Organizational Conflict

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Academic Script

1. Introduction

Hello friends! As we continue our journey through the course in Organizational Behavior, today we will discuss conflict at organizations and related topics. We will start with its definitions, discuss related concepts, and see how conflict is linked with day to day life.

Learning Objectives

1. Define conflict.

2. Differentiate among the traditional, interactionist, and managed-conflict views of conflict.

3. Outline the conflict process.

4. Understand, analyze and describe the nature of small and large-scale conflicts.

2. Definition

Conflict is a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affects, something that the 1st party cares about. Similarly, conflict can be defined as a process in which one party perceives that another party has taken or will take actions that are incompatible with one's own interests.

For the existence of conflict, there should be some form of interaction between the parties involved, which can result into incompatibility or opposition.

It is based upon the perceptions. If one perceives no threat or unable to identify the threat, there won't be any conflict. The conflicts people experience in organizations can be, incompatibility of goals, differences over interpretation of facts,

disagreements based on behavioral expectations, etc. Conflict is, in general, perceived as something negative and detrimental to any organization. This is true to a large extent but is not the absolute truth. To understand conflict in organizational behavior, first of all we need to understand various approaches or point of views towards conflict.

3. Transitions in Conflict Thought

There have been many different schools of thoughts to describe conflict. With passage of time, the importance given towards conflict and its management has been increased. They are as follows:-

1. The traditional view: It suggests that any type of conflict is bad and so must be avoided. This term had a negative connotation in the traditional view. This view says that such conflicts should be avoided as it indicates malfunctioning. It was assumed that all conflicts are bad and must be avoided and discussed with terms such as violence, destruction and irrationality. This view was consistent with attitudes about group behavior that prevailed in the 1930s and 1940s.

The human relations view: As per this approach, conflict is a natural inevitable phenomenon and, so can't be eliminated completely from any organization. Here, conflict was seen in a positive light as it was suggested that conflict may lead to an improvement in a group's performance.

2. The Interactionist view: The most recent approach i.e. the interactionist view says that some level of conflict is very much necessary for a group to perform effectively. This view encourages conflict on the grounds that a harmonious, peaceful,

tranquil and cooperative group is prone to becoming static, apathetic and unresponsive to needs for change and innovation. The contribution of this view is recognizing that a minimal level of conflict can help keep a group viable, self-critical and creative. This view doesn't propose that all conflicts are good. As per this view, conflicts can be divided into two categories :-

a) Functional form of conflict – This is also called constructive form of conflict as it supports the goals and objectives of the group and improves the performance.

b) Dysfunctional form of conflict – It is also called destructive form of conflict as this kind of conflict negatively affects a group's performance, which in turn impacts the organization in a direct or indirect way.

Functional form of conflict can be differentiated from dysfunctional form of conflict on the basis of following three types:

1. Task conflict – It is related to the content and goals of the work.
2. Relationship conflict – It focuses on interpersonal relations.
3. Process conflict – It is related to how the work gets done.

The various studies have revealed that:
a) Low-to-moderate levels of task conflict are healthy for the group and organization as it stimulates discussion of ideas which leads to better participation and outcome.
b) Low level of process conflict is also beneficial in getting the

things done effectively.

c) In general, relationship conflicts have been found to be destructive. The ego clashes and rivalries between employees often do a lot of harm to the group as well as organization.

3. Resolution focused view of conflict: There are some very specific cases in which conflict can be beneficial. Workplace conflicts take time away from job tasks and hurt feelings and anger often linger after conflicts appear to be over. Task conflicts sometimes escalate into relationship conflicts. Conflicts produce stress, which may lead people to become more close minded and adversarial. Longer-term studies show that all conflicts reduce trust, respect and cohesion in groups, which reduce their long-term viability.

A growing body of research suggests we can minimize the negative effects of conflict by focusing on preparing people for conflicts, developing resolution strategies and facilitating open discussions.

The level of conflict in organizational behavior varies between micro and macro level. At the micro level lies the intra-individual conflict i.e. conflict occurring within an individual due to various reasons. This is the most basic kind of conflict where an individual confronts no one but himself/herself.

