

Organizational conflict and its management: A theoretical analysis

الصراع التنظيمي وإدارته: تحليل نظري

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ABSTRACT:

The subject of organizational conflict has attracted the attention of both academic researches and professional managers in the field of business due to its significant contribution to the wellbeing of the work environment. As well as the effect it causes to the relationship between employees, and between staff and their supervisors. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss in general the topic of organizational conflict by focusing on its definition, sources that generate it, and its escalation phases. Furthermore, this article debates the styles of managing conflict between individuals, and highlights the important role that organization's management should play in conflict situations and why.

Keywords: Conflict, Organizational conflict, Styles of conflict management, Organizational conflict management.

ملخص:

يعتبر موضوع الصراع التنظيمي من المواضيع الجاذبة لكل من الباحثين الأكاديميين والمسيرين المحترفين في مجال إدارة الأعمال، وذلك نظرا للدور الأساسي الذي يساهم به في تحسين بيئة العمل. إضافة إلى الأثر الذي يسببه على العلاقة بين العمال، وبين العمال ومسؤوليهم. وعلى هذا الأساس فإن هذه الورقة البحثية تسعى إلى مناقشة عامة لموضوع الصراع التنظيمي من خلال التركيز على كل من مفهومه، المصادر التي تسبب وقوعه، ومراحل تضخمه. كما أن هذا المقال يهدف إلى دراسة أساليب إدارة الصراع التنظيمي بين الأفراد، ويسلط الضوء كذلك على الدور المهم الذي يجب على إدارة المنظمات أن تلعبه في حالات وقوع الصراع التنظيمي ولماذا.

كلمات مفتاحية: الصراع، الصراع التنظيمي، أساليب إدارة الصراع التنظيمي، إدارة الصراع التنظيمي.

1- Introduction:

The intense competition in a rapid changing environment has forced organizations to seek perfection and effectiveness regarding managing its material, financial and human resources. The latter poses a demanding challenge for managers in terms of motivating and leading employees to focus towards the same direction and specific goals that serves the organization's ultimate strategy. One challenge, amongst many others, that organizations have to deal with in daily basis is managing conflicts that occur within its staff. The diversification of people's culture, traditions, education and preferences ... etc. has made organizational conflict an inevitable situation in the workplace. In fact, according to statistics published in CCP Global Human Capital Report in May 2008 a study was carried on questioning 5.000 full-time employees in nine countries regarding organizational conflict, the results have revealed that 85 per cent of employees witness some amount of conflict and 29 per cent experience it always and frequently (Short, 2016).

Conflict, if not managed at the right time and properly, may reach a level where employees become enemies and work against each other, which will cause negative impact on their performance. The previous research has also stated that an average worker spends 2,1 hours per week dealing with conflict. This means that for the USA, the 2,1 hours conflict per week per employee are costing the US economy roughly \$ 359 billion (Short, 2016).

One might think that a conflict-free organization is the best environment for work. This statement is not completely accurate. Modern academic views suggest that a productive work environment should experience some level of conflict that its positive impact drives staff to deliver better results. Therefore, managers are taking organizational conflict management a serious issue in terms of learning its fundamentals and management techniques. A study demonstrated that 70 per cent of managers believe that managing conflict is a crucially important leadership skill (Bumpke, 2019).

In light of our previous introduction, the main question we are trying to resolve is: what is organizational conflict, and how it can be managed by employees and management?

In order to answer this article's problem, we have structured our research as follow, in the first part we shall focus on the phenomena of organizational conflict by giving its definition, its causes, its levels, and phases to get a better understanding for its management. In the second part, we shall discuss briefly the styles of handling conflict between employees, as well as shading some attention to the role of organization in conflict management situations.

2- Organizational Conflict:

2-1- Definition:

Researchers had different view of prospective towards the subject of conflict. March & Simon (1958) defined conflict, from a decision making point of view, as an interruption in the typical mechanisms of decision making process, which will cause a person or group to acknowledge difficulty in choosing the best alternative choice. Tedeschi et al. (1973) illustrated

the incompatible situation between conflicting parties when they defined conflict as “an interactive state in which the behaviour or goals of one actor are to some degree incompatible with the behaviour or goals of some other actor or actors” (p. 232).

