

The Difference of Conflict Management Styles and Conflict Resolution in Workplace

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Abstract

This paper is a review of conflict management styles and conflict resolution from the managers and supervisors' point of view. Conflict is an inevitable fact for any organization. Leaders should understand and apply various conflict management techniques and conflict resolution styles in order to form strong relationships with subordinates. Conflict is a situation when two or more parties are in disagreement. Unresolved conflict can negatively impact the success of an organization. So, leaders must learn how to address and manage conflict depending on the situation and the party involved. While the internet has increased organizational performance, it has also added new types of conflict. Workplace conflicts may result in absenteeism and affect employee loyalty.

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1 Introduction

A conflict usually occurs when two or more people communicate. When people think of conflict in simple terms, they think that happens when serious issues and anger is invoked in communication process. Conflict is misinterpreting one's words or value. Inappropriate, poor communicated information and selecting the wrong channel to transmit the information arise in the parties. There are numerous conflict management styles such as passive aggressive style, forcing style, avoiding style, accommodating style, compromising style, and collaborating style. There are two different types of conflict; one of it is task conflict and focuses on the ways to resolve problems. The other type of conflict is called relationship conflict and focuses on blaming other parties rather than resolve the conflict. Relationship conflict is negative in most of the people's perceptions. Conflict in an organization affects the commitment and absenteeism of employees. Nowadays, employees have strong beliefs. According to Pygmalion's Theory, the supervisors' attitude and expectations of employees and how they treat them largely determine the employees' performance. When a conflict arises between supervisor and subordinates, and the employees think that the supervisors has low expectation of them, the employees will be committed and may use absenteeism to escape (avoiding style) from the conflict.

Managers, supervisors, employers and leaders should use different type of conflict management styles when facing different kind of subordinates, employees and team members. If a manager (employer or leader) only uses one type of conflict management style in handling all conflict in the workplace, it may not work as they expect it to. In conflict response, a supervisor is not only affecting the relationship between the supervisor-subordinate, it also affects the trust and loyalty of subordinate that perceived a supervisor as a representative of the organization. Despite that, there are several factors that can trigger a conflict.

By understanding the types of conflict, supervisors can use appropriate conflict resolution styles. If a conflict is left unresolved, it may cause serious consequences. In today's globalization era, the internet is a widely used communication tool. Although internet communication has increased the efficiency and productivity of organizations, it has also created new types of conflicts. Conflict through internet has become more frequent.

2 Types of Conflict

According to Flanagan and Ruden (2008), research over the past fifteen years has determined that there are two essential types of conflict in organizations: task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict concentrates on how to resolve problems caused by differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions. Researchers have discovered that conflict will result in creativity and improved decision-making. It is another way to acknowledge conflict in a positive term.

The second type of conflict is known as relationship conflict. Examples of relationship conflict are disagreements about values, personal or family norms, or about personal taste. People refer to relationship conflict in negative terms. There is a reason why people always use negative words to describe conflict. This is because they are often involved in relationship conflict. Researchers have showed that relationship conflict lowers the productivity and motivation amongst team members. Insufficient communication amongst team members can lead to less choices and poor decisions. In additions, team members may simply agree to a decision without thinking of the impacts and quality of implementation.

3 Sources of Conflict

Conflict can be a big issue in the workplace. It may occur between manager and subordinate, teacher and student, doctor and nurse.

Especially in the medical field, according to Breen, Abernethy, Abbot and Tulsy (2001), 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 (Awad, Fagan, Bellows et al., Am, 2005; as cited in Katz, 2007) and has been recognized as a root cause of 35% of anesthesia-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 specialized understanding and role expectations.

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

There are negative personality traits that can trigger conflict. Personality traits commonly found among surgeons and anaesthesiologists, such as perfectionism, compulsiveness, and reliance on scientific evidence can make it more difficult for these physicians to admit others' skills and to resign control (Vaillant, Sobowale and McArthur, 1972; Kressel, Kennedy and Lev, 2002; Thomas, Sexton and Helmreich, 2003). Also, a number of conflicts may occur in a preoperative phase, when the surgeons disagree with each other's opinions.

4 Consequences of Unresolved Conflict

According to Journal of Anesthesia, the consequences of unresolved conflict can be divided into two categories: indirect and direct. Indirect consequences are

negative publicity and media coverage, decreased morale, increased disability and employee's payment claims, increased turnover, and diversion of limited and valuable resources to dispute resolution, consist of legal remedies (Gerardi, 2004; Chassin and Becher, 2002). The direct consequence of unresolved conflict is a barrier to communication between the members. Appropriate communication among team members is well acknowledged in some of the safety-critical industries (Davies, 2005).

