

Types of Organisational Conflicts

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Abstract

Conflict is part of the reality we find in all organizations, regardless of their dimension or activity area. It appears as a consequence of human interaction within organizational processes and it can significantly influence the way of functioning and the obtained results.

The limited organizational resources, the differences of opinion, different value systems, and different behaviors – can easily create animosity among a collectivity and which, in time, can generate conflicts of larger or smaller impact.

Conflict has its own dynamic that has a variety of sources. Failing to identify those sources and come up with a viable solution, can lead to the spreading of the conflict which will involve more and more organizational resources.

Keywords: *conflict, sources of conflict, types of conflicts, leadership, results*

1 Defining the conflict

Developing the abilities to handle a conflict represents an important leadership characteristic. Due to the lack of formal mechanisms, leaders have to identify those elements that facilitate the quick solving of the conflicts or keep them in an area that does not threaten the collectivity stability or compromise the promoted vision.

Within an organization, its members come with their own expertise, knowledge and experience gained over time. Moreover, they bring their own models of behavior and values that they believe in, which will be changed in the interaction with the others.

In time, due to common activities, we notice an increase of the common interest area, when the differences are minimizing. It is a process that takes place mainly because of the organizational culture.

However, if leaders do not pay attention to the existing differences, to managing the competitiveness within the organization, we can notice a development of the individual and aggressive approaches that can create a climate of distrust and expectance (Horn, 2004).

In this situation we can notice that the desire for collaboration is inhibited (Fullan, 2001) and the interactions among the organizational members decrease significantly. Producing and using the knowledge will take place mostly individually, or within small collectivities.

Each side will manage its own intellectual assets and interaction with others will be treated skeptically and attentively, not to allow the others to access an important source of power.

The conflict presents several main characteristics that we will emphasize in order to successfully manage this organizational phenomenon:

- ◆ There are two or more sides involved
- ◆ Conflict of interests
- ◆ Perception of a loss or threat
- ◆ Interdependence
- ◆ Sequence

Conflict represents a major topic in the organizational life, as a result of the impact over its functionality (Leibling, 2005). The negative perception over it is, up to a certain point, balanced with another approach, towards the positive effects of a conflict.

According to them, it is necessary for the organizational personnel not to overreact with their attention towards harmony, and they should focus on reaching the established objectives. Therefore, it is important to develop the capacity to monitor and analyze what happens around us and notice the initiatives to solve the problems of the organization (Williams, 2005).

During these processes, it is possible that, one way or another, we are in conflict with other organizational components, fact that should not make us feel threatened. It is a possibility to maintain the organization alive, to encourage creativity among different hierarchical levels.

Baron (1990) says that the conflict is “an interactive process, manifested by incompatibility, lack of agreements or dissonance within a social entity (individuals, groups, organizations, etc.).

Moorhead and Griffin¹ (1995) consider conflict as “disagreement between sides that can positively or negatively influence the involved persons”.

¹ Moorhead, G., Griffin, R., *Organizational Behavior*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1995, p. 222

The definition of the conflict is as follows: “a state of discord, disagreement and lack of compatibility among several persons or group of persons that can, sometimes, lead to violence.”
(www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict).

In our opinion, **conflict represents the major discord that can appear among two or more sides that interact, as a consequence of taking into consideration the lack of compatibility between their positions and can distinguish a (mutual) threat in satisfying their own needs, objectives etc.**

The organizational conflict is unavoidable and it manifests in various forms. Even if, maybe, it is perceived more as a negative phenomenon, nowadays, more and more specialists, leaders, and managers, see it as an important part in building a society, exchanging ideas, experiences within it.

Moreover, conflict does not exclude the idea of competition. Kept within normal levels, competition, internal or external, proves to be an important agent in amplifying and capitalizing employee's potential.

The competition can appear among two workshops in order to see which of them can reach a better productivity, or a limited number of slacks; it represents an action with important benefits for the involved organization.

In the described situation, the two organizations subdivisions are not in conflict, but they compete in order to be recognized spiritually (ex.: diplomas, congratulations, pictures in the local newspapers etc) and/ or materially (bonuses, presents etc.).

