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Conflict Resolution and Stress Management at Work

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ABSTRACT:

Conflict and stress are common parts of today's workplaces. They often happen because people have different goals, ways of communicating, workloads, or face pressure from the organization. Handling conflict properly and managing stress well are important not only for maintaining good relationships between employees but also for improving productivity and keeping the organization healthy. This narrative review brings together peer-reviewed research from 2003 to 2026 and recent workforce survey data to explain how conflict and stress at work are linked and what practical steps can reduce both. Workplace conflicts usually arise from misunderstanding, unclear instructions, or clashing priorities. Good conflict resolution focuses on open conversation, careful listening, and finding solutions together. Methods like mediation, honest communication, and problem-solving based on everyone's needs help employees understand the real cause of the issue instead of arguing over small points. Managers also play an important role by setting clear expectations and creating an atmosphere where people feel respected and safe to express their views.

Stress at work can come from heavy tasks, short deadlines, or lack of control over one's work. Effective stress management includes training employees in time management, using simple mindfulness or relaxation practices, and providing access to mental-health support. Workplaces can also help by offering flexible timings, clear communications, and policies that support a healthy work-life balance. At a personal level, employees can reduce stress by setting priorities, using relaxation techniques, and talking to trusted colleagues or supervisors. Bringing conflict-resolution skills together with stress-management practices creates stronger, healthier teams. When employees feel understood, supported, and confident in handling problems, their job satisfaction increases and the chances of burnout decrease. In the end, building a workplace that values psychological safety and positive communication leads to better performance and a more supportive work culture.

Keywords: Workplace stress, organizational conflict, stress management, conflict resolution, employee well-being, organizational performance.

Introduction:

In modern organizations, employees frequently face various psychological and professional pressures that may lead to stress and conflict. Workplace stress arises when individuals feel unable to cope with the demands and responsibilities of their job. When stress becomes chronic, it may affect employee productivity, mental health, and organizational performance.

According to the UK Labour Force Survey (Health and Safety Executive [HSE], 2020), workplace stress remains a significant issue affecting employees. Between 2019 and 2020, over 828,000 workers were reported to be suffering from work-related stress, depression, or anxiety, whether newly developed or long-standing. Furthermore, approximately 17.9 million working days were lost due to work-related stress, depression, or anxiety during the same period. These statistics highlight the serious impact of workplace stress on both employee well-being and organizational productivity.

The problem is not limited to the UK. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2025 report found that about 30% of employees in India experience stress daily and about 34% experience anger daily, and that employee engagement in India fell from 33% to 30% (Gallup, 2025). The World Health Organization has also issued guidelines recommending organizational interventions and manager training to protect employees' mental health at work (WHO, 2022).

What is stress

At the most basic level, stress is our body's natural 'fight or flight' response to pressures from a situation or life event. Stress is generally understood as the degree to which you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope as a result of pressures that feel unmanageable. Stress is a response to a threat in a situation, whereas anxiety is a reaction to the stress.

If our stress response is activated repeatedly, or it persists over time, the effects of continued strain on the body may contribute to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety. When long term stress, often referred to as chronic stress, comes as a result of a workplace, employers have a duty of care and responsibility to step in and assess the root of the problem.

Causes of workplace stress

Workplace stress can arise from several organizational and interpersonal factors. One of the most common causes is a **heavy workload**, where employees are required to complete large amounts of work within limited time. Similarly, **tight deadlines** often create pressure that forces workers to rush tasks and may reduce their ability to maintain work–life balance. Another important factor is **role confusion**, which occurs when employees are unclear about their responsibilities or expectations within the organization.

Conflict in organizations

Organizational conflict refers to disagreements among individuals or groups in a workplace over work-related matters, stemming from diverse perspectives, limited resources, and common triggers like scarce resources, task interdependence, unclear roles or goals, personality clashes, and communication breakdowns. It manifests in key types: task conflict (disputes on goals, ideas, or procedures), relationship conflict (personal or emotional incompatibilities), and process conflict (differences in task execution or assignment), alongside vertical (e.g., between management and staff) or horizontal (e.g., between departments) forms. When unmanaged, it harms productivity, heightens stress and anxiety, erodes morale, boosts turnover and absenteeism, and diverts focus from objectives, though moderated task conflicts can sometimes foster innovation.

Relationship between conflict and stress

Stress and conflict together can reduce managers' motivation and commitment, weaken their work efficiency, and increase frustration, which in severe cases leads to burnout and depression. Conflict is one of the undesirable phenomena most closely related to stress. The relationship between the two is bilateral: conflict raises the level of stress, and stress can in turn increase the scale of conflict situations.

Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine the causes and effects of workplace stress and organizational conflict, and to analyse the relationship between these two factors. The paper also aims to explore effective conflict resolution strategies and stress management techniques that can improve employee well-being and organizational performance.

