Management of Workplace Conflict

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Abstract: In order to survive, an organisation must focus its efforts on generating revenue in the face of competition. Sometimes the need to focus on beating the competition can get derailed by internal organizational conflict. In order to keep your employees focused on being productive and bettering the competition, it is necessary to understand the causes of organizational conflict. Conflict, if not closely checked may be the cause of the downfall of an organisation. It is therefore very important that those in leadership or management positions should make sure that conflict is handled carefully so that employees concentrate on their jobs rather than on fights.

Keywords: Management, conflict, workplace, organisations, causes

INTRODUCTION

According to Jaffee [1] organisational conflict stemmed from the industrial revolution era, where workers who felt that their rights and conditions of service were not palatable, fought against their employers who were exploiting them. They rebelled through industrial actions like collective resistance, sabotage, absenteeism and strikes. The causes or sources of these conflicts Jaffee [1] further attributed to two main sources i.e. individual tension which according to him arises individuals with different aims and objectives have to work together in same organisation with a single goal and objective and this is bound to create tension amongst the individuals. He also associated the source of conflict in the organisation to division of labour because according to him, employees in an organisation are assigned specific tasks in specific departments and this too can generate conflict within the organisation [1].

De Dreu and Gelfand [2] on the other hand, identify three broad sources of workplace conflict which according to them are scarce resources and conflicts of interest which give rise to these resources conflicts; secondly the desire to maintain and promote a positive aspect of oneself which invariably gives rise to identity and value conflicts. And lastly, the need to hold the same shared and socially accepted views and beliefs which also can give rise to conflicts of understanding.

According to Breen, Abernethy, Abbot and Tulsky [3], differences of opinion are predictably common in difficult, high-pressure work environment; such as intensive care unit, emergency department and operation room. Inaccurate, incorrect and poorly communicated information is common among the conflict parties. Breakdown leads to misunderstanding of staff and conflict among team members.

Poor communication can readily lead to compromised patient safety [4, 5] and has been recognised as a root cause of 35% of anaesthesia-related, sentinel events. This regularly occurs when only one member of the team has the authority to access the bits of information, such as a preoperative laboratory test or consultation. Even if all of them have same opportunity to access the same information, different individuals may have different perceptions of the meaning, based on their specialised understanding and role expectations.

Conflicts arising from role expectations are especially prevalent in intensive care units of hospitals. Most of the health care centres have their own hierarchical decision-making procedure.

Causes of conflict

Organisational causes of conflict are consequence of the characteristics of organisational design, limited resources and characteristics of organisational systems such as, compensations, decision-making, planning and budgeting [6]. Some aspects of organisational causes of conflict are [6].

- Dependence in work activities. When a member of an organisation cannot start his / her job, since another member has not finished his / her job, or if an individual significantly influences a colleague's job; then this might cause conflict.
- Differentiation of organisational units and incompatibility of operating goals. The specialisation of organisational units (manufacturing, purchasing, finance, sales etc) manifests in everyday work as differences in working manners, goals and culture. These differences, as well as difference in their operative goals create a potential for emergence of horizontal conflict.
- Sharing limited resources. Resources in an organisation are related to power and influence, with each department trying to obtain a larger share. These resources are not only financial, but are also related to information technology, human resources, redistribution of employees etc. the insufficiency of resources can also be a foundation for a potential conflict.
- Compensation system. The compensation system has a direct influence on people's

behaviour, their satisfaction and feeling for justice and equality. In this situation, conflict can start because of inconsistencies, which means that the employees in different departments might be rewarded by using different criteria. Salaries of employees will always be a cause of dissatisfaction of individuals, because it is difficult to be objective and measure all the employees' achievements and contributions at their workplaces. However, it is possible to standardise rational and acceptable.

- Organisational indistinctness and neglect. Unclear organisation of work or delegation of authority can cause conflict. If obligations and responsibilities of employees are not clearly determined, conflicts are unavoidable. Low level of formalisation stimulates conflicts, especially in small and mid-sized enterprises, where there is no specialisation of employees, or delegation of authority among manager.

Starks [7] noted that conflict results when a person's or group's behaviour or action negatively affects another. These negative behaviours or actions may result when beliefs, values, attitudes, ideas, needs, goals, perceptions, expectations or interests differ. Conflicts may also arise when the behaviour or actions of people, teams, or departments violate the rules, regulations, or social norms of an organisation [7]. The triggers of functional conflict may result from:

- Differences in opinions, personalities, knowledge, education and experience;
- Natural results of diversity based on such characteristics as age, ethnicity, gender etc
- Project or process differences;
- Virtual and / or self-managed work teams, or
- Rapid change

Hastings [8] noted that workplace conflicts can be caused by a variety of issues such as:

- Different work methods where employees have the same goal but different approaches to achieve the goal.
- Different goals that is inconsistent with each other.
- Differences in personalities where people annoy each other because of who they are or how they act.
- Biases that people have against different groups of people.
- Issues, actions, or comments that cause stress.
- Different viewpoints or perspectives about various issues that may relate to people's upbringing, gender, age, or other such characteristics.
- Different levels of interpersonal; skills and verbal and / or written communication capabilities.

- Competition for financial or other resources; and
- Unique subculture that establish "us vs. them" situations. According to Rahim [9] conflict management involves designing effective strategies to minimise the dysfunctions of conflict and enhance the constructive functions in order to optimise learning and effectiveness of an organisation. This implies that managing conflict does not necessarily connote avoidance or termination but the decrease of the odds of non-productive escalation. As such, conflict management is the method by which organisations and people handle grievances or disputes so as to find a middle way alternative to increase resolution, work towards consensus and offer genuine commitment to decision-making.

