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Conflict in workplace: Is it Constructive or Destructive?

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts are part and parcel of workplaces, and therefore they are inevitable. Conflict can be defined as a disagreement or argument between people with opposing ideas, interests, or purposes. Conflicts can be productive and detrimental at the same time, and therefore it is of the essence for an organization to be aware of their presence and know how to capitalize on them to improve performance. This paper highlights the types of conflicts, sources of conflicts, the constructive and destructive effects of conflicts, and conflict management strategies.

Keywords: Types, Conflict, Constructive, Destructive, Sources, Workplace

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is inevitable in our society because human beings are social beings who constantly interact to satisfy each other's needs. In this process of interaction, disagreements and confrontations always related to differences in views, interests, perceptions, ideas etc., normally occur. In general, conflicts can be defined as disagreement or incompatibility between two or more parties (Patzak,2012). Over the years there have been many views in relation to conflict. Some scholars are of the idea that conflict is detrimental and as such, it should be avoided at all costs. On the contrary, some scholars argue that conflict is a phenomenon that necessitates prudent management and can therefore be productive. They opine that a conflict can be an opportunity for both the organization and employees to realize their full potential and growth

Since conflicts are inevitable, organizations should seek to recognize their pros and cons, set strategies to manage and minimize them and implement conflict resolution mechanisms in a methodological way (Fleetwood, 1987). Robbins (2005) has defined conflict as a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected or is about to negatively affect something the first party care about. According to Robinson conflicts are about perception and not necessarily hard facts.

TYPES OF CONFLICTS

Conflicts in the workplace can be irritating and difficult to deal with. Confrontation can arise from personal clashes, team dynamics, or disagreements between departments in an organization. It is therefore paramount to know the types of conflicts as this will enable the managers to   find and tailor a better remedy/ formulate strategy that will help minimize its negative impacts.

Figure one: A pictorial illustration of the different levels of conflicts (Source: Fanshawe college)

INTRAPERSONAL CONFLICT

This conflict arises when a person faces two different decisions and cannot take the appropriate decision as he faces competing objectives and roles (**Chand 2010**)

Intrapersonal conflicts can take three shapes, approach -approach-conflict, avoidance -avoidance and approach-avoidance.

- **The approach-approach conflict** occurs when a person is presented with two or three options with positive consequences i.e., a person must choose between two positive and equally attractive alternatives e.g., a person can choose between two jobs that appear to be equally attractive.

- **In the avoidance–avoidance approach** an individual has to select one or two alternatives with negative outcomes or consequences i.e., two negative and equally unattractive alternatives e.g., when an employee is threatened with punishment regarding his demotion unless he does something he dislikes like spending extra time travelling on his job

- **The approach-avoidance** – this conflict happens in a situation where an individual should choose something with both positive and negative outcomes (**Evans -2013**) e.g., the person chooses to accept a good job in an undesired location

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

It is probably the most recognized and popular conflict which arises between two or more individuals. A lot of conflicts in the workplace are interpersonal in nature. Unlike intra- personal conflict interpersonal conflict Involves two or more individuals.

The interpersonal conflict can either be **substantive, emotional** or **both**. For example, two heads of department arguing and debating each other aggressively on the merits of a project is an example of substantive interpersonal conflict while two employees continually in disagreement over each other's dress code is an example of an emotional interpersonal conflict.

Interpersonal conflicts can be caused by personality differences, perceptions, experience, education, background and clashes of values and interests, power and status differences, lack of information, role incompatibility, stress and scarce resources (**Whetten 2012**)

Figure Two: Types of interpersonal conflicts

INTRA - GROUP CONFLICT

This is a type of conflict that happens when an individual in a team aims to achieve a target or objective that is different from the other teams in the organization (**Barki 2004**)

Intragroup conflict can be **task-related** or **relationship related**.