Intra-individual conflict can arise due to following factors –

a) Due to frustration – Any sort of physical or mental obstruction in the path of a person's goals leads to frustration inside him/her. That frustration, if arising out of the job, may lead to

aggression and violence at the workplace. The reasons may vary from an abusive supervisor to dead-end job with no growth opportunities.

The frustration may lead to positive results as well sometimes as the person may put in more efforts to reach his goals or bring changes to his goals as per the situation. But in most of the cases, frustration is not good and so organization should try to eliminate it.

b) Goal conflict – It results due to two or motives of an individual blocking one another. It happens when a person has –

• A goal with both positive and negative aspects
• Two or more positive, but mutually exclusive goals
• Two or more negative, but mutually exclusive goals that one tends to avoid.

As per psychology, the positive features of an organizational goal are more dominant than the negative ones in the very beginning. But as the goal comes nearer, negative aspects begin to become more prominent for the person. The point, where approach equal avoidance, is where stress, indecision, depression or unwillingness and other such mixed feelings develop in the person which is damaging for him/her as well as organization.

c) Role conflict and ambiguity – Role is defined as a position that has expectations evolving from established norms. Different roles have different expectations and demands associated with

them which sometimes lead to role conflict. There are three types of role conflict –

• In between person and the role – It refers to the differences between a person's personality attributes and expectations attached with the role.

• Intra-role – Due to contradictory expectations about how a given role should be played, an ambiguous situation arises for the person.

• Inter-role – Due to differing requirements of 2 or more roles that must be played at the same time, inter-role conflicts arise. This mostly happens in the case of work and non-work roles. For example, a working mother has to play two separate roles at home and office.

Interactive conflict (macro level) – It includes conflict between individuals as well as groups.

1. Interpersonal conflict – the most common form of conflict in any organization is the one between two persons. There are four major reasons of interpersonal conflict

a) the differences between persons arising out of different cultural and family background, education, and values.
b) The communication breakdown in the organization.
c) The incompatible roles of the managers, in contrast to their functions and task which are interdependent.
d) An environment marred by work stress, downsizing, market

competition, uncertainties also leads to conflict.

2. Intergroup behavior and conflict – It refers to the conflict between members of one group with those of the other groups. The reasons leading to these can be:-
a) Competition for organization's scarce resources like funds, space, work force etc.
b) Difference in their objectives and priorities.
c) Ambiguity on the part of the responsibility and authority of a group.
d) Envy between groups or unfair treatment of one group in terms of rewards, job assignments, working conditions, privileges etc.

4. Stage I: Potential Opposition or Incompatibility

The first step in the conflict process is the appearance of conditions that create opportunities for conflict to arise. These conditions need not lead directly to conflict, but one of them is necessary if conflict is to surface. For simplicity's sake, we group the conditions (which we can also look at as causes or sources of conflict) into three general categories: communication, structure, and personal variables.

Communication: The communication can be a source of conflict. They represent the opposing forces that arise from semantic difficulties, misunderstandings, and "noise" in the communication channels. A review of the research suggests that differing word connotations, jargon, insufficient exchange of information, and noise in the communication channel are all barriers to communication and potential antecedent conditions to conflict. Research has further demonstrated a surprising

finding: the potential for conflict increases when either too little or too much communication takes place. Apparently, an increase in communication is functional up to a point, after which it is possible to over-communicate, with a resultant increase in the potential for conflict.

Structure: The requirements of the jobs can bring people into conflict. These conflicts are structural in nature. The term structure in this context includes variables such as size of the group, degree of specialization in the tasks assigned to group members, jurisdictional clarity, member–goal compatibility, leadership styles, reward systems, and the degree of dependence between groups. Size and specialization can stimulate conflict. The larger the group and the more specialized its activities, the greater the likelihood of conflict. Tenure and conflict have been found to be inversely related; the potential for conflict is greatest when group members are younger and when turnover is high. The greater the ambiguity about where responsibility for actions lies, the greater the potential for conflict to emerge. Such jurisdictional ambiguities increase intergroup fighting for control of resources and territory. Diversity of goals among groups is also a major source of conflict. When groups within an organization seek diverse ends, opportunities for conflict increase. Reward systems, too, create conflict when one member's gain comes at another's expense. Finally, if a group is dependent on another group (in contrast to the two being mutually independent), or if interdependence allows one group to gain at another's expense, opposing forces are stimulated.