As observed by Uchendu, Anijaobi and Odigwe [10], since conflict is inevitable in organisations, its management determines whether it will generate positive or negative effect on the organisational performance. The timely recognition and immediate explication of the underlying tension before the conflict issues go out of hand are germane to effectual management of conflict in the workplace.

Consequently, conflict management orientation is a highly obtrusive process which can be implemented in a number of diverse ways in organisations. Ford [11] posited a four-way process which includes assessment and inquiry, design, implementation and evaluation aimed at achieving efficacious and objective conflict decision in the workplace. This integrative approach is often employed to encourage management to satisfy the needs of stakeholders in the resolution of conflict. Vigil and King [12] observed that the use of integrative style of managing conflict is likely to create better result and higher commitment in individuals than teams using non-integrative conflict management. The integrative approach broadens the understanding of the conflict problem and increases resolution.

In the same vein, collective bargaining strategy has been suggested as the approach for managing union-management conflict in organisations. The approach is internationally acclaimed as the legal instrument by which workers and management settle conflicts arising from employment contracts [13]. Presently, faster rates of adoption of collective bargaining strategies have been encouraged in Nigeria by the Trade Union Amendment Act [14] and by the positive use of this machinery for resolving conflict by some multinational firms in the country. In practice, this collaborative approach of managing conflict, involves negotiation between union and management in a process of meeting demands, discussing, presenting

counter demands, bluffing and sometimes threatening all in a bid to reach collective agreement.

Approaches to conflict management

Thomas [15] also put forward some approaches for managing conflicts. These are avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise and collaboration. The avoidance strategy is called conflict avoidance. Any organisation using this method is sitting on a keg of gun powder. The accommodation strategy believes that no amount of sacrifice is too much to allow peace to reign. It is a palliative technique which involves capitulation and appeasement. The competition strategy involves the survival of the fittest and win-lose method, without taking other party into consideration.

In the compromise strategy, parties to the conflict are willing to give up something in order to settle the conflictual problem. The last approach is collaboration which is a win-win approach whereby parties to a conflict are prepared, willing and ready to satisfy each other's demands fully. Except for the collaboration strategy which is reflected in behaviours that rae both cooperative and assertive, all other approaches depend majorly on the structure of the organisation, because they provide a short term solution to conflict situations.

Thomas and Kilmann defined five modes for responding to conflict situations and which are used by managers in decision making process [16]:

* Competing is when an individual pursues his / her own concerns at the other person's expense [17]. This mode can be described as forcing and using a formal authority or power one possesses to satisfy his / her wishes and desires. A party should act in a very assertive way without any cooperation which might be necessary for emergency or time sensitive situations. Ethical dilemma is likely to occur in this type of conflict strategy as one of the parties could find it difficult to act in a way that helps the organisation or others as it goes against his or her principles and interests [18].
* Accommodating is neglecting of an individual's concerns in favour of some other person. This type of conflict solving technique appears when parties cooperate very well and one of the members is an expert in the given situation, thus is able to provide a better solution even if it works against somebody else's goals and desired outcomes.
* Avoiding is when a person neither pursues his / her own concerns nor those of the other individuals [17]. This type of situation takes place when one of the parties does not want to participate in the conflict and pays no attention to it. It might happen when one of the parties has no interest in the conflict, does not wish to win the argument or is emotionally unwilling to create any tension, and hoping that he situation would pass by.
* Collaborating implies working together to find a solution that satisfied all parties. The definition of collaboration in many dictionaries can be summed up as cooperation with other party to express and hear concerns in the effect to find a mutually satisfactory outcome. It is also called a "win-win" scenario which is possible when one takes into consideration the wishes of all parties, broadens the frames of usual solutions and analyses all of the ideas to create absolutely new and fresh outcome.
* Compromising resolves, the conflict with partial satisfaction of both parties. Sadly, it resolves the issue temporary.

Desivilya, H. S. and Yagil, D. [19] also brings forward five main conflict management patterns:

Dominating – "High concern for self and low concern for the other"

Obliging – "Low concern for self and high concern for the other"

Avoiding – "Low concern for self and low concern for the other"

Integrating – "High concern for self and low concern for the other"

Compromising – "Moderate concern for self and moderate concern for the other"

Competition – "Reflects a desire to achieve one's own ends at the expense of someone else. This is domination, also known as a win-lose orientation" [20].

Accommodation – "Reflects a mirror image of competition, entirely giving into someone else's concerns without making any effort to achieve one's own ends. This is a tactic of appeasement".

Sharing – "Is an approach that represents a compromise between domination and appeasement. Both parties give up something, yet both parties get something. Both parties are moderately, but incompletely, satisfied".

Collaboration – "Reflects an effort to fully satisfy both parties. This is a problem-solving approach that requires the integration of each party's concerns".

Avoidance – "Involves indifference to the concerns of both parties. It reflects a withdrawal from or neglect of any party's interests".

Moreover, Desivilya [20] stresses that project team members more often choose to use a passive approach. To passive strategies counts obliging and avoiding while integrating, compromising and dominating belongs is seen as an active strategy. In comparison with Desivilya [20] Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy [21] have chosen to look at conflict management approaches from a slightly different perspective. They claim that conflict resolution can be

divided into two independent dimensions, cooperativeness or uncooperativeness and assertiveness or unassertiveness.

Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy [21] suggests that instead of trying to find a superior approach, focus should instead be on determining when a certain approach is appropriate. It is also highlighted that each approach comes with diverse advantages and disadvantages.

CONCLUSION

Nothing can destroy productivity, derail projects, and damage an organisation's reputation faster than workplace conflict. Whether it smolders just beneath the surface or becomes open warfare, conflict can paralyze a group, department, or the entire organization. And once initiated, the unpleasant task of resolving conflicts falls on the shoulders of the leader or manager.

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