

KINDLING THE HIDDEN FIRE : EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

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“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.”

-Albert Einstein

People with divergent personalities, perceptions, attitudes and values occupy different positions in organizations. These positions often have differing or contrasting job charts, different levels of status attached to them and also foster competition among employees. People of different divisions in organizations have to compete for scarce resources in order to achieve their targets / objectives. As a result, in every human endeavor conflict exists.

Conflict exists wherever there is social interaction. It emerges as an outcome of interdependencies and interactions between and among people. Conflict is as old as human existence itself. Historical evidences indicate that conflict existed even in prehistoric times when man was at the stage of homo erectus evolving to be Homosapien, on the path to become a modern man. As man developed himself into a hunting society, there are proofs of feuds among tribes for cattle, precious stones, etc. Feuds also existed within the tribe and between clans. Over thousands of years man evolved into an agrarian society where feuds took place for land and water. In Indian epics there are several instances of conflict, especially in Ramayana and Mahabharatha. In modern industrial society, we come across several kinds of conflicts in organizations that sprout out of a number of sources.

An individual experiences conflict due to many pressures exerted on him by many groups to which he belongs and the demands of various roles he must play. The socialization process of an individual itself is also viewed as conflict.

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Meaning of conflict

Conflict crops up as change disrupts the existing balance of resources and power thereby straining relations between the people involved. It is the perceived incompatibility between one goal, value or need and another goal, value or need. Conflict may exist within the same person or between a person and another entity. In organizations it shoots up when two interdependent parties perceive that they have incompatible goals and scarce resources, and there is interference from each other in achieving these goals or gaining the resources.

Conflict is a state of mind characterized by indecision, uncertainty, dilemma, tension and anxiety. It is as though there are a number of forces, somewhere in the brain, each moving in opposite and non-complementary directions. An individual experiences conflict when he is expected to behave in two or more incompatible ways at the same time (Harigopal, 1995)

An analysis of definitions given by various thinkers indicate that:

1. Conflict is a state of mind
2. It occurs due to incompatibility of goals or values
3. Conflict occurs when the existing balance of power and resources is disturbed.
4. Frustration leads to conflict
5. Differences of opinion may had to conflict

In its simplest terms, conflict is a bye-product of growth, change or innovation. Like change itself, conflict is practically inevitable and when handled properly, can provide better communication, guarantee results and improve employee morale and productivity.

Traditional vs. Modern view about conflict management

Classical view: The clanical approach of the 1930s and 40s viewed conflict as an undesirable phenomenon, an organizational abnormality, symptomatic of improperly designed communication and reward systems. Conflict was regarded as a negative process associated with outcomes like anger, resentment, confusion, agitation, violence, turbulence, destruction and irrationality. It disrupts the smooth

functioning of organizational processes and creates chaos and disorder. It was thought that conflicts indicate a malfunctioning within the organization and hence should be avoided altogether. Well-managed organizations would have ways of avoiding conflict altogether. Adherence to principles of classical management and scientific analysis of jobs will lead to cooperation in organization. If by any chance, conflicts were to develop, the management can easily and quickly resolve them. Taylor, the Father of scientific management, felt that quarrels, compromise and negotiation would be entirely discarded in labour management relations when everybody abides by the laws of the situation.

The Behavioral view: From late 1940 through the mid 70s, conflict theory was dominated by the behaviorist approach in which conflict was seen as an inevitable fact of organizational life to be recognized and addressed. During this period, the emphasis was on finding and using appropriate methods for resolving conflicts by managers. This school of thought highlighted that since organizations are composed of individuals with different perceptions of goals and differing value systems, conflict is bound to arise in organizations. Agreements over priorities, time schedules, method of doing a job, allocation of resources give way to conflicts. Behavioralists believed that conflicts need not always be detrimental, as sometimes it may focus on problems and instigate a search for better and more innovative solutions to problems. Though this school of thought maintained that conflict is inevitable and will lead to creativity in problem solving and hence beneficial to organization, yet they opined that conflict should be resolved once it arises as it is harmful and detrimental to an organization. Achieving co-operation is the very essence of any organization. The Behavioralistic view reflected “ a popular pre-occupation with morals, human relations and co-operation and the general value that peace is good and conflict is bad”. During 1960s, the focus was on the structural sources of conflict, particularly for conflicts that occurred between various functional departments and the choice of methods in managing conflicts.