However, when the members of the two subdivisions start sabotaging, changing the functional parameters of their competitors' equipment, it is very possible that this competition will generate a major conflict between the two groups, followed by bad consequences on the organizational environment and the obtained performances.

We can notice that, in order to speak about a conflict, we need a major lack of compatibility in terms of objectives or actions (Larry, A., Rowland, J., 2005) that can seriously threaten the status of the other side.

A major lack of disagreement or a competition among two or more sides does not automatically lead toward a conflict. Therefore, we must not react in the given circumstances as in a zero-sum game (with a winner and a loser) in which the actions of the others bring me significant losses.

This kind of approach can prove to be dangerous for those who think and promote it, placing themselves in a very sensible position generating and involving organizational conflicts.

We consider that in order to better comprehend conflicts, it is useful to know their classification and try to emphasize the particularities of each, in order to recognize and apply the corresponding methods for their annihilation.

2 Types of conflicts

Conflicts can be categorized according to many criteria that emphasize their specifics.

According to the analyzed level:

- ◆ Intrapersonal conflicts
- ◆ Interpersonal conflicts

Intrapersonal conflicts happen when a one finds oneself in a situation that requires certain decisions or behaviors that do not correspond to one's values.

The causing factors of this type of conflict can come from the inner side of the involved person, or the external environment.

If the leader works with a very agreeable person, he/she creates an unstrained climate within the organization, but it cannot reach the expected performances. This implies certain punishments from the leader.

The situation is an undesirable one, but the leader has to interfere in order to prevent this to happen with the other members of the organization, to avoid their not taking into consideration the established values.

A similar conflict can encounter when within a certain group managed by a leader, there is a family member. He/she has to manage the obligations toward their family together with the ones of the group he sustains, which implies a huge responsibility.

Another source can be lack of interest, values or different objectives of the person involved in a certain activity.

This is the case when we are required to be part of a certain project or activity that we do not believe in and it can become a threat for our group or organization.

The greater the pressure, the greater the amplification of the conflict and, if there limits to be exceeded, it is possible that this conflict will be moved from the intrapersonal area to the interpersonal one.

In this context, the given person has to re-evaluate his/her priorities or value system and has to take a decision about involving or not involving in this specific activity.

Another modality that can place one into a high state of conflict is when one is being required two or more activities simultaneously, activities that are in contradiction to each other. This situation can involve persons that occupy formal posts, and also informal organizational leaders.

Intrapersonal conflicts can be easily kindled by constant pressures coming from groups from inside or outside the organization in order to fulfill their own interests.

The exerted pressures, their dynamic, represent important potential sources for intrapersonal conflicts and can lead to a quick exhaustion of organizational managers and leaders, if they did not manage to develop certain abilities specific for the interactions with the stakeholders.

Another difficult situation that can take us into an intrapersonal conflict can be the ambiguity that characterizes the expectances or objectives that we should fulfill.

Our desire for a strong identity and individualism within the organization, the wish to establish powerful position of what we are in the organization and what we have to do takes us into a process that requires considerable resources that generate an increased stress.

The elements presented earlier place numerous pressures on the affected person and will lead to a number of internal clashes that, after their amplification can transform into major organizational conflicts.

Interpersonal conflicts are the ones that take place between two or more persons and can involve persons belonging to the same group, or different groups.

This type of conflict is frequently encountered and can take various forms. Interpersonal conflicts, even if it is initiated by two or three persons, in time it can involve more and more persons, up to hundreds, or even thousands.

Historically, there are many conflicts between areas or countries, conflicts that were consequence of several personal misunderstandings, but attracted important resources for significant periods of time.

According to the amplexness of the conflict:

- ◆ Intra-group conflict
- ◆ Inter-group conflict

The intra-group conflict appears inside the same group and can be generated by multiple causes. Among the most encountered we can mention the difference of comprehension of the actions that are to be met, the status

inside the group, the relationships between the old members and the new ones etc.