- **Task-related conflict** is a perception of disagreements group members have about the content of their decision e.g., task content about procedures or guidelines A task conflict happens there are differences regarding the contents of a task and the goals of work e.g., resource distribution (**John 1995**)

- **A Relationship related conflict** exists in case members of a group have interpersonal incompatibilities such as tension, annoyance, animosity, and personal clashes (**John 1995**)

INTERGROUP CONFLICT

Intergroup conflicts are conflicts between different groups, teams, sections or departments in an organization. When one group of employees unite against the other. It can arise from goals and objectives that are contradicting. It occurs when different sections in an organization are seeking to accomplish their own objectives. The classic example is a conflict among functional groups or departments, such as the Human Resource and marketing department in an organization. The growing use of cross-functional teams and task forces is one way of trying to minimize such conflicts and promote more creative and efficient operations (**Kinicki,2008**)

INTER-ORGANIZTIONAL CONFLICT

Inter-organizational conflicts happen between organizations which to some extent depend on one another. Inter-organizational conflict involves disputes between two or more organizations. Corporate takeovers, mergers and acquisitions can lead to this type of conflict. Interorganizational conflicts often occur as a result of the competition and the rivalry that characterizes two or more firms operating in the same market or vying for the same consulting contract. For example, different energy suppliers may engage in inter-organizational conflict when they are competing for a larger market share. The more interesting inter-organizational conflicts, however, may be those among organizations that are working together, perhaps in joint operating agreements or community consortiums.

INTRA ORGANIZATION CONFLICTS

There are four types of Intra organizational conflicts namely: vertical, horizontal, line staff and role conflict (**Luthan 1998**)

- **Vertical conflicts** arise among the organizational levels e.g. (the superior-subordinate conflict)

- **Horizontal conflict** happens among departments or staff with similar organizational hierarchical levels. (**Jones 2008**)

- **Role conflict**- a role is a cluster of activities that others expect individuals to perform in their positions. A role frequently involves conflict

- **Line staff conflict** - The relationship between line and staff departments always results to line staff conflict. This is because staff managers and line managers often have different personal characteristics

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Over the past decades, there have been arguments and theories trying to explore and explain the sources of conflict. One such theory is the individual characteristic theory (**Schell Berg 1996**) which argues that human conflict is unavoidable not because it is a part of our social life, but because it is a biological fact lying within us all. In the 19th century another school of thought the social Darwinist emerged and they related the conflict to the competitive nature of the environment in which human being coexists. They argued that the mantra "Survival for the fittest" was the main source of conflict (**Schell Berg 1996**)

Katz on his side identified three sources of conflict namely:

- **Resource conflict** - competition for organizational resources

- **Role conflicts** – which arise from prescribed behavior

- **Structural conflict** - need to manage interdependence in organizations units

Structural factors that can lead to confrontation include but are not limited to goal differences, specialization, authority, relationships, ambiguities, and roles and expectations. Personal factors that can lead to conflicts include: skills and abilities, personality, perception, diversity and personal problems. Poor communication can also be a source of conflict. Communication and conflicts are related in three ways: communication behavior often creates, and reflects conflicts and is the vehicle for the productive or destructive management of conflict (**Fleetwood 1987**).