The Interactionist view: While behaviorists believed that conflict is inevitable and must be accepted, interactionists argued that conflict is not only acceptable but should be encouraged. It has a broader scope. The inevitability of conflict results from the interaction between an organizations imposed struggle for limited rewards and the innate aggressive and competitive instincts

in people. This school of thought argues that if harmony, peace tranquility and cooperation prevails in an organization over a longer period, the group will be prone to become non responsible to creativity, innovation and change and may become contended with the situation. Hence, a minimum and optimum level of conflict has to be maintained to make the organization viable, creative and self-critical. The mission of the management is not to create harmony, and cooperation, but to attain its goals effectively. Hence managers must find ways and means to increase the beneficial effects of conflicts and reduce the dysfunctional or negative effects. Interactionists maintain that stimulation of conflicts in organization is necessary to make the organization viable, creative and filled with diversion and excitement. Conflict is integral to the nature of change. It is an inherent structural component in all-social relations.

Thus, conflict management travelled its journey through avoidance, acceptance and encouragement and stimulation over the years. The current thought acknowledges the inevitability of conflict and focuses it as a useful tool or vehicle to shake the organization from stereotype and contention to innovation and creativity.

Consequences: Conflicts may yield either beneficial effects or negative effects in organizations.

Beneficial Consequences: When properly managed, conflicts can have beneficial consequences.

- ▶ Motivate individual to do better and to work harder. One's abilities and talents come to the forefront in a conflict situation
- ▶ Satisfy certain psychological needs like dominance, aggression, esteem and ego, and thereby provide an opportunity for the constructive use and release of aggressive urges
- ▶ Provide creative, constructive and innovative ideas
- ▶ Add variety to one's organizational life
- ▶ Provide diagnostic information that can generate cues for better organization and management to prevent occurrence of similar problems
- ▶ Facilitate an understanding of the problem, people and interrelationships between people, better co-ordination among individuals and departments, in addition to strengthening intra-groups relationships

Dysfunctional consequences

- ▶ Conflicts affect individual and organizational performance. Resolving conflicts consumes a considerable amount of managerial time and energy which could be more productively spent in the absence of conflicts
- ▶ In a conflict situation, people may promote their self-interests or personal gains at the cost of others in the organization
- ▶ Intense conflicts over a prolonged period affect individuals emotionally and physically and give rise to psychosomatic disorders.
- ▶ Time spent on conflicts, if costed, could mean considerable amount of money wasted
- ▶ Conflicts may lead to work sabotage, employee morale problems, decline in the market share of product / services and consequent loss of productivity.
- ▶ Organization – related individual consequences:
 - ▶ Absenteeism
 - ▶ Job dissatisfaction
 - ▶ Apathy or indifference to work
 - ▶ Job stress and burnout
 - ▶ Disloyalty
 - ▶ Work sabotage
 - ▶ Employee turnover
 - ▶ Increased resistance to change
 - ▶ Decreased information sharing

Types of conflict

Conflict has been classified in different ways. Following are some of the classifications.

