In my view, avoidance only makes the problem worse because it ignores the fact that conflict exists, and hence, it does nothing to reduce its symptoms.

4) **COMPROMISING:** This is whereby an individual gives up their concerns after negotiations just so an agreement is reached. The individual changes their opinion and accepts the other party's viewpoint, not because they agree, but because they wish to avoid continued confrontation. The main advantage of managing conflict this way is that it maintains relationships and helps to resolve conflicts faster; however, compromising only produces sub-optimum results (Huan & Yaznadifard, 2012). It resolves conflict temporarily.

5) **COLLABORATING:** This is where the conflicting parties work together to find a solution that is mutually-beneficial. The parties collaborate with each other, hearing each other out and expressing their concerns, with the aim of finding an outcome that is satisfactory to both parties (Huan & Yaznadifard, 2012). Collaboration is the best method of managing conflict because it creates a win-win scenario, which considers the wishes of both parties and allows the parties to analyze all ideas raised in a bid to create absolutely fresh and new outcomes.

Managers could rely on the collaborative style when managing conflicts to assist create a positive environment in their workplaces. Moreover, through collaboration, optimum solutions are reached and new outcomes realized that would never have been realized with the other four styles of conflict-management. Collaboration is deemed to create a conflict-free environment in the workplace, and to increase positive outcomes within teams and in the organization as a whole. This then begs the question, 'how exactly would a manager execute the collaborating style to effectively manage conflict among employees at the workplace?'

Researchers have devised different models for fostering collaboration between conflicting parties at the workplace. One such model is that formulated by Robinson (2010), which identifies eight steps that a manager ought to follow when resolving conflict in the workplace. Executing the Collaborating Conflict-Management Style in the Workplace

**STEP 1: SET GROUND RULES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE COMMITMENT:**

The first step in the collaboration process is to set the ground rules for how parties will interact and engage with each other at the workplace (Robinson, 2010). The manager needs to ask the conflicting parties to treat each other with respect, and to take time to listen and understand each other's concerns. According to Robinson (2010), setting ground rules is important because people need rules and guidelines to govern their conduct.

**STEP 2: SELECT A FACILITATOR:**

Supervision is paramount when a team environment is aggressive by disagreement (Robinson, 2010). In some cases, the conflicting parties may be reasonable enough to deal with the situation themselves; other cases, however, will require the intervention of a facilitator, often another colleague or an executive. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), managers should develop a culture of allowing employees to solve conflicts on their own. The society recommends that executives only step in when the conflicting parties are threatening to quit over the issue, when the conflict is getting personal and parties are beginning to lose respect for each other, and when the conflict is affecting organizational success or employee morale (Lytle, 2015).

**STEP 3: UNDERSTAND THE DETAILS OF THE CONFLICT AND ITS HISTORY:**

The bottom-line here is to ask all participants to describe the conflict, and give their views on what they think the problem is, and how it started. The parties must give all relevant details about the conflict to make it possible for a solution to be found easily. All parties must be heard and given an opportunity to get involved in the resolution process (Huan & Yaznadifard, 2012). The facilitator could direct the participants to use 'I' statements as opposed to 'you' statements, and to focus on specific problems and behaviors, rather than on people. Alternatively, the facilitator could allow each party to have its say without interruption, as the other takes notes rather than presenting a conflicting side of the story. They could then categorize the problem and have both sides brainstorm solutions. This strategy is often used by the supervisor to resolve minor conflicts within the department; and it often produces positive results.

**STEP 4: CHECKING FOR FACTS AND CLARIFYING ON PERCEPTIONS:**

Participants should be advised to verify the reality of the issue at hand, and not be quick to prove the other party's arguments wrong. The facilitator should help the participants separate the facts from perceptions, and guide them to make judgment and decisions based on the former. He/she needs to assist the participants maintain a calm attitude that allows them to explore the evidence and consider the facts effectively to ensure that the conflict is resolved.

**STEP 5: IDENTIFYING THE PARTIES' INDIVIDUAL AS WELL AS SHARED NEEDS:**

It is prudent for the conflicting parties to understand each other's real needs such as the need for independence and the need for achievement. The manager needs to have a clear view of the suggestions acceptable to both parties. This assists to prevent resistance to resolution. Understanding each party's needs is crucial in helping the manager/facilitator reach a solution that is mutually-acceptable (Huan & Yaznadifard, 2012). One way to identify needs is to have both parties write down their desired changes and expectations.