These previous definitions have demonstrated the incompatibility of behaviours and goals that might emerge. Whereas the following definitions have gone a step forward to precise the negative impact that would be caused in a potential conflict situation, Robbins present conflict as “a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect something that the first party cares about” (Robbins, 2009, p. 376).

On the other hand, Coser (1968) presented in his definition the level of tension conflict can reach, when he said that conflict is “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals” (Bisano, 1988, pp: 13-14). Rahim (2001) believed that conflict is “an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance with or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organization, etc.)” (p. 18).

From these previously mentioned definitions, we can say that conflict is an interactive organizational phenomena that occur between two parties or more (individual, group, or organization) as a result of a situation of incompatibility in (goals, values, preferences, or needs ... etc.) which lead one (or all) party (ies) to express their dissatisfaction over that situation by conducting a certain behaviour that may be considered a threat to the other party (ies) and negatively affect the way of achieving their goals and needs.

2-2- Levels of Organizational Conflict:

Conflict within an organization has been classified into multiple levels by different academic researchers, the following represent the most common levels:

- Intrapersonal conflict: this type of conflict occurs within a member of organization, when one-member experience self-contradictions in his professional career, (i.e., individuals face inner conflict in certain times when facing incompatibility between their given tasks, roles, and their abilities to perform them, another example when an employee do a job that does not match his value and principles create self-conflict feelings and behaviour) (Bercovitch, 1983; Rahim, 2001; Olakunle, 2008);
- Interpersonal conflict: refers to a conflict that arise between two or more members within an organisation, whether they were in the same or different hierarchical level or department (Bercovitch, 1983; Rahim, 2001; Olakunle, 2008);
- Intragroup conflict: states the organizational conflict that take place between some or all members or between two or more subgroups within one group (Rahim, 2001; Olakunle, 2008);
- Intergroup conflict: refers to conflict occurring between two or more groups within an organization. A group could take many forms (i.e., department, unite, section ... etc.) (Rahim,

2001; Olakunle, 2008). Conflicts that happen between marketing and finance is example of intergroup conflict. This type of conflict is also known as Interdepartmental conflict (Bercovitch, 1983).

2-3- Sources of Conflict:

Katz (1964) mentioned three sources of potential organizational conflict:

- (1) Structural conflict: is caused between organizational units when administrators manage and coordinate tasks.
- (2) Role conflict: is caused due to a certain behaviour related to the role and job given to employees.
- (3) Conflict for resources: is the intense competition that can transform to conflict between individuals or group over all kinds of resources available within the organization, especially when it does not cover all needs.

Robbins (1978) also presented three factors that can be considered as sources of conflict, he argued that understanding correctly these sources will help managers dealing with conflict the right way:

- (1) communicational factors: which could be any misunderstanding that occur when employees communicate or misuse information.
- (2) Structural factors: related to organizational and structural roles such as conflict in functions or responsibilities.
- (3) Personal factors: are the differences between individuals in personality.

Another classification of sources of conflict, in more detailed and modern fashion, was brought by Rahim (2001). He introduced a classification of ten sources of that will help, according to Rahim, understand the nature and implications of conflict.

- (1) Affective conflict: happens when two parties interact with each other while trying to solve a problem to discover their incompatibility over few or all issues.
- (2) Substantive conflict: occur when two or more parties disagree on their job functions or tasks.
- (3) Conflict of interest: is the incompatibility of preferences between members in organization such as conflict over allocation of a scarce resources.
- (4) Conflict of values: is the incompatibility of parties in their values or ideologies on certain subjects.
- (5) Goal conflict: occur when two or more social entities have different outcome preferences of a certain process.
- (6) Realistic versus Non-realistic conflict: the latter type arises when one party release tension and express hostility for unworthy reasons. Whereas, Realistic conflict happens for solid and grounded reasons (i.e., tasks, values, objectives ... etc.).

