

## STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CONFLICT IN AN ORGANISATION

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### 1.0 Abstract

This present paper proffers some suggestions on how organisations can manage conflict so that it does not disrupt their operations. Conflict, if not dealt with properly, can cause serious damage to an organisation. A huge amount of energy can go into internal conflicts, petty disputes and personal battles. Good managers spot conflicts as or even before they arise and deal with them as effectively and efficiently as if they were dealing with fires in the building. Organisations are living systems consisting of interacting units performing a task in a mutually dependant manner within a structure of scarce resources. It seems common place to suggest that conflicts would be present in such a setting. The parties in an organisation may have a conflict about the distribution of resources, or they may have a more fundamental conflict about the very structure of their organisation and the basic nature of their interaction. Once the parties are in a situation of goal incompatibility, their conflict develops in a dynamic fashion, initiating valuable and much-needed constructive changes or leading to escalating strategies and destructive consequences. Managers must accept the need to influence the developmental dynamics of a conflict so that the parties' attitudes and actions will lead to better coordination and a more appropriate interdependence. They must not seek to stifle or eliminate organisational conflict; for that is hardly a realistic goal. The challenge managers face is to utilise such conflict management techniques that would ensure that as a conflict passes from a latent to a manifest phase, it proceeds towards its potential and realizes its constructive values.

### Key terms

Conflict, managing, organisations, managers, strategies

## 2.0 Introduction

Conflict and dispute are part of life. There is no society, community, organisation or interpersonal relationship which does not experience conflict at some time or another as part of daily interaction. Conflict arises when people or groups are engaged in competition to meet goals which are perceived to be, or are in fact, incompatible. Conflict can become physically and emotionally damaging or it can lead to growth and productivity for all parties. It all depends on how conflict is managed and resolved.

As Steiner (2009) postulates, organisations are social entities segmented into hierarchies of departments and individuals. The basic realities of organisational life can not but stimulate comparisons, competitions and conflicts between departments and individuals (Mintzberg and Quinn, 1991). Conflict is an omnipresent feature at each of these organisational levels. As Kenneth (2012) argues since conflict may have functional as well as dysfunctional consequences, it is essential that managers explore various methods and techniques of conflict management. Effective conflict management is indispensable if coordinated efforts and productive achievements are to result.

## 3.0 The nature of conflict

‘Conflict is an open disagreement between two people or groups of people who have different goals and values. Conflict involves people’s feelings as well as their objectives, and both feelings as well as outcome of the conflict must be resolved, agreement must be found or a compromise worked out (Johnson and Scholes, 1993).

Although this definition is rather negative, a number of comments have been made by writers on the nature of conflict which recognize the derived advantages that can be gained from conflict, including:

- Confronting the individual with him / herself
- Forcing reassessment of the position of the other party
- Redefining of roles and relationships
- Facilitating change
- Preventing stagnation
- Creating an awareness of alternatives and options.

## 4.0 Conflict as a process

The particular nature of conflict situations is not unknown to managers of organisations. At the outset of a conflict situation is often perceived as a single event; but this is seldom the case. Conflicts do not simply erupt; rather they develop through various stages, and in each of these

stages certain factors contributed to the possibility of conflict (Andrews, 2007) as discussed below:

- **Perceived conflict:** Potential conflicts are precipitated by how individuals 'see' each other. These perceptions determine whether conflict will occur.
- **Felt conflict:** As mentioned in the definition of conflict, people's feelings and attitudes towards each other, and the particular cause of conflict, will further affect their eventual behaviour., confrontation will occur, being either conflictive or problem-solving.
- **Conflict resolution:** At some point in the process conflict will either be resolved, or it will be suppressed.
- **Resolution aftermath:** Depending on the outcome of the resolution the future situation might lead to further conflict or to co-operation.

## 5.0 Conflict resolution

Conflict management is one of the activities that a manager is exposed to on a daily basis. The types of conflict a manager is exposed to are not restricted to the domain of the organisation and in many cases can involve the community and other stakeholders.

### 5.1 What is conflict resolution?

'Resolution of conflict occurs when parties involved understand each other's position accurately. They are willing to discuss it, because they want to resolve the conflict, regardless of their disagreements. Resolution occurs only when the parties try to reach mutually satisfying solutions (Chandler, 1999).

In the past managers have depended upon a well established hierarchy in authority. The person on top could make rapid decisions and act autocratically when necessary. This was often used to 'resolve' conflict situations, but were these solutions lasting and effective in the long-term? The definition of conflict resolution posed above assumes a method of problem-solving that is more democratic in its approach and allows those affected to be involved. The next section suggests some ways in which the manager might want to approach conflict resolution in the future.

### 5.2 Techniques of conflict resolution

When attempting to reach agreement in a conflict situation it may be useful to take note of the five causes of conflict usually described by writers such as Yip (2002), Gluck (2005) and Hax and Nicolas, (2007). These are differences based on a clash of:

- Interests

- Understanding
- Values
- Style
- Opinion

Authorities identify three styles of reaction to conflict. These are:

- Aggressive ('fight it')
- Assertive ('negotiate it')
- Passive ('duck it') (Hax and Nocolas, 2007).

Five skills for negotiating conflict can also be identified. These are:

- Spot / define it
- Understand it
- Look for 'win-win' (where all parties to the conflict feel that they have gained something)
- Act at the right time
- Check out the results.