Personal Variables: Have you ever met someone for whom you felt an immediate dislike? You disagreed with most of the

opinions he expressed. Even insignificant characteristics—the sound of his voice, the smirk when he smiled, his personality—annoyed you. We've all met people like that. When you have to work with such individuals, the potential for conflict arises. Our last category of potential sources of conflict is personal variables, which include personality, emotions, and values. Personality does appear to play a role in the conflict process: some people just tend to get into conflicts a lot. In particular, people high in the personality traits of disagreeableness, neuroticism, or self-monitoring are prone to tangle with other people more often, and to react poorly when conflicts occur. An employee who shows up to work irate from her hectic morning commute may carry that anger with her to her 9:00 a.m. meeting. Her anger can annoy her colleagues, which can result in a tension-filled meeting.

5. Stage II: Cognition and Personalization

If the conditions cited in Stage I negatively affect something one party cares about, then the potential for opposition or incompatibility becomes actualized in the second stage. As we noted in our definition of conflict, one or more of the parties must be aware that antecedent conditions exist. However, because a conflict is a perceived one, does not mean it is personalized. In other words, "A may be aware that B and A are in serious disagreement . . . but it may not make A tense or anxious, and it may have no effect whatsoever on A's affection toward B." It is at the felt conflict level, when individuals become emotionally involved, that they experience anxiety, tension, frustration, or hostility. Keep in mind two points. First, Stage II is important because it's where conflict issues tend to be defined, where the

parties decide what the conflict is about. If I define our salary disagreement as a zero-sum situation (if you get the increase in pay you want, there will be just that amount less for me), I am going to be far less willing to compromise than if I frame the conflict as a potential win–win situation (the dollars in the salary pool might be increased so both of us could get the added pay we want). Thus, the definition of a conflict is important because it typically delineates the set of possible settlements. Our second point is that emotions play a major role in shaping perceptions. Negative emotions allow us to oversimplify issues, lose trust, and put negative interpretations on the other party's behavior. In contrast, positive feelings increase our tendency to see potential relationships among the elements of a problem, to take a broader view of the situation, and to develop more innovative solutions.

6. Stage III: Intentions

Intentions intervene between people's perceptions and emotions and their overt behavior. They are decisions to act in a given way. We separate out intentions as a distinct stage because we have to infer the other's intent to know how to respond to his or her behavior. Many conflicts escalate simply because one party attributes the wrong intentions to the other. There is also typically a great deal of slippage between intentions and behavior, so behavior does not always accurately reflect a person's intentions.

Exhibit 2 represents the primary conflict handling intentions. Using two dimensions— cooperativeness (the degree to which one party attempts to satisfy the other party's concerns) and assertiveness. (the degree to which one party attempts to

satisfy his or her own concerns)— we can identify five conflict-handling intentions: competing (assertive and uncooperative), collaborating (assertive and cooperative), avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative), accommodating (unassertive and cooperative), and compromising (midrange on both assertiveness and cooperativeness).

Competing: When one person seeks to satisfy his or her own interests regardless of the impact on the other parties to the conflict, that person is competing. You compete when you place a bet that only one person can win, for example.

Collaborating: When parties in conflict each desire to fully satisfy the concerns of all parties, there is cooperation and a search for a mutually beneficial outcome. In collaborating, the parties intend to solve a problem by clarifying differences rather than by accommodating various points of view. If you attempt to find a win–win solution that allows both parties' goals to be completely achieved, that's collaborating.

Avoiding: A person may recognize a conflict exists and want to withdraw from or suppress it. Examples of avoiding include trying to ignore a conflict and avoiding others with whom you disagree.