- ▶ Realistic and non-realistic.
- ▶ Inter psychic and psychosocial conflicts

- ▶ Conflict of interest and conflict of understanding:
- ▶ Intra-personal, interpersonal, organizational, inter-organizational and revolutionary conflict. Intra-individual conflict involves frustration, goal conflict, and role conflict and ambiguity. Frustration occurs when goal-directed behavior is blocked. Goal conflict occurs when a goal has both positive and negative features or when an individual has two or more competing goals thus blocking one another. three types of goal conflict are generally identified.
- ▶ Approach – approach conflict, where the individual is motivated to approach two or more positive but mutually exclusive goals.
- ▶ Approach – avoidance conflict, where a single goal has both positive and negative characteristics and the individual is motivated to approach and avoid it at the same time. This has relevance to the analysis of organizational behavior.
- ▶ Avoidance – avoidance conflict, where the individual is motivated to avoid two or more negative but mutually exclusive goals.
- ▶ Role conflict and ambiguity arises as individual is expected to play various roles and a clash there from.
- ▶ Organizational conflict includes Hierarchical conflict, Functional conflict, etc. Line – staff conflict and Formal – informal conflicts exist between formal and informal organizations.
- ▶ Bargaining, bureaucratic and systems conflict
- ▶ Perceived, latent and manifest conflicts
- ▶ Organized and unorganized conflict

While there are different kinds of conflicts explained above, all conflicts in organization fall within one of *six categories* mentioned below (Arnold, 1993)

- ▶ External (conflicts related to competition, the market place, regulation, or on adversarial take over)
- ▶ Management process and style (conflicts stemming from leadership style, the decision making process, or organizational structure)

- ▶ Strategic direction (conflicts over the company's mission direction, objectives and strategies)
- ▶ Operational (conflicts related to issue such as "quality verses schedule" or "design-to-production transition".)
- ▶ Interdepartmental (conflicts that occur when divisions compete with themselves rather than with other companies)
- ▶ Value system (conflicts over business philosophy)

Dynamic process of conflict development

Conflict before taking its final shape, undergoes a gradual process of development. For effective conflict management, it is necessary to understand the developmental stages of conflict.

Pondy (1957) identified five stages of conflict episode viz. latent conflict – the conditions that lead to conflict, perceived conflict – cognition, felt conflict – effect, manifest conflict – behavior and conflict aftermath - conditions and consequences of conflict.

Arnold (1993) explained conflict development process in five sequential steps viz.

- ✦ individuals seek support for their cause, forming "we - they" boundaries
- ✦ polarization and conflict become more visible over time
- ✦ conflict touches every aspect of the organization, from board room to boiler room
- ✦ emotions and hostilities increase
- ✦ Conflict becomes life- threatening

Different ways of reacting to conflict

Conflict management strategies are different from conflict resolution. Conflict management brings conflict under control, whereas conflict resolution attempts to terminate the conflict. Conflict management recognizes the importance of positive conflict in relationships and may be a strategy to prevent conflicts from being resolved. However, these terms are interchangeably used in the conflict literature.

Three basic strategies for conflict resolution are : lose-lose approach where both parties lose, win-lose approach where one party emerges as a winner and the other party loses and win-win strategy where energies and creativity are aimed at solving the problems so that both parties emerge as winners.

People respond in different personal styles to resolve conflicts in groups:

- ✦ The tough battler seeks his own goals, he demonstrates that he is right by using facts that support his position and views conflict as nuisance
- ✦ The friendly helper overvalues the importance of his relationship with the group and undervalues his own personal goals, he thinks that conflict should be avoided
- ✦ The jelly fish simply removes himself, either mentally or physically, from the conflict. He sees conflict as a hopeless, useless and punishing experience
- ✦ Compromiser actively seeks to find some middle ground, using voting and rules to avoid confrontation. He strives to develop a workable solution, rather than the best solution.
- ✦ The problem solver actively seeks to satisfy the goals of himself as well as others. Conflict is natural and helpful. He insists on getting disagreements into open, so that they can be worked out and a greater commitment to solution.

Depending on the conflict situation, a person may react in different styles to suit the situation. A person's behaviour in any situation is influenced by his emotionality, self-concept, the extent of fear of punishment and behavioural rigidity / flexibility that he has, in addition to how clear he is of the goals, tasks etc., to be performed.

Conflict management process

Conflict can be managed by the conflicting parties themselves by employing negotiation skills or by a third party intervention i.e. through mediation.