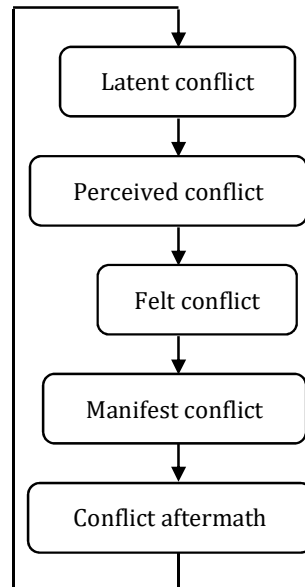
- (7) Institutionalized versus Non-institutionalized conflict: the former is known by situations where parties follow overt rules, and show expected behaviour, and their relationship has continuity (i.e., negotiations between labour and management). Non-institutionalized conflict does not consist of previous characterizations, (e.g., racial conflict).
- (8) Retributive conflict: happen when one conflicting party apply more unnecessary conflict to punish the other party.
- (9) Misattributed conflict: occur when one actor arises a conflicting situation not for the real reasons instead of the real hidden ones.
- (10) Displaced conflict: this type take place when either one (or two) party (ies) direct their tension to a third party who is not involved.

2-4- Phases of Organizational Conflict:

Conflict develops through time since it is a dynamic process (Pondy, 1967). And it comes in many degrees, from a simple unsatisfied hidden feeling to a disagreement up to hostility, injury, and elimination act (Bisano, 1988). Therefore, organizational conflict progress throughout several phases. Pondy (1967) believes that conflict includes five stages to reach its peak as shown in Figure (1).

- (1) Latent conflict: in this stage, there is no conflict at the surface, or in other words conflict is hidden so far, but the causes of a potential one are there (i.e., competition for limited resources, all forms of incompatibility, and orientation towards organizational independence);

Fig 1. Pondy's Phases of conflict



Source: Authors' own illustration

- (2) Perceived conflict: this is the phase where all parties become aware that a conflict has been emerged. Management will be able to notice more and more the risen conflict when actions and reactions of involved parties appear. At this stage, the possibility to resolve this conflict is higher than any other stage since it is fresh. Therefore, Pondy urges managers to improve communications between parties to search for the origin of causes;
- (3) Felt conflict: this stage is characterized by parties actually feeling the conflict. Anxiety and tension develop towards each parties, which will impact the relationship between them and to deal with each other in a negative manner;
- (4) Manifest conflict: a several varieties of low spirit and conflict behaviour from complete apathy to open aggression occur from one or all parties;
- (5) Conflict aftermath: in this phase, results and impacts of conflict appear and affect one or all parties. If managers fail to resolve conflicts at this step, these results and impact will become causes of another conflict cycle.

3- Organizational Conflict Management:

3-1- Conflict Management:

In this part, we shall review one particular approach for managing conflict in work place between individual as employees at any hierarchy level versus another.

The most famous styles, or also called strategies in many other literatures, for handling conflict within an organization is the five styles model. Many authors took initiatives to publish their work and studies regarding their prospective of resolving conflicts, the most cited publications known in this matter are Follett's in 1940; Blake & Mouton's in 1964; Thomas' in 1976; and Rahim's in 1983. We should mention that there were several other similar models that have been published in different classifications. For instance, (Deutsch, 1949; Knudson, Sommers, and Golding, 1980) suggested Two Styles model for handling conflict. (Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Billingham & Sack, 1987; Rands, Levinger, Mellinger, 1981) presented a Three Styles model. (Pruitt, 1983; Kurdek, 1994) brought the four styles model.