Accommodating: A party who seeks to appease an opponent may be willing to place the opponent's interests above his or her own, sacrificing to maintain the relationship. We refer to this intention as accommodating. Supporting someone else's opinion despite your reservations about it, for example, is accommodating.

Compromising: In compromising, there is no clear winner or loser. Rather, there is a willingness to ration the object of the conflict and accept a solution that provides incomplete

satisfaction of both parties' concerns. The distinguishing characteristic of compromising, therefore, is that each party intends to give up something.

7. Stage IV: Behavior

When most people think of conflict situations, they tend to focus on behavior because this is where conflicts become visible. The behavior stage includes the statements, actions, and reactions made by the conflicting parties, usually as overt attempts to implement their own intentions. As a result of miscalculations or unskilled enactments, overt behaviors sometimes deviate from these original intentions. It helps to think of behavior as a dynamic process of interaction. For example, you make a demand on me, I respond by arguing, you threaten me, I threaten you back, and so on.

Exhibit 3 provides a way of visualizing conflict behavior. All conflicts exist somewhere along this continuum. At the lower part are conflicts characterized by subtle, indirect, and highly controlled forms of tension, such as a student questioning in class a point the instructor has just made. Conflict intensities escalate as they move upward along the continuum until they become highly destructive. Strikes, riots, and wars clearly fall in this upper range. Conflicts that reach the upper ranges of the continuum are almost always dysfunctional. Functional conflicts are typically confined to the lower range of the continuum.

Conflict-Resolution Techniques (Exhibit 4)

1) **Problem solving:** Face-to-face meeting of the conflicting parties for the purpose of identifying the problem and resolving it through open discussion.

2) **Super-ordinate goals:** Creating a shared goal that cannot be attained without the cooperation of each of the conflicting parties.

3) **Expansion of resources:** When a conflict is caused by the scarcity of a resource (for example, money, promotion, opportunities, office space), expansion of the resource can create a win-win solution.

4) **Avoidance:** Withdrawal from or suppression of the conflict.

5) **Smoothing:** Playing down differences while emphasizing common interests between the conflicting parties.

6) **Compromise:** Each party to the conflict gives up something of value.

7) **Authoritative command:** Management uses its formal authority to resolve the conflict and then communicates its desires to the parties involved.

8) **Altering the human variable:** Using behavioral change techniques such as human relations training to alter attitudes and behaviors that cause conflict.

9) **Altering the structural variables:** Changing the formal organization structure and the interaction patterns of conflicting parties through job redesign, transfers, creation of coordinating positions, and the like.

Conflict-Stimulation Techniques

1) **Communication:** Using ambiguous or threatening messages to increase conflict levels. Bringing in outsiders Adding employees to a group whose backgrounds, values, attitudes, or managerial styles differ from those of present members.

2) **Restructuring the organization:** Realigning work groups, altering rules and regulations, increasing interdependence,

and making similar structural changes to disrupt the status quo.

3) **Appointing a devil's advocate:** Designating a critic to purposely argue against the majority positions held by the group.

8. Stage V: Outcomes

The action–reaction interplay between the conflicting parties results in consequences. As our model demonstrates, these outcomes may be functional, if the conflict improves the group's performance, or dysfunctional, if it hinders performance.

Functional Outcomes: It is hard to visualize a situation in which open or violent aggression could be functional. But it's possible to see how low or moderate levels of conflict could improve the effectiveness of a group. Let's consider some examples and then review the research evidence. Note that all our examples focus on task and process conflicts and exclude the relationship variety. Conflict is constructive when it improves the quality of decisions, stimulates creativity and innovation, encourages interest and curiosity among group members, provides the medium through which problems can be aired and tensions released, and fosters an environment of self-evaluation and change. The evidence suggests conflict can improve the quality of decision making by allowing all points to be weighed, particularly those that are unusual or held by a minority. Conflict is an antidote for groupthink. It doesn't allow the group to passively rubber-stamp decisions that may be based on weak assumptions, inadequate consideration of relevant alternatives, or other debilities. Conflict challenges the status quo and therefore furthers the creation of new ideas, promotes

reassessment of group goals and activities, and increases the probability that the group will respond to change. An open discussion focused on higher-order goals can make these functional outcomes more likely. Groups whose members have different interests tend to produce higher quality solutions to a variety of problems than do homogeneous groups. Team members with greater differences in work styles and experience also tend to share more information with one another.