Arnold (1993) explained conflict resolution process in ten steps.

- ✦ Specify the conflict in terms of its identity, location, time and magnitude of each
- ✦ Describe what is outside the conflict
- ✦ Identify the distinctions about the conflict

- ✦ Test these distinctions for cause
- ✦ Identify values of the parties and your own
- ✦ Adopt a winning, opportunistic philosophy
- ✦ Develop criteria, determine what each party in the conflict wants to achieve, preserve and avoid
- ✦ Prioritize into “Absolute” and “Highly desirable” criteria
- ✦ Generate possible resolutions
- ✦ Evaluate and choose the best resolution and test alternatives against criteria.

Conflict can be creatively resolved by following different approaches, the most comprehensive as mentioned by Dunn (University of Arizona)

- ✦ Listen objectively to the other persons views
- ✦ Let the situation pass without comment
- ✦ Reflect : Both parties should understand the other persons view and check with each other
- ✦ Vent emotion : The affected person should be encouraged to express his feeling, to get every thing off his chest. Rational discussion and empathy can follow
- ✦ Compromise : Both parties give up something to come up with a win-win solution
- ✦ Gently confront with facts : If the above approaches do not work, confront the person head-on with the realities of the situation. Facts have to be used and not judgments
- ✦ Directly confront, with feelings : Both parties should openly express their feelings as to what is bothering them and encourage each other to react to feelings.
- ✦ Productively argue : If nothing else works, get the underlying conflict out in the open and thrash it out . But fight fair and preserve the relationships

Managers have to be sensitive to the conflicts and realize that conflict management is a gradual process. Conflicts have to be managed creatively to yield beneficial consequences.

Skills required to manage conflicts

Conflicting parties will have to possess the following combinations of skills to manage conflicts effectively.

Understanding	Conceptualizing	Sensitivity
Analytical	Objectivity	Planning
Initiative and proactive	Observation	Empathetic
Honesty and enthusiasm	Persuasiveness	Active listening
Communication	Coordination	Probing
Information collection	Influencing	Flexibility
Result oriented	Patience	

A Multi-dimensional approach to conflict management

Different individuals react to conflict in different ways due to several factors. Philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and management thinkers analyzed the factors from the perspective of their respective field of disciplines. Infact, factors from all these disciplines would contribute to understand, analyze and react to conflict in a particular way. The following aspects may influence the individual's behavior during conflict.

- ✦ Social factors: include Culture, Length of relationship of the conflicting parties, Status in the organization, Leadership styles and Knowledge about the people involved in conflict
- ✦ Psychological factors: include differences in ideology and value system, earlier experience in conflict handling, multiplicity of roles and needs, goals and choices, motivation and hygiene factors, task role, emotionality – expression of emotions in public, individual maturity, ability to influence others, degree of self – confidence, risk taking behavior and intent of conflict
- ✦ Political dynamics within an organization: include organization factors like goals, structures, procedures, etc; size of the conflicting parties; time of conflict; context of the conflict and power - power, the use of power, or the lack of power is at the center of any conflict

Challenges for next decade : empowerment through conflict management

Organizations are set to undergo changes in future due to rapid changes taking place in the requirements of customers and stakeholders. This will stimulate conflicts and pose challenges to people in organizations. When organizational members are sensitive to these challenges, the constructive conflict because of its beneficial effects will lead to empowerment of conflicting parties. Empowering is an act of building, developing and increasing the power of people through cooperation, sharing and working together. Empowerment is achieved through focused freedom, and this depends on the manager's underlying philosophy towards people in the organization.. Some of the challenges conflict management poses for near future are mentioned below.