The discrepancies that we perceive between our expectancies about our role that we have inside the group, about how we are to be treated, and the specific way these things happen inside the group we are part of, make us take an attitude at a certain point.

If the taken actions are not considered legitimate or are viewed as a threat for the status of the organization members, then we find ourselves in a conflict with them.

Of course, stating different opinions or manifesting certain attitudes, regardless of their nature, should not automatically lead to a conflict. This is the moment when the main role is played by the leader and his ability to manage the situation and identify the best solutions.

The appearance and maintenance of a conflict within a group can prove to be benefic for the group. Even though from the harmonization point of view we are losing some ground, there is a lot earned in the creativity and innovation domain.

Promoting an open climate, a dialogue between the group members encourages the communication process and idea, knowledge circulation. This is the way organizational learning is being accelerated, at the group or individual level.

A positive influence will take place for the taken decisions, as a consequence of the circulation of a richer quantity of information.

At the same time, the time required for taking certain decisions is decreasing, as a consequence of the previous knowledge of the important elements that were discussed and of the fact that via debate, via the proposed solutions, the group members will identify themselves quicker with the taken decisions, which will lead to a better support.

In a group where members try to avoid conflict at any price, they are afraid to openly show their disagreement or lack of support for a certain idea or a certain project.

The inter-group conflict appears between two or more groups and can be connected to the differences on organizational priorities or on its important components, the access to the limited resources, the status that certain groups want to have over others, etc.

It is a type of conflict that scarcely appears, but its impact and area of influence are consistent and abiding.

The inter-group conflict opposes one group to another one, or one group to other ones. Theoretically, this implies that all the group members

are in conflict with all the members of the opposed groups. There is a saying: “all against everybody!”

Practically, things are more gradated, because the informal relations can have a variety of forms, and a person can be part of more groups at the same time. We get to the situations when a person belonging to one group that has conflicts with another one meets in a third group with a person from the second one, the adversary group.

In the third group there is a warm environment and a strong solidarity, and the activities of the members are based on open, sincere interactions that greatly satisfy the involved ones.

Thus, we can see that in clashing situations the reaction of certain collectivity members can deviate from the average, and this deviation can be in the positive or the negative direction!

However, there are many times when conflict can embrace only the form of the interactions that take place between the representatives of the given groups. They are considered legitimate to present and fight for the interests of those they represent.

While the sides are involved in the declared conflict which is visible through tight relationships at the representative levels, at the member level we can notice normal relationships.

Unlike the previous situation, the interactions between different group members take place in inconsistent environments. The value systems, the attitudes and shown behaviors can substantially differ from one group to another.

In the intra-group conflicts, solving the conflict was facilitated by the **cultural uniformity** of its members. This fact can insure the prerequisites for a higher functioning of the mechanisms for solving the conflicts and the identified solutions could easily integrate into certain behavioral models, already known and accepted.

In the inter-group conflicts, the cultural elements are often used to emphasize the differences, even the superiority of one group among the others. Is it used the following collocation: “we and they”.

It is interesting to notice that, in inter-group conflicts, we find a change in the group members’ behavior not only in relationships with those outside the group, but also with the other group colleagues.

When faced with a threat for the entire group, the conflict, group members feel more and more in right to show hostile attitudes and behaviors.

The amplified cohesion of the group becomes visible at an announcing level, in the leaders’ speeches and their members’, inside and outside it, but also in the taken actions and attitudes.

The group characteristics can substantially change, depending on the intensity and length of the conflict. In order to be able to face the new challenges, the group members emphasize the behavioral norms and protection mechanisms.

The greater the pressure is, the greater is also the possibility for the leadership to be taken by an authoritarian person, ready to take on the risk of solving the critical situation.

If the chosen strategy is one of a win-loss type, then the leader will take aggressive approaches toward the other sides involved. The determination and sometimes even the brutality of the chosen solutions can determine the members to truly believe that this is the only viable solution for the other side's loss.

Even though a significant part of the members does not agree with the taken approaches, not even the person, they avoid to show these disagreements or to take on the lead to solve this situation.

