

CONCEPTUAL AND ELEMENTARY FRAMEWORK OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

Stela SEARS

Academy of Economic Studies, Chisinau, Moldova, stelaphd@gmail.com

Abstract. Conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of human life. In the organizational environment conflict is a frequent phenomenon, affecting a number of organizational processes and outcomes. The studies of organizational conflict are of particular interest to managers and scientists and contribute to a better understanding of the complex nature of organizational behavior and organizational processes. The perspectives on conflict in the organizational environment have evolved over the years. So far, organizational conflict is considered a legitimate and unavoidable element, which, incidentally, is also an indicator of an effective organizational management. Organizational conflict has not only dysfunctional (negative) effects, but also functional (positive) effects. Recognition of different types of conflict and the different styles of conflict management provides a vital tool for understanding organizational conflict and its management. Conflict management provides no single recommendation for dealing with conflicts, but rather offers a variety of ways, the practical application of which is conditional on several factors: an analysis of the specific situation, determining the causes and nature of conflicts and their possible consequences. A better management of organizational conflicts can have a significant impact on productivity, thus turning the organization into a better and more pleasant working environment for the employees.

Keywords: conflict; organizational conflict; conflict management.



1. Introduction

Conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of human life and has always been part of human interaction, even in times less subject to dynamic changes. The conflict is a social phenomenon. During the interaction of two or more individuals, a potential for conflict can appear. In organizational life conflict is a frequent phenomenon, affecting a number of organizational processes and outcomes.

The organizational culture of contemporary businesses is characterized by globalization, technological change, demands for increased productivity and efficiency, and increased participation by employees in the decision process. All these attributes of organizational culture of today create an environment which promotes the appearance of conflict.

In light of the above, it is clear that the study of organizational conflict is of particular interest to people with management jobs and scientists, facilitating a better understanding of the complex nature of organizational behavior and organizational processes.

Despite the voluminous study of organizational conflict, there is no clear and universally accepted definition of this term. In general, the conflict appears as a form of human interaction in which two or more members of a community disagree partially or completely about a problem. Since the goals of both parties are often incompatible, goal achievement by one of the parties makes it impossible to achieve this goal by the other party. Thus, conflict can be defined as "... a process in which one

party perceives that its interests are adversely affected by the other side" [1]. In the same context, Hocker and Wilmot [2] consider the conflict as "... an explicit struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference of the other party to achieve its goals." A particularly interesting and evocative definition of the term of conflict is found in the work of Pondy [3]: "The term conflict refers neither to its previous conditions, nor to its recognition by the individual or to certain emotional states or at events open to any repository of emotions, past, or structure, but nevertheless taken together ...".

Despite semantic differences in the definition of conflict, there are some common elements in all definitions, namely: the existence of two or more parties whose interests appear to be incompatible; the perception of conflict by all parties involved; the state of some sort of opposition; the struggle for limited resources.

2. The historical evolution of the concept of conflict.

Conflict research and empirical studies devoted to this phenomenon have an extensive history. The perspectives on conflict in the organizational environment have evolved over the years.

A synopsis of the evolution of the concept of conflict theory is found in the work of Robbins [4], which describes the following stages of historical evolution of perspectives on conflict:

1. Classical or traditional perspective on conflict, based on the idea that conflict is destructive to the organization, and therefore it must be eliminated.
2. Behavioral perspective, which recognizes that organizational conflict is inevitable, accepts the presence of conflict and even promotes the idea of encouraging conflict to improve organizational efficiency.
3. Interactionist perspective, by contrast, recognizes conflict as an absolute necessity and encourages explicit opposition. In this perspective, conflict management combines methods for both encouraging conflict, as well as for resolving it.

In the traditional view conflict was considered as something destructive, while the role of management was to eliminate conflict in the organization. The behavioral perspective viewed conflict as an inevitable part of the complex organizational structure and something to be accepted. By contrast, interactionist perspective considered conflict as absolutely necessary in the organizational life, with management's role being to support and encourage conflict in the organization.

At present, conflict is considered a legitimate and unavoidable element in the organizational environment, which, incidentally, can also be an indicator of effective organizational management.

3. Types of conflict

In the works devoted to organizational conflict management, particular attention is paid to the typology of conflicts. Thus, conflicts can be classified according to the essence (substantive or emotional conflict), the degree of intensity (discomfort, incident, misunderstanding, tension and crisis), the form of conflict (latent conflicts and manifest conflicts), the level at which conflicts occur (intrapersonal conflicts, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup), and direction of evolution (vertical, lateral and oblique), and the effect (functional and dysfunctional).

Rahim argues that the recognition of different types of conflict and the different styles of conflict management provides a vital tool for understanding organizational conflict and conflict management [5]. Therefore, conflict management strategies must incorporate recognition of the different types of conflict which may have a positive or negative impact on the individual or group performance [6].

4. Functional and dysfunctional effects of conflict

Conflict is a natural part of organizational life and is not necessarily a bad thing. Thus, organizational conflict may have not only dysfunctional (negative) effects, but also functional effects (positive). On the one hand, constructive conflict is functional when it helps to improve the quality of decisions, encourages interest and curiosity, promotes creativity and innovation. On the other hand, conflict can be dysfunctional and destructive, leading to reduced group effectiveness.