5 Internet Conflict

Communication is not only face-to-face discussions. By a click of a mouse, people can get connected. Internet has become a main tool to keep in touch with friends, family, relatives, customers, clients, managers and subordinates.

When the emails replace face-to-face delegations, there are bound to be conflicts. This can be attributed to some of the limitations of using email including the absence of non-verbal communication. One of the most common mistakes is due to misinterpreting the message from sender. There is no non-verbal cues show to the receivers, it may cause misunderstandings. Education level difference among the sender and receiver may cause wrong interpretations. Furthermore, some information is very difficult to explain in text. Data may be lost during the sending period. For example, if managers send a challenging task to subordinates, the subordinates may interpret the task in their own way. When subordinates hand in the completed task to manager, the data may be lost if the subordinate does not save a copy. So, a conflict among managers and subordinates arise. Who should bare the responsibilities to answer for it? The only answer is subordinates have to redo the task because the manager has a higher position in the chain of command. People have to use email consciously to prevent misunderstandings and conflicts by using Internet.

6 Conflict Affects Commitment and Absenteeism

Research has shown that commitment is a critical ancestor of employee behaviour in common (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1991) and in absenteeism (Blau, 1986; Gellatly, 1995; Hanish and Hulin, 1991; Hammer, Landau, Stern, 1981; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Mowday, Porter, Steers, 1982; Sagie, 1998; Somers, 1995).

Affective commitment is defined as the employee's positive emotional attachment to the organization. Lined up with the social exchange principle (Shore, Tetrick, Lynch and Barksdale, 2006), employees that have strong affective commitment come into contact with an internal strength and encouragement focus, leading to achieve maximum desire level of success under the terms of the contract (Luchak

and Gellatly, 2007). If affective commitment is low, employees may cease their employment, although absenteeism might be an option to resign work while it provides workers with a mechanism to express their disagreement to serious circumstances in the organization (Gaziel, 2004). Absenteeism and others resignation behaviours such as lateness and personnel turnover will reflect 'indirect' attitudes like increased job dissatisfaction and low organizational commitment (Sagie, 1998).

Research has shown the relationship between supervisory conflict and absenteeism. Specifically, an integrative conflict strategy can be seen as a form of leadership (Lorenzi, 2004) by which leaders focus to the desires of a group instead of focus on their own limitation and personal interests. Supervisors that implement an integrative conflict strategy give space to their employees' anxieties and make an effort to satisfy them. In fact, this strategy pays off in terms of a more committed and more present workforce. This integrative conflict strategy may be seen as a transformational leadership, given that its importance is associated with the leader's sense of social responsibility and collective interests rather than with self-interest (House and Aditya, 1997).

Accumulating evidence suggests that transformational leadership is positively related with individual work attitudes such as employee commitment (Avolio, Zhu, Koh and Bhatia, 2004). If leaders can identify the subordinates' needs, transformational leaders are capable to motivate their subordinates to get more involvement in their jobs, follow-on in higher levels of organizational commitment (Walumbwa and Lawler, 2003). Also, it decreases the levels of absence in workforce.

7 Ways of People Deal with Conflict

According to Robinson (2010), Pruitt and Rubin (1986), there are several ways that people commonly use to resolve conflict.

1. **Passive-aggressive style** – People with passive-aggressive behaviour can be passive one minute and aggressive the next second. They do and say things indirectly, act powerless to form hostility and then complain to others or act out in subversive ways, for example forget to bring important data to a meeting when it is promised (Katz and Kahn, 1996).
2. **Avoidance style** – People who always stay away from conflict. For example, they pretend that everything is okay to the point that if they are openly asked, "Do you have any worry that you want to convey?" they usually say, "No". People who favour the avoidance style tend to ignore conflict (Rahim, Antonioni and Psenicka, 2001). Avoidance style is prevalent in East Asian culture, Chinese cultures main concern in maintaining relationship. They usually use this style to maintain a harmony situation (Huang, 1999).