These observations lead us to predict benefits to organizations from the increasing cultural diversity of the workforce. And that's what the evidence indicates, under most conditions. Heterogeneity among group and organization members can increase creativity, improve the quality of decisions, and facilitate change by enhancing member flexibility. Researchers compared decision making groups composed of all-Caucasian individuals with groups that also contained members from Asian, Hispanic, and Black ethnic groups. The ethnically diverse groups produced more effective and more feasible ideas, and the unique ideas they generated tended to be of higher quality than the unique ideas produced by the all-Caucasian group.

Dysfunctional Outcomes

The destructive consequences of conflict on the performance of a group or an organization are generally well known: uncontrolled opposition breeds discontent, which acts to dissolve common ties and eventually leads to the destruction of the group. And, of course, a substantial body of literature documents how dysfunctional conflicts can reduce group effectiveness. Among the undesirable consequences are poor communication, reductions in group cohesiveness, and subordination of group goals to the primacy of infighting among members. All forms of

conflict—even the functional varieties—appear to reduce group member satisfaction and trust. When active discussions turn into open conflicts between members, information sharing between members decreases significantly. At the extreme, conflict can bring group functioning to a halt and threaten the group's survival.

We noted that diversity can usually improve group performance and decision making. However, if differences of opinion open up along demographic fault lines, harmful conflicts result and information sharing decreases. They fall into in-group favoritism and won't take the other side's point of view into consideration. Managers in this situation need to pay special attention to these fault lines and emphasize the shared goals of the team.

Managing Functional Conflict

One of the keys to minimizing counterproductive conflicts is recognizing when there really is a disagreement. Many apparent conflicts are due to people using different language to discuss the same general course of action. For example, someone in marketing might focus on "distribution problems," while someone from operations will talk about "supply chain management" to describe essentially the same issue. Successful conflict management recognizes these different approaches and attempts to resolve them by encouraging open, frank discussion focused on interests rather than issues (we'll have more to say about this when we contrast distributive and integrative bargaining styles). Another approach is to have opposing groups pick parts of the solution that are most important to them and then focus on how each side can get its top needs satisfied. Neither side may get exactly what it wants, but both sides will get the most important parts of its agenda. Groups that resolve conflicts successfully

discuss differences of opinion openly and are prepared to manage conflict when it arises. The most disruptive conflicts are those that are never addressed directly. An open discussion makes it much easier to develop a shared perception of the problems at hand; it also allows groups to work toward a mutually acceptable solution. Managers need to emphasize shared interests in resolving conflicts, so groups that disagree with one another don't become too entrenched in their points of view and start to take the conflicts personally. Groups with cooperative conflict styles and a strong underlying identification to the overall group goals are more effective than groups with a competitive style. Differences across countries in conflict resolution strategies may be based on collectivistic tendencies and motives. Collectivist cultures see people as deeply embedded in social situations, whereas individualist cultures see them as autonomous. They As a result, collectivists are more likely to seek to preserve relationships and promote the good of the group as a whole. They will avoid direct expression of conflicts, preferring indirect methods for resolving differences of opinion. Collectivists may also be more interested in demonstrations of concern and working through third parties to resolve disputes, whereas individualists will be more likely to confront differences of opinion directly and openly.

9. Summary

Many people assume conflict lowers group and organizational performance, this assumption is frequently incorrect. Conflict can be either constructive or destructive to the functioning of a group or unit. Levels of conflict can be either too high or too low to be constructive. Either extreme hinders performance. An

optimal level is one that prevents stagnation, stimulates creativity, allows tensions to be released, and initiates the seeds of change without being disruptive or preventing coordination of activities. One conflict-handling strategy will not always be best. One should select a strategy appropriate for the situation. Using collaboration, accommodation, competition and avoidance the conflict can be handled well.