**STEP 6: COME UP WITH MULTIPLE SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM:**

In this step, the facilitator summarizes the conflict based on what they have heard, and obtains agreement from participants. Possible solutions could then be brainstormed, and participants invited to discuss all options in a positive manner. Huan and Yaznadifard (2012) posit that the advantage of developing multiple options to a problem is that if one option fails, you will still have other options as back up. Options that participants agree are unworkable should be ruled out. The final options that participants agree are workable could then be summarized.

**STEP 7: DEVELOP NEXT STEPS AND ENSURE THAT ALL PARTIES AGREE:**

Next steps are the stepping-stones along the path towards resolving conflict. They are the specific strategies that are executed in order for the final solution to be implemented. With each achievable step, participants are able to measure their progress towards realizing the final solution, and resolving the conflict altogether. The next steps developed in this case should be acceptable to both parties. As Robinson (2010) points out, these steps help to build trust and to enhance relationships for working together.

**STEP 8: MAKE MUTUALLY-BENEFICIAL AGREEMENTS:**

Once acceptable options have been summarized and achievable next steps developed, the parties need to plan and come into an agreement. An agreement is mutually-beneficial if it recognizes and emphasizes the participants' shared needs (Huan & Yaznadifard, 2012). Mutual affirmation is deemed to increase participants' confidence levels, making them better-placed and more committed to handling challenges that may arise on the way. Robinson (2010) cautions that it may not be possible to satisfy all of the participants' needs during this phase; the bottom-line is to develop a decision-making rule that emphasizes the common goals and hence, generates the level of commitment needed from participants.

Robinson (2010) agrees that managers who follow these steps in resolving conflict within their organization are deemed to raise the performance and overall job satisfaction of their teams. Developing an environment where conflicts are resolved effectively makes employees more confident and more productive, given that they are able to spend more emotional energy on their work, and less energy on activities that are not helpful such as backstabbing and avoidance. Positive emotional energy spreads throughout the organization when conflicts are handled effectively, and consequently, overall productivity improves.

#### **V. MANAGING DIVERSITY-RELATED CONFLICT:**

The model suggested above can be used to resolve general conflicts at the workplace. The modern-day workplace, however, in addition to the conventional interpersonal conflicts, faces a new breed of conflict resulting from differences in personality, generation, culture, nationality, and ethnicity. Globalization and economic liberalization have made it easier for people to move across borders, and as a result, the workplace has become richly diverse. It is crucial that managers understand how to manage diversity-related conflict in their organizations so they are able to preserve working relationships as well as profitability and productivity in their organizations.

Woods (2010) expresses that diversity-related conflict can be managed through diversity training, which would make it possible for conflicting parties to be appreciative of the other party's perspective, and hence, willing to collaborate. According to the author, "collaboration is not possible unless both parties arrive at an openness to try as best as they can to understand...the other's perspective" (p.5).

Employees ought to be trained on how to interact with, and engage with people of different cultures, generations and ethnicity. This will go a long way towards not only preventing conflict among employees, but also helping them collaborate to resolve it amicably before it escalates to unprecedented levels. When employees understand the expectations of their colleagues from different backgrounds, it becomes relatively easy for them to understand their individual needs, goals and expectations. This potentially helps them to engage better in a collaborative framework to develop mutually-satisfying solutions whenever conflicts arise.

Managers and supervisors too ought to receive leadership training on how to effectively resolve diversity-related conflicts among their staff. Such training will equip them with skills on how to foster effective collaboration between conflicting parties, and how to devise solutions that are mutually-beneficial to all parties involved.

#### **VI. CONCLUSION:**

In a nutshell, the 21st century society has made huge advances in the area of conflict management. Numerous studies have been conducted to increase the society's knowledge in regard to conflict management and legal codes for promoting healthy workplaces. Nevertheless, the society continues to face challenges in managing conflict situations in diverse work environments. Conflict is a complex phenomenon that most of the time cannot be avoided whenever the human element is involved. However, conflict is not always detrimental; it could yield significant benefits to an organization if handled effectively. It is prudent that managers equip themselves with the skill on how to manage conflict in their workplaces. This will go a long way towards increasing productivity and overall job satisfaction. Maintaining an open mind, conflict management training, and diversity education are all beneficial strategies that the modern-day organization could use to ensure that conflict is effectively-managed.

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