3. **Compromising style** – This involves a give-and-take situation in which both parties will give up something after negotiation in order to reach an agreement (Yuan, 2007). It will create I-win and I-lose section to create compromise. These people change their own opinion either because they found sufficient reasons to do so or simply to avoid continued confrontation (Lussier, 2010; Reich, Wagner-Westbrook, Kressel, 2007; Friedman, Tidd, Currall and Tsai, 2000).
4. **Collaborating style** – People who resolve the conflict with the best solution agreeable to all parties. It is commonly named as problem-solving style. They attend to the issue openly, frankly and neutrally by communicating with the other party (Flanagan and Runde, 2008). Previous study showed that, there is significant positive relationship in using collaborating style and people's satisfying their task, their supervision and their job in general (Alexander, 1995).
5. **Forcing style** – People who use aggressive behaviour to solve the conflict. They force other people in order to achieve their goals. They use authorities, threats, and intimidate styles to force the parties agree with it (Lussier, 2010; Rahim and Bonoma, 1979).
6. **Accommodating style** – People who use interventions of other parties to resolve the conflict. These people are not assertive but cooperative (Yuan, 2007).

8 Different Styles of Conflict - Advantages and Disadvantages

According to Lussier (2010), each conflict style has advantages and disadvantages. The benefits and weaknesses of each conflict style are given as follows.

- **Avoidance style** – The advantage of this style is that can maintain the relationship between managers and subordinates. The weakness of this style does not resolve conflict. Montoya-Weiss, Massey and Song (2001), found that using this style will hurt relationship of a team. People usually let the conflict be lessened while time goes on. In fact, avoiding the problem does not make it go away, but make it worse.
- **Compromising style** - Benefit of this style is conflict can resolve in short time while the relationship is still maintained. Weakness of this style is compromising styles usually starts to another results (Suboptimum decisions). If people overuse this style, it may cause the people being greedy and ask for several times to get achieve their desires.
- **Collaborating style** – The advantage of using this style is make all parties happy with the final decision (Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001). On the other hand, due to letting all parties to be satisfying the final decision, it may use longer time and put in more effort than other styles.

- **Forcing style** – The benefit of this style is enhanced organizational decisions will be chosen if the forcer is correct rather than choosing a less effective decision. The weakness of this style is aggression and anger occurs toward its users. Research suggested that forcing is a negative conflict management style that would decrease team performance (Cohen & Bailey, 1997).
- **Accommodating style** – Relationship is maintained by the users. The more effective ideas may not be used due to accommodating style. Misuse of this style may lead to loss of relationship that they try to maintain.

9 Process of Conflict Resolution

Based on Robinson (2010), an effective team leader learns how to resolve the conflict by using the following eight stages to navigate with challenging interaction in senior team.

1. Develop ground rules;
2. Select a facilitator;
3. Uncover the details of the problem and its history;
4. Check the facts and clarify perceptions;
5. Focus on individual and shared needs;
6. Develop multiple options for solving the issue;
7. Develop doable next steps; and
8. Make mutual-beneficial agreements.

Step 1: Develop ground rules for constructive commitment

The first critical step is to develop a set of ground rules for how people will engage each other in an organization, and of course, follow and enforce those ground rules. It is a simple fact of the human condition that people need some guidelines to help govern their behaviour. Simply hoping that everyone will rise to the occasion and behave rationally is naïve. The leaders must consistently model and enforce the ground rules (Schwarz, 2002; Robinson, 2010).

Step 2: Select a facilitator

Supervision is needed when a team environment becomes not efficient or aggressive. In most of the argumentative situations, the parties involved are emotionally caught up to unbiased and objectively deal with the conflict resolution process by themselves. In some circumstances, another party such as a colleague can be enlisted to help assist the process, while others will involve the executive in charge. Help from outside the organization will be needed rarely, but if you can develop the internal capability to “mediate” conflicts, most issues can be resolved effectively (Robinson, 2010). Research has suggested that when managers adopt a conflict management style that focuses on satisfying needs of parties involved in

conflict situation, supervisors and subordinates tend to build a relationship based on trust and respect (Fisher and Ury, 1981; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986).

Step 3: Uncover the details and history related to the issue

According to Robinson (2010), everyone's position must be taken notice. The parties involved must offer all the related details such as the situation including any information about earlier challenge to solve the problem. All people arguments must be heard and get all parties to involved in resolution. It is very important that all voices are heard, no matter how doubtful is. Frequently, extremely assertive and articulate people push their agenda while the less assertive or articulate people feel uncomfortable. Therefore, the more pushy/articulate person may win the argument while the other party is offended and then may just exhibit a resistance to the outcome in a passive-aggressive way.