Among the most frequently cited undesired consequences of conflict are communication problems, reduced group cohesion, and subordination of group goals to the struggle for supremacy of its members. Several studies have shown that the existence of conflict in groups is a sign of strength, not weakness [7]. In extreme cases, conflict undermines the functioning of the group and calls into question its existence [8].

Conflict in organizations often leads to disturbances of the established order and has an impact on stability and harmony. In this case, conflict seems to be something that should be avoided and eliminated. However, conflict can be seen as an inevitable feature of human interaction and something that through constructive management methods can attain a positive value and contribute to an enhanced organizational performance. In this case conflict can lead to beneficial changes in the institutional framework. However, attempts to foster constructive conflict can also indirectly lead to destructive conflicts [9].

Conflicts have constructive or destructive effects depending on the intensity of the conflict itself and, in a second place, depending on how they are managed. If not properly managed, conflict escalation can lead to negative emotions, high staff turnover and increased court costs. Thus, conflicts become one of the biggest tests for managers and one of the most frustrating and unpleasant experiences for the parties involved.

5. Sources of organizational conflict

Detection and identification of the causes of conflict at an early stage is essential in business management and enables managers to take appropriate measures to enhance the positive effects of conflict and reduce the negative consequences. The role of effective management is to identify ways and means by which it is possible, on the one hand, to reduce the negative effects of conflict, and on the other hand, to boost its positive effects. The causes of conflict are varied. Understanding these causes is essential for ensuring the best choice of methods and strategies for effective management of conflict situations. Robbins [10] groups the most important factors that cause conflicts in the following way:

- 1) Communication factors: conflicts arising from communication deficiencies.
- 2) Structural factors: organizational conflicts related to roles.
- 3) Personal factors: conflicts that arise due to personal differences.

Katz [11], in turn, highlights three sources of conflict:

- 1) Structural conflicts: conflicts arising from the interdependence of organizational subunits.
- 2) Role conflict: conflict related to individual behavior.
- 3) Limited resources: the competition for organizational resources.

Several authors, including Martin and Felenz [12], classify sources of organizational conflict in relation to the

organizational levels where these conflicts arise. The sources of conflict may be intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, inter- and intraorganizational.

In a newer perspective on the topic of causes of organizational of conflict, Taylor [13] highlights, among other things, the differences between the old generation and new generation, old knowledge versus new, adaptation to new technologies, as well as ideological changes.

6. The concept of conflict management

Studying conflict in general and in the organization, in particular, is of great practical utility for managing an organization, since conflicts left unresolved in time can generate both tangible and intangible costs.

Thus, the urgent question that arises for the company's management is not how to avoid the conflict, but how to tackle it. If the conflict is not managed in an appropriate manner, the company's productivity, operational efficiency and employee morale will suffer.

It is important to distinguish between conflict resolution and conflict management. Once it has been established that the nature of the conflict can be both functional (constructive) and dysfunctional (destructive), the following research emphasis has shifted from attempts to eliminate the conflict through resolution to efforts of conflict management through management.

For some researchers, the terms of conflict resolution and conflict management are interchangeable. For others, they are two different concepts: while conflict management is a process that seeks to bring the conflict under control, then conflict resolution is a process that tries to stop the conflict.

The term conflict management is favored by many researchers. Rabies [14] argues that "The conflict can never be eliminated, it only may be managed in order to minimize its negative effects, to reduce the intensity, and to facilitate its positive role on development. Conflicts are rarely solved. Most often, conflicts can only be tempered and regulated."

Rahim [15] is of the opinion that "The contemporary organizations need conflict management, not conflict resolution". Conflict management does not necessarily prevent, reduce or end the conflict. Management means developing effective strategies at the macro level designed to minimize conflict malfunctions and increase constructive functions of conflict, which would contribute to increasing the level of organizational learning and organizational effectiveness.

7. Theoretical models of conflict

The development of theory and practice in human resources management has generated theoretical models of conflict, which allow a better understanding of the causes and mechanisms of conflict situations, but also formalize the conceptual framework of how to address the questions of conflict management. Depending on the characteristics

of the conflict model, managers may use different methods to address and resolve conflicts.

Structural conflict models are used to identify conditions that initiate or end the conflict activities. Their basic purpose is to specify the most important factors related to the occurrence of conflict in the organization [16].

By contrast, process models study the evolution of conflict through temporal parameters. These models attempt to highlight specific stages in the development of conflict and to determine the interrelationship between these stages.

In figurative language, structural models attempt to represent the static image of the conflict, by identifying its main causes and components, while the process model emphasize the active character of conflict through its stages of time.

8. Conflict management strategies

A lot of literature on management and human resources refers to the existence of specific strategies used by individuals in organizations for conflict management. Some works refer to a wide range of strategies, while others would focus on developing a single strategy. Some scholars attempt to couple conflict management strategies with conflict management styles, while others view them separately.