These approaches to conflict resolution are valuable and instructive. They embody certain techniques which are very useful in reducing tensions between persons or groups, but they do put great emphasis on the manager and her or his skill in being able to negotiate a satisfactory resolution to a conflict. In dealing with potential conflicts managers might want to consider the following:

### **5.3 Ten hints on conflict resolution by Chandler (1999)**

1. Nurture a positive atmosphere.
2. Clarify perceptions of yourself and your position.
3. Clarify perceptions of the other parties.
4. Clarify perceptions of the causes of the conflict.
5. Clarify the underlying factors of the cause.
6. Be in charge of your responses.
7. Encourage parties to express feelings.
8. Focus on shared needs and goals.
9. Generate options.
10. Develop and implement do-able parts.

## 5.4 Negotiation

One way of positive conflict management is negotiation. Negotiation has been defined as; ‘A transaction in which both parties have a veto on the final outcome’ (Yip, 2002). In other words, each party in a negotiation has to consent to the outcome if it is to be implemented and each has an interest in the other agreeing to it. Thus, by negotiating the parties make a joint decision.

According to this definition, negotiation is something we do every day in our personal, professional or business capacities. For example people negotiate with their spouses on whether they spend their money on new household furniture, with their children on which household chores they have to do. They negotiate a salary increase with their bosses and may be part of formal high level negotiations on local, regional, national or international policy or business issues.

We are constantly encouraged to become participants in the development process. Participation means shared decision-making which means reaching agreement. Successful participation is dependant on the skill of negotiation. Negotiation is not easy. The majority of people only know two ways of negotiation, namely gentle and soft or tough and hard. Whatever position is taken involves a trade-off between getting what the parties want and keeping a good relationship between the negotiating parties (Andrews, 2007).

A different method of negotiation has been successfully employed. It is called Principled Negotiation or Negotiation on the Merits and was developed at the Harvard Negotiation Project. This method is valuable because it can be used everywhere by anybody to negotiate anything (Hax and Nicolas, 2007).

It will be helpful to have a quick look at the strategies people usually follow when employing this method. Each party takes up a position, defends it and makes a series of concessions until an agreement is reached or when the negotiations break down because the parties could not make any additional concessions on their positions. One problem with this kind of bargaining is that the main concern becomes the positions of the parties and not the issues which brought the group together in the first place. It is usually a very long process, emotionally draining, but it can produce agreements which will be acceptable to all in the most efficient and friendly way as possible. The method consists of four points which deal with the basics of negotiation. They are people, interests, options and criteria (Gluck, 2005).

## 5.5 People

Separate the people from the problem. This first point is important because negotiators are people with their own emotions, beliefs, likes and dislikes which influence the way they perceive

the problem and search for a solution. It is thus imperative that negotiating parties identify the problem and work together to solve the problem and do not spend the time trying to attack and change the people involved in the negotiation process.

### **5.6 Interests**

Focus on interests and not on the position. This second critical point emphasizes the importance of identifying and focusing on the negotiating parties' real interests and not on their positions. Ask the basic question 'why'? To find out your own and the other party's real interests. Moreover, the most powerful, but often most overlooked interests are the universal basic human needs, that is, economic well-being, security, social acceptance, a sense of belonging and control over one's own life. But above all listen to what is being said.

### **5.7 Options**

Generate a wide variety of possibilities before reaching a decision. Set aside a special time for the parties to invent a wide variety of possible solutions to the problem. It has been found that the major obstacles to inventing options are:

- Premature judgment
- The search for the single answer
- The assumption of a fixed pie
- Assuming that solving their problem is their problem.

### **5.8 To overcome these obstacles it will be necessary to:**

1. Separate the act of judging from the act of inventing options. One strategy to use is that of brainstorming.
2. Look for multiple options by using a Circle Chart which encourages different modes of thinking on the same subject.
3. Try and find mutual gain by identifying shared interests.
4. Make the solution of their problem also your problem by actively trying to understand their position and coming up with shared solutions.

### **5.9 Criteria**

Insist that the result be based on objective and standard criteria by which results can be measured. This will ensure a fair solution.

These four points are important and relevant throughout the negotiation process.

## **6.0 Strategies of conflict resolution**

A popular way of describing conflict resolution strategies is in terms of winning and losing (Chandler, 1999).

These strategies can be broadly described as follows:

### **6.1 Win – lose**

The outcome of this strategy is that one party loses and one wins. In most cases this strategy is unsatisfactory, and in all probability the conflict will erupt at a later stage.

### **6.2 Lose – lose**

Both parties lose in the deal: usually a third party is involved, and tries to reach a compromise that is seldom acceptable to either of the parties.

### **6.3 Win – win**

Both parties are satisfied with the outcome, and the focus is on solving the problem and not defeating each other.

## **7.0 Summary**

In negotiating a solution to a conflict situation the aim of the resolution process should always be to strengthen the future relationship of the parties involved. The conflict situation can have mutual advantages and benefits if approached in the right manner, and with the right attitude towards a possible resolution. Striving for win – win strategy so that both parties can be satisfied with the outcome is the ideal route for a manager to follow. Conflicts should be solved democratically. Make use of a mediator when necessary.

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