Implicitly, they will consider their position as a compromise with a very small time horizon, so that after the reconciliation, they will interfere and tell their points of view, so the situation will come back to normal.

This is a theoretical assumption that has been proven wrong many times by reality. When the new leader takes on, he/she will desire to consolidate his/her authority by creating and developing specific mechanisms that will assure this evolution.

The promptitude the leader must take decisions and actions in order to protect group interests determine him/her to avoid the consulting system applied earlier, that is the discussion on possible approaches or solutions.

Step by step, we will notice the appearance of new sources of conflicts, different of nature and a transformation from the inter-group area to the intra-group area.

According to the sources of the conflict:

- ◆ Conflict of interests
- ◆ Conflict of objectives
- ◆ Process (action) conflict
- ◆ Emotional conflict

The conflict of interests refers to the necessity of the involved sides to satisfy certain needs, either materially, either spiritually. In order to get this satisfaction, appears the need of confronting other persons that want to capitalize their limited resources, thus generating a conflict between all the potentially affected.

In this category we can include conflicts that ensure food, shelter, etc. but also elements of social inclusion or obtaining a certain status within the collectivity.

The conflict of objectives is connected to the previous one and it refers to the level we fix concerning the results we want to obtain. It is similar, at some point, to the process we find during negotiations, where generally we establish initial levels that are beyond the levels that we consider acceptable for the given situation.

Via the successive negotiations that take place, we are willing to lower these limits, but not under a certain value.

Another situation is when the presented and supported objectives are considered to be incongruent, and this is when mutual pressures take place in order for one side to give up and the other to impose its point of view.

We can mention a compatibility of objectives; referring to the possibility certain parts have to simultaneously reach the established targets. In a situation of compatibility, the parts satisfy their interests, and their actions are no longer part of the conflict area.

However, if there is this comprehension that the established objectives are seriously threatened by the others, that when the other side will reach their targets you will lose your own, we are facing a situation that rapidly moves toward the conflict area.

The process (action) conflict appears when there are major differences on the directions to be taken. Each involved side supports its project that, according to their opinion, is in nature to insure the normal attaining of the proposed objectives.

It is a conflict where the organizational resources are at stake, their managing and directing, in nature to send important signals regarding their priorities or the importance of certain organizational areas.

The emotional conflict appears when different value systems are confronted, symbols, etc., that are in nature to send strong emotional messages. Emotions, feelings associated with certain symbols or actions can find themselves on opposite sides and can generate very aggressive reactions from the involved parts.

Practically, each type of conflict mentioned earlier has a strong emotional part that amplifies its scope.

According to its structure:

- ◆ Structured conflict
- ◆ Unstructured conflict

The structured conflict is the one that involves certain well established steps. There are predefined models and mechanisms that foresee its course and also its solutions.

The structured or institutionalized conflicts are the appanage of the formal structures where the elaborated procedures strictly in this purpose represent a guide for those involved.

An example of structured conflict is the one between the trade unions and the management of a certain organization, where the involved parts have to respect certain steps when launching and reconciling a conflict.

The unstructured conflict is the one that appears spontaneously, most of the times informally for which do not exist special procedures in order to solve them. The unstructured conflicts can cause major problems due to their unpredictable character and due to the power of manifestation.

The longer the conflict lasts, the more resources it attracts and immobilizes and the generated effects can have a major impact on the organization.

The promptitude of the solution and the minimization of the negative impact depend a lot on the reaction capacity of the leader and on his/her abilities to solve this type or organizational challenge.

3 Conclusions

The important thing is not only the conflict, but also the way we react to it, our involvement in these processes. The attitudes and the behaviors we adopt can increase the chances of reconciliation, can postpone it or considerably feed it.

Our reaction can be a strong one because we feel in the right to reach certain objectives, to act in the chosen manner. The greater the threat we feel, the greater the intensity of the reaction to the elements we analyze.

If our comprehension about the others' actions will extend not only on our person, but also on the near ones that we consider in our care, and this is when we will try to empower our answer to the "enemy".

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