Regarding conflict management styles one can speak of a certain uniformity of views on this subject. Scientists generally refer to a finite number of conflict management styles, the most recognized classifications being presented in the works of Blake and Mouton (1964) [17] and Killmann and Thomas (1975) [18].

Thomas's model is the most frequently used by managers to address organizational conflict. It describes five basic strategies or styles of dealing with conflict by the individual:

1. Conflict avoidance style. This style is used to describe a behavior that is unassertive and uncooperative.
2. Competitive style. This style is used to describe a behavior that is assertive and uncooperative.
3. Accommodation style. This style is used to describe a behavior that shows unassertiveness combined with a high degree of cooperation.
4. Collaboration style. This style is characterized by assertiveness and cooperation. Both parties will try to find creative solutions acceptable to all and will try to achieve goals and optimum results for all parties.
5. Compromising style. This style is characterized by a moderate level of assertiveness and cooperation.

The effectiveness and the applicability of all five styles of management depends on the context of specific situations, personal traits of the parties involved, the desired results and the time available. For a successful conflict management to take place, it is essential to understand the advantages and disadvantages of each of these styles.

Research on the main strategies of conflict management theory and practice provides a framework for managers to choose the most appropriate conflict management strategy, according to the specifics of the case and the organizational needs. The analysis of conflict management styles led to two major conclusions: each conflict management strategy may be useful in specific conflict situations, and, most often, conflict management cannot be reduced to a single strategy.

9. Conclusions

Studying conflict in general and organizational conflict in particular, is of great practical utility for managing an organization, because conflicts unsolved in time can generate both tangible and intangible costs.

Organizational practice shows that conflict situations are used as important strategies to achieve a better result. The conflict within certain limits can play a crucial role for organizational productivity [19]. Successful organizational management requires an early identification of sources of conflict and factors that influence the direction the conflict will take.

Conflict management provides no single recipe for dealing with conflicts, but rather many ways of action, the practical application of which is conditional on several factors: an analysis of specific circumstances, determining the causes and nature of conflicts and their possible consequences.

Dealing with conflict superficially, lack of understanding constructive and destructive effects of conflict, constitute the main reason why some organizations record poor performance despite moderate financial, technological, human resources, because the most part of these are consumed in conflict. Better management of organizational conflicts can have a significant impact on productivity, turning, at the same time, the organization in a very pleasant working environment for the employees.

References

1. Wall, J.A., Callister, R.R.: *Conflict and its Management*. Journal of Management, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1995, pp. 515-558
2. Hocker, J.L., Wilmot, W.W.: *Interpersonal Conflict*. (2nd edition), Dubuque, IA: W. C. Brown., 1985, p.23
3. Pondy, L.R.: *Organizational Conflict: Concepts and Models*, Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 12, 1967, pp. 296-320
4. Robbins, S.P.: *Managing Organizational Conflict: A Nontraditional Approach*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974, pp.13-14
5. Rahim, M.A.: *Managing Conflict in Organizations* (2001). Praeger Publishers, 2001, pp. 312
6. Rahim, M.A.: *Towards a Theory of Managing Organizational Conflict*. International Journal of Conflict Management, Vol.13, No.3, 2002, pp.206-235
7. Hall, J., Williams, M.S.: *A Comparison of Decision Making Performance in Established and Ad-Hoc Group*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1966, February, pp.217
8. Hoffman, R.: *Homogeneity of Member Personality and Its Effect on Group problem Solving*. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, January 1959, pp.27-32
9. Amason, A. C.: *Distinguishing the effects of functional and dysfunctional conflict on strategic decision making: resolving a paradox for top management teams*. Academy of Management Journal, 1996, Vol. 39 No.1, pp.123-148
10. Robbins, S.P.: *Managing Organizational Conflict: A Non-Traditional Approach*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974
11. Katz, D.: *Approaches to Managing Conflict, Power and Conflict Organizations*. ed. Bz R.L. Kahn and K.E.Boulding (new Zork: Basic Books, 1964), pp. 105-114
12. Martin, J., Fellenz, M.: *Organizational Behavior and Management*. South Western Educational Publishing, 2010, IV Edition, pp.642
13. Taylor, R.L.: *Leadership strategies for department chairs and program directors*. Lecture at Faculty Development Workshop, American Dental Education Association Annual Session, March 3, 2001, Chicago, IL.
14. Rabie, M.: *Conflict resolution and ethnicity*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers,1994
15. Rahim, M.A.: *Managing conflict in Organizations*. New York: Praeger, , 1992, p.76
16. Baron, R. *Conflict in Organizations*. In Psychology In Organizations: Integrating Science And Practice, Murphy, K.R., Saal, F.E., 1990, Psychology Press, pp. 197-200
17. Blake, R.R., Mouton, J.S.: *The managerial grid: Key orientations for achieving production through people*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing, 1964
18. Kilmann, R.H., Thomas, K.W.: *Interpersonal conflict-handling behavior as reflections of Jungian personality dimensions*. Psychological Reports, 1975, Vol. 37, pp. 971-980
19. Rahim, M.A.: *Managing Conflict in Organizations*, Praeger Publishers, 2001, pp. 312