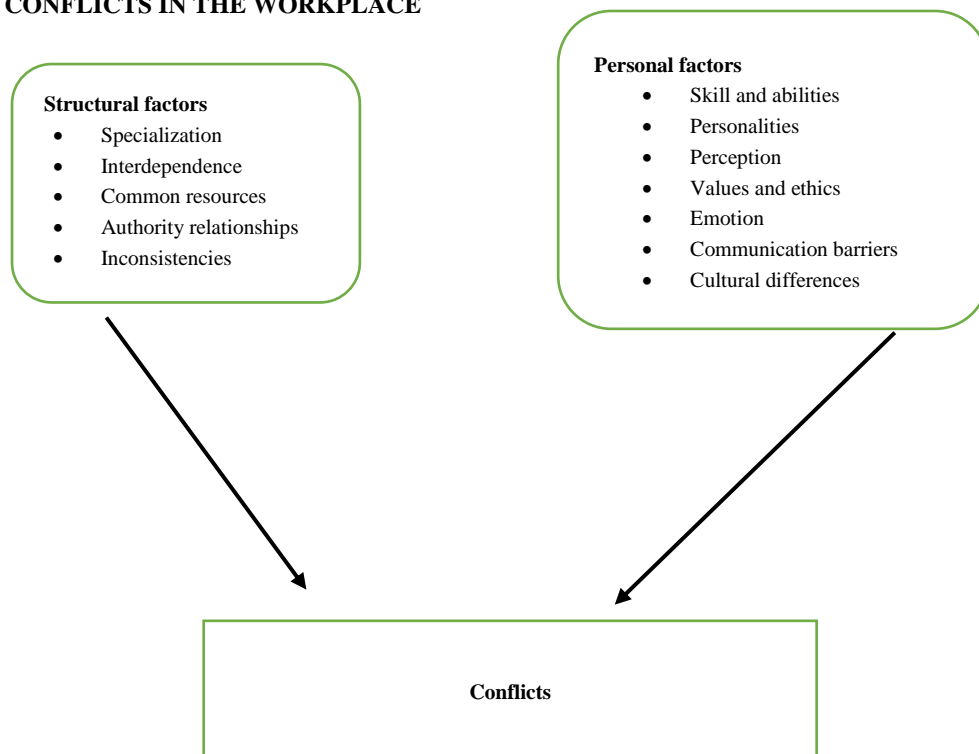## SOURCES OF CONFLICTS IN THE WORKPLACE

Structural factors
- Specialization
- Interdependence
- Common resources
- Authority relationships
- Inconsistencies

Personal factors
- Skill and abilities
- Personalities
- Perception
- Values and ethics
- Emotion
- Communication barriers
- Cultural differences

Conflicts

Figure three: Sources of conflict

IS CONFLICT DESTRUCTIVE OR CONSTRUCTIVE?

The conflict schools of thought

In order to understand the meaning of conflict, three schools emerged. The first school, the traditional school argued that conflicts were bad, disruptive and detrimental to the organization well-being and as such should be avoided (**Robbins 2005**)

The human relation, second school of thought argued that conflicts can be avoidable if an environment of trust and goodwill is created in the workplace. According to them the role of the management should be to avoid conflicts if possible and resolve them as soon as it occurs.

The last school of thought is the interactionist who views conflict as a possible force and necessary for effective and efficient performance (**Robbins 2005**)

The interactionist school of thought argues that some conflicts should not only be seen as good or bad but rather that some conflicts are absolutely necessary for a group to perform effectively.   **(De Breu 1997)**

The above arguments and theories can be summarized in the table below:

SCHOOL	EFFECT OF CONFLICT ON PERFORMANCE
1. THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL	Performance declines as the level of conflict increase
2. HUMAN RELATION SCHOOL	Performance mainly depends on how effectively the conflict is handled
3. THE INTERACTIONIST	Certain level of conflict is necessary to increase performance

Table 1: A summary of the schools of thoughts with their effects on organization performance

For decades, managers in the workplace have always viewed conflicts as a negative detrimental force. However, in the 21 century the paradigm as to how conflicts were viewed changed to two orientations:

- **Functional orientations**

- **Dysfunctional orientations**

A **functional** form of conflict, or constructive conflict, supports the goal of the organization and improves its performance. It may also encourage greater work effort and help task performance. It can also open eyes to problems and opportunities and can also inspire new ideas, learning and growth among individuals. It can also help improve the relationship among participants because when two sides work on resolving a disagreement together, they feel that they have mutually accomplished something (**Kiniki ,2008**)

In 1992 David introduced four assumptions aligning with the functional orientation of conflict:

a) **Conflict is a normal useful process**

b) **All issues are subject to change through negotiation**

c) **Direct confrontation and conciliation are valued**

d) **Conflict is a necessary renegotiation of an implied contract- a redistribution of opportunity, the release of tension and the renewal of relationships**