Step 4: Check for the facts and clarify perceptions

Rather than approaching the issues as what the lawyers might trying to do and prove the other arguments are wrong, try to verify the reality of an issue, so that all parties involved will understand the problem and its serious consequences. The facilitator is a key role during this step as he or she must help the participants to separate the "evidence" from perceptions and maintain a calm attitude toward probing the evidence and resolving the conflict (O' Driscoll and Beehr, 2000; Robinson, 2010).

Step 5: Importance of individual and shared needs

It is necessary that the parties involved understand each other's real needs such as need for achievement and need for independence (Johnson and Stinson, 1975). Managers need to know the acceptable suggestion by all parties. If suggestion is dissatisfying, resistance to resolution occurs. Managers will reach a mutually acceptable solution by understanding and attempting to maintain each party's needs.

Step 6: Develop vary options for solving the issue

In finding solutions to a controversial problem, think about three to five options. If one option goes wrong, you will still have other options as back up (Darling and Walker, 2001). When people are under stress and at the same time conflict is involved, then they try to hold off all preconceived ideas. Brainstorming is one of the effective methods to generate several options on reducing conflict. Multiple options make the resolution process smoother when two parties are in extreme contentious level.

Step 7: Develop achievable next steps

Think of achievable next steps as stepping-stones along the pathway of resolving conflict. They make the final decision become reasonable, reachable small solutions or actions chief to a comprehensive solution. People involved will see a hopeful vision, which reinforces the positive actions managers are using as manager completed each achievable step. Achievable small steps build trust, force and enhance the relationships for working together (Robinson, 2010).

Step 8: Make mutually beneficial agreements

After developing multiple options and before taking any achievable steps, parties have to plan and come into an agreement. Team members have to recognise and choose to emphasize their common goals. Therefore, team member will think about the conflict resolution. Mutual affirmation and success will increase the level of confidence among team members, and they are confident to handle difficulties (Deutsch, 1973, 1980; Robinson, 2010). Some of the characteristics have to be removed towards compromise. In fact, not every wish or needs are all satisfied during this phase. Therefore, the ground rule “Develop and use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed” is very important.

Managers who follow these steps will facilitate and raise their team’s performance. Developing an environment where resolve a conflict effectively is the model and difficulty notwithstanding the professional of leader. Effort is worth when results in positive outcomes. Through contentious issues, employees feel more confident at working, they will benefit from working more and be more productive for the reason that they spend less emotional energy toward activities that are not helpful, for example, avoidance, backstabbing, and/or releasing pent up anger in outburst, etc. Positive emotional energy will spread through the workplace and people will be more delightful and willing to contribute for the organizations.

10 Discussion

This paper discusses the various types of conflict management, conflict resolution, and its effects in workplace. Studies have shown an interesting scene when supervisors handle conflicts in a controlling way, the affective commitment of subordinates remains unchanged and they are rarely in absent. Whereas, emotional attachment to the organization can be improved by the supervisor’s integrative conflict strategy. If the supervisors solve conflicts in a controlling way, the affective commitments of subordinate remain unchanged and they are not likely to be absent. In fact, emotional attachment to the organization can be improved by the supervisor’s integrative conflict strategy. Conflict is decisive process variables, which frequently serve as a mediator between previous circumstances of team

behaviour and team outcomes (Barki and Harwick, 2001; Montoya-Weiss, Massey and Song, 2001; Pearson, Ensley and Amason, 2002).

11 Conclusion

In conclusion there are several types of conflict that have been named by different authors, from their perspective. Consequence of unresolved conflict may affect job satisfaction and employee loyalty in any given organization. Superior should mediate a conflict by using the right method. Internet conflict is a new type of conflict that is caused by common use of internet by people and organizations due to the ease in access. Conflict may affect employees' commitment through the organization and increase the rate of absenteeism in workplace. In addition, there are several ways to deal with conflict, such as passive aggression, compromise, collaborating, accommodating and etc. Different styles of conflict management have its benefits and weaknesses, users have to identify the most appropriate conflict styles based on the different situation they are in. By following the conflict resolution procedure, conflicts will be solved easily.

Conflicts serve as a learning curve for all organizations. Without conflict, an organization will not improve. Superior and subordinates should learn to resolve the conflicts that occur instead of just avoiding that conflict. Employees should learn and practice the various methods of conflict resolution. Superior and subordinates should start solving conflicts as it is the only way to ensure that conflicts are handled better in the future.

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