Research gap

Conflict and stress have each been studied extensively, but they are often treated as separate topics, and much of the available evidence comes from Western samples or single-sector surveys. This review brings the two literatures together in one framework and links them to the Indian workplace, where recent surveys report high levels of daily stress and falling engagement (Gallup, 2025).

Method:

This paper is a narrative review. Sources were identified through keyword searches on Google Scholar and on publisher and open-access platforms (PubMed Central, MDPI, Frontiers, Emerald), using combinations of the terms workplace stress, workplace conflict, conflict management, stress management, and employee well-being. Peer-reviewed articles in English were prioritised, together with seminal books and book chapters, one international guideline (WHO, 2022), and one global workforce survey (Gallup, 2025) for context. Because this is a narrative review, no formal systematic screening (such as PRISMA) was applied, so the selection reflects the authors' judgement and may not be exhaustive.

Literature review:

Workplace Stress

Previous studies have identified workplace stress as a significant factor affecting employee health and organizational performance. According to Robbins and Judge (2017), stress can be defined as a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, demand, or resource related to what they desire and for which the outcome is perceived as uncertain and important. Stress often arises due to factors such as heavy workload, tight deadlines, lack of organizational support, and unclear job roles. Similarly, Cooper and Dewe (2008) highlight that prolonged exposure to stress can lead to serious physical and psychological problems, including anxiety, depression, and reduced productivity. More recent evidence shows that exposure to several kinds of work factors at once, including psychosocial, mechanical, chemical, and physical conditions, is associated with a higher risk of long-term sick leave (Sterud et al., 2024).

Organizational Conflict

In addition to stress, organizational conflict has been widely discussed in academic literature as another major workplace challenge. Thomas (1992) defines conflict as a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected something that they care about. Conflict may

arise due to differences in goals, values, or perceptions. Following Jehn (1995) and Jehn and Mannix (2001), conflict is commonly categorized into task conflict, relationship conflict, and process conflict, each having different impacts on employee performance. Pruitt and Rubin (1986) describe how such conflicts escalate, reach stalemate, and are eventually settled. While moderate levels of task conflict may improve decision-making and innovation, relationship conflict often leads to stress and reduced team performance. A bibliometric review of 1,043 Scopus-indexed documents (1972–2022) found that research on workplace conflict outcomes clusters around four theoretical schools: conflict types, individual differences, conflict co-occurrence, and conflict dynamics (Su & Rungruang, 2024). A meta-analysis also showed that both task and relationship conflict are negatively related to team performance and member satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In a sample of 260 US workers, task, relationship, and non-task organizational conflict all acted as social stressors linked to psychological, behavioural, and physical strain, and the negative link for task conflict may reflect its co-occurrence with the other conflict types (Bruk-Lee et al., 2013).

Relationship Between Stress and conflict

Research also highlights a strong relationship between stress and conflict in organizational settings. As noted by Greenberg (2011), conflict situations can increase stress levels by creating tension and emotional strain among employees. At the same time, high stress can lead to increased conflict due to frustration, lack of patience, and communication breakdowns. This demonstrates a two-way relationship between stress and conflict, where each factor reinforces the other and negatively affects workplace harmony. Recent large-scale studies treat workplace conflict as a stressor with measurable health and attendance consequences. In a Norwegian population study that followed 13,731 respondents, conflicts with superiors were associated with more physician-certified sick leave, while conflicts with colleagues showed weaker and largely non-significant associations (Sterud et al., 2022). Pooled national survey data from Latvia (2006–2018) showed higher odds of medically certified sickness absence for all types of workplace conflict (Lakiša et al., 2021), and higher odds of sickness presenteeism, most strongly for conflicts with managers (Lakiša et al., 2022).

Stress and Conflict Management Strategies

Furthermore, previous research emphasizes the importance of effective conflict resolution and stress management strategies in maintaining a healthy work environment. According to Follett (1940), conflict can be resolved through integration, where both parties work together to find mutually beneficial solutions. Additionally, Goleman (1995) highlights the role of emotional intelligence in managing stress and improving interpersonal relationships. Techniques such as open communication, mediation, time management, and organizational support systems have been widely recommended to reduce stress and resolve conflicts effectively. Organizations that promote supportive leadership and positive communication are more likely to achieve higher employee satisfaction, improved productivity, and a healthy work culture.

Role of the management:

The role of management is crucial in addressing workplace stress and conflict. Managers play an essential role in setting clear expectations, improving communication, and providing support to employees. Effective leadership helps in identifying early signs of stress and resolving conflicts before they escalate. By fostering a positive work environment, encouraging teamwork, and ensuring fair treatment, management significantly contributes to reducing workplace stress and maintaining organizational efficiency.