- ✦ In the market scenario, a number of multinational organizations with establishments in different geographic locations in the world which recruit global workforce with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds may pose challenges to managers in human resource management for handling cross-national and cross-cultural gaps. When people from different parts of the organization with different values and philosophies are forced to work together, strife is inevitable.
- ✦ As a result of globalization everyone in the universe is interconnected in the flow of information, money, goods and services. Liberalization of market forces led to international competition. The market has now become a battleground for each industry in which firms of different nations compete in different ways which also affects the nation's prosperity.
- ✦ Advancement of science and technology introduced new techniques and methods of production in organizations for effective and efficient use of resources which might stimulate conflict among the workforce. This was clearly evident right from scientific management days. Use of computer for information collection, processing and decision making has already become an integral part of manager's routine. Global networking through electronic media make the job of managers much more challenging in exploring and exploiting opportunities for widening their franchises.

- ✦ Competition among the producers and heightened demand for the best products and services from customers is forcing organizations to be innovative to produce customized products in a vast array of choices in order to withstand the market forces and retain their market segment in view of liberalized market economy.
- ✦ As a result of fierce competition in the market, organizations are prompted to introduce changes in the processes relating to production, distribution, sales, human resource management and financials management. This redesigning makes the jobs challenging and difficult and necessitates people to do their jobs differently than what they did previously. People occupying different positions may perceive this change as a threat and feel insecure and hence conflict may sprout.
- ✦ As multi-level hierarchy of functions and departments is disappearing and a flat organizational structure is the order of the day. As a result of fierce competition from all quarters of the globe, customers' increased quality requirements for goods and services and intensive time pressures, organizations will be forced towards more flat and flexible organizational structures. In an era of rapid change open, flexible responsive organization is of crucial importance. The restructuring of working relationships in teams, with multiplicity of roles and memberships in different teams, self-directed work teams might emerge to respond to the situation.
- ✦ Trend is towards increasing the participation of stakeholders in many business processes and decisions. Stakeholders of different interest groups possessing different goal directed behavior might foster conflicts.
- ✦ Marriage of organizational profits to social events i.e. of late organizations have begun to look at the business from the social point of view and environmental and ecological restoration has gained focus.
- ✦ Organizations are on the path to becoming learning organizations facilitating the learning of all its members and continuously transforming themselves. Participation, openness, trust and responsibility are all concepts encouraged in learning organizations.

Conflict management should lead to empowerment of people in organizations. Features of an empowered organization are

- ✦ Expanding the skills and tasks required for a job
- ✦ Enhancing the content of a job
- ✦ Unfolding creativity and innovation
- ✦ Better human relations and high morale
- ✦ Greater control over decisions about the work as a result of participation
- ✦ Customers satisfaction
- ✦ Team work
- ✦ Better communication and healthy organizational environment
- ✦ Clarity of goals and mission

Conclusion

Realizing the interdependence in performing any activity and even to lead a successful and peaceful life, people may face a variety of conflicts in almost all walks of life in organizations with their interface to members at organization, family and society. People have to reconcile and co-ordinate with several members and stakeholders to achieve the desired results. This necessitates the need for taking conflicts in a positive way in order to generate processes, systems, structures to improve the effectiveness of individuals and teams. A culture has to be built up where in team members will be encouraged to participate and share their ideas, unlock the creativity and innovation and interact freely with each other for institutional learning and growth. Crisis of conflict may be seen as a chance to bring all the issues and concerns in to the forefront and people may openly vent out their feeling leading to cooperation and synergy of energies, and empowerment. An empowered team has all the talents and skills of the players to create even better results.

The effectiveness of managers depends on how well they understand the underlying dynamics of conflict, which may be all together different from its expression, and whether they can identify the crucial tactical points for intervention.

Conflict management some times becomes programmed and institutionalized in organizations as in the case of decision making process. To a great extent, an organization's success depends on its ability to structure and operate appropriate mechanism to stimulate and manage a variety of conflict phenomenal. Increasing nature of technological development and competitive global market demanding higher levels of quality of service, greater sensitivity to customers needs has prompted organizations to create and manage organizational culture that foster commitment, responsibility and the development of individual potentiality for the organizational betterment. Conflict management is people-oriented but at the same time all the processes should be focused on achieving strategic aims, goals and mission of the organization.

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