The first assumption means that, although conflict is a complicated process, it can strengthen relationships. If the conflict is managed correctly, it will lead to a stronger, healthier, and more satisfying relationship. In this case, the conflict also increases the cohesiveness of groups. With reference to the third and fourth assumption, the main idea is to recognize conflict as soon as possible and work through it in a productive way (**Martene 2007**)

On the other hand, **dysfunctional conflict** is believed to be destructive and detrimental. Such kind of conflict usually hinders organizational performance and leads to decrease productivity

This conflict orientation is characterized by competing individual interests overriding the business's overall interest. Managers withhold information from one another, employees sabotage others' work either intentionally or through subtle conflict-motivated disinterest in teamwork. (**Kinicki,2008**).

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

Once an organization has identified the sources of conflict, the next step is to confront and manage it to avoid its escalation and negative effects. Conflict management refers to both the strategies and approaches of containing as well as to the strategies and approaches of resolving if. Effective conflict management help in minimizing disruption and providing solutions that are satisfactory and acceptable. All working places, whether private or public have different ways and approaches for managing conflicts but the effectiveness of such approaches and methodologies can be evaluated by the extent to which they limit the antagonism and opposition among members in a workplace.

There are different ways and strategies to minimize and manage conflict but at the end of the day, the basic approach of these strategies remains the same. **Thomas and Kilman** identified five conflict management styles based on two dimensions

a) **Assertiveness i.e., the motivation to achieve an individual goal**

b) **Cooperativeness i.e., the desire to help the other party to achieve its goal and outcome**

Figure four: Illustrates how varying levels of assertiveness and cooperation relate to different conflict management styles. (Source – Killman and Thomas)

AVOIDING CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLE:

It is also known as the **"withdrawing"** style. In this conflict resolution style, the level of assertiveness and cooperativeness are very low. From the manager's point of view, this style might be necessary when getting involved in a situation would prove further controversy. When this style of conflict management is used everyone loses because the issues are not addressed or solved **(Victor, 2012)**

SMOOTHING (ACCOMMODATING CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLE)

It emphasizes more in human relationships. Individuals ignore their own goals and resolve conflicts by giving in to others because they see the relationship as of great importance while their own goals are of the least importance. Smoothing means covering up the conflict by appealing to the need for unity rather than addressing the issue of the conflict itself. Since the problem is never addressed, the emotions may build up further and suddenly explode and thus it provides only a temporary solution **(Victor 2012)**

FORCING (WIN - LOSE APPROACH)

This is a technique of domination where the denominator has the power and authority to enforce his own views over the opposing conflicting party. This technique always ends up in one party being a loser and the other being a winner. This style is appropriate when quick decisive actions need to be taken and where unpopular actions need implementation e.g., cost-cutting. In this style, there is high assertiveness and low cooperation,

CONFRONTING (THE GIVE-AND-TAKE APPROACH)

This is the win-win approach to interpersonal conflict handling where there is a moderate level of assertiveness and cooperativeness. A compromise is reached by balancing the demands of the conflicting parties and bargaining in **a give-and-take** position to reach a solution. Each party gives up something and also gains something. It is very common in negotiations between labor unions and management. It works effectively when the goals and power of both sides are of equal importance.

COLLABORATING CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLE

This approach objectively assumes that in all organizations, no matter how well they are managed, there will be differences of opinions which must be resolved through discussion and respect for different viewpoints. This style is characterized by a high level of assertiveness and cooperativeness and is often described as "a win-win scenario" where both sides creatively work together to achieve the goals and desired outcome **(Victor 2012)**

CONCLUSION

This paper has revealed what conflict is, its types, sources of conflict, its constructive and destructive nature and finally the ways the conflict can be managed. Based on the data presented the researcher believes that conflicts when effectively managed can be instrumental in achieving organizational goals and improving performance.

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