Discussion:

Understanding Workplace Stress

Workplace stress is a common issue that arises due to various factors present in the working environment. Stress can be understood as a natural response of the body to pressure or challenging situations. While a certain level of stress may improve performance, excessive and prolonged stress can become harmful, affecting both physical and mental health. Workplace stress does not usually result from a single factor, but rather from a combination of stress sources such as workload, lack of control, poor communication, and imbalance between work and personal life.

Analysis of Workplace Stress factors

Research suggests that workplace stressors can be broadly categorized into work content and work context factors. Work content stress factor include aspects such as job design, workload, and work pace, while work context factors involve organizational culture, interpersonal relationships, role clarity, and career development. When not managed properly, these factors can lead to reduced performance, poor decision-making, and serious health issues. This indicates that stress is not only an individual problem but also an organizational issue that requires systematic management. These factors not only create stress but also influence employee performance. The relationship between stress and performance can be better understood through the following figure:

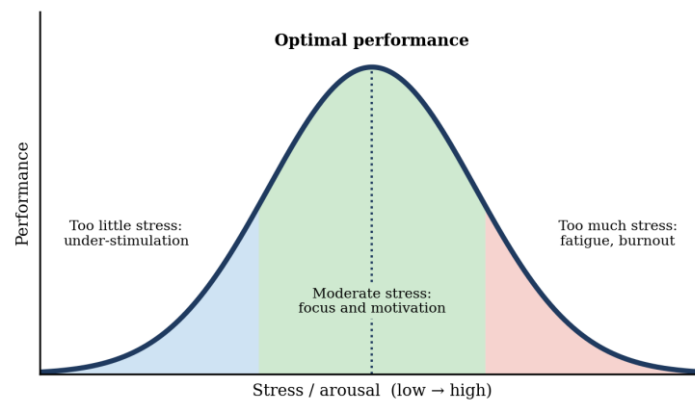


Figure 1: Relationship between stress and performance (Yerkes–Dodson law). Conceptual illustration by the authors, based on Yerkes and Dodson (1908); not plotted from data.

The graph shows that moderate levels of stress can improve performance, whereas excessive stress leads to a decline in efficiency and productivity.

Relationship Between Stress and Conflict

Workplace conflicts often arise due to differences in opinions, roles, and communication gaps among employees. Poor relationships, lack of support, and ineffective communication can contribute to conflict situations. These conflicts increase emotional strain and lead to higher stress levels among employees. At the same time, individuals experiencing high stress may react negatively, which can further increase the likelihood of conflicts. This creates a continuous cycle where stress and conflict reinforce each other.

Role of Management

The role of management is crucial in identifying and reducing workplace stress. Managers are responsible for recognizing early signs of stress such as changes in behavior, reduced performance, and withdrawal from tasks. Organizations should adopt proactive strategies such as stress risk assessments, improved communication, and mental health support. Creating a supportive environment where employees feel comfortable discussing their concerns is essential for reducing both stress and conflict.

Strategies for Stress and Conflict Management

Various strategies can be implemented to manage stress effectively, including training programs, flexible work arrangements, and open communication. Encouraging employee participation in decision-making and providing greater control over work tasks can significantly reduce stress levels. These approaches not only help in managing stress but also minimize the chances of conflicts in the workplace.

Overall Implications

Workplace stress and conflict are closely interconnected issues that require continuous attention from both employees and management. Effective stress management strategies and a positive work environment can significantly improve employee well-being, enhance productivity, and promote a healthy organizational culture.

Conclusion:

Workplace stress and organizational conflict are significant issues that have a direct impact on employee well-being and organizational performance. Stress arises from various factors such as heavy workload, tight deadlines, lack of support, and unclear job roles, while conflict occurs due to differences in opinions, values, and communication gaps. This review highlights that both stress and conflict are closely interconnected, as conflict situations increase stress levels, and high stress can further lead to more frequent conflicts in organizations.

The reviewed evidence also emphasizes the importance of effective management in addressing these challenges. Organizations must focus on creating a supportive work environment through better communication, clear role definition, and appropriate stress management strategies. Techniques such as conflict resolution practices, employee participation, and mental health support can help reduce pressure and improve relationships among employees. Overall, managing stress and conflict effectively is essential for enhancing productivity, maintaining employee satisfaction, and ensuring long-term organizational success.

Limitations and future research

This review has several limitations. It is a narrative synthesis, so the selection of sources may not be exhaustive, and it contains no primary data. Much of the cited evidence is cross-sectional and self-reported, which limits causal conclusions, and much of it comes from Europe and North America. Future work should test the stress–conflict relationship in Indian organizations, for example through surveys of employees in the service and IT sectors, and should use longitudinal designs to examine whether conflict leads to stress, stress leads to conflict, or both.

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