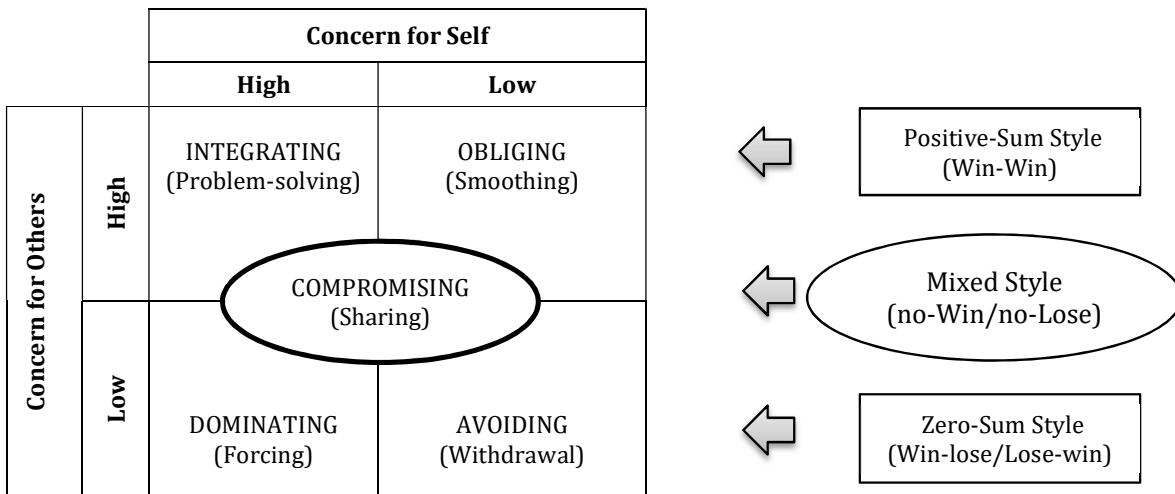
In this section, we shall focus on Rahim's 1983, and Rahim & Bonoma's 1979 five styles model for managing interpersonal organizational conflict. Furthermore, Rahim & Bonoma (1979) argue that this five styles model is also suitable for managing conflict at Intragroup and Intergroup levels. They differentiated the model based on two dimensions that occur in any conflict situation: concern for self and concern for others.

- First dimension: concern for self: describes the degree (high or low) to which a person prefers to satisfy his own interests, and ignores the others.
- The second dimension: concern for others: represents the opposite of the former dimension, where a person tends to care for others' concern rather than his.

The combination of the two dimensions results five strategies or styles for managing conflict, just as Figure 02 illustrates.

- (1) Integrating style: occur when concern for self and others at the same time is high. In this situation, both parties involved work to find solutions that suits them all. Rahim & Bonoma (1979) think this strategy lead to creative solutions.
- (2) Obliging style: in a smooth manner a specific result or procedure on one party when it is evident that concern for self is lower than concern for others. The party with lower concern is obliged to accept proposed solutions for the sake of his higher concern for others.
- (3) Dominating style: is a consequence of low concern for others and high concern for self. This strategy includes forcing procedures or solutions on the self-lower concern party.
- (4) Avoiding style: is a strategy in which its implementation will result failure for all parties to satisfy their concern. Avoiding strategy is characterized with withdrawal of individuals with lower concern for self, and stepping aside for higher concern others.
- (5) Compromising style: consists of reaching an acceptable solution for both parties. It includes setting a middle ground that ensure all parties achieve a mutual benefit (e.g, labour and management).

Fig 2. Interpersonal styles of handling conflict



Source: (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979, p. 1327).

3-2- Managing Conflict from the Management prospective:

Most academic writings about organizational conflict management focuses on the styles or strategies of handling conflict between individuals in the work environment without the involvement of the administration. The previously mentioned strategies might resolve conflicts between employees, but the most important questions are, does the outcomes of interpersonal

conflict management, even if the employees themselves are satisfied by it, effect the overall performance and productivity of the organization. And where will the role of the management be fitting in organizational conflict situations.

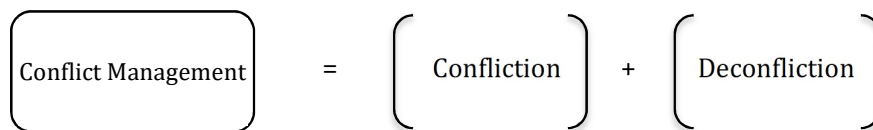
It is obvious that organizations aim to achieve the highest level possible of organizational effectiveness. Therefore, in a situation of conflict between individuals, the parties involved will apply one style out the five which satisfy them without any consideration for others not involved in their differences. "Managers who try to eliminate conflict will not last long, while those who manage it well will typically experience both organizational benefits and personal satisfaction" (Darling & Fogliasso, 1999, p. 385). And so it is preferable that the management of any organization should, when it notices conflict situations, closely observe the handling of these situations, and intervene when they believe that the outcomes would jeopardise its organizational effectiveness.

3-2-1- Confliction and De-confliction:

De Bono's writings regarding social conflict brought an emphasis on the role that organizations might play in a conflict situation. He believes that a small level of conflict or its total elimination would not benefit the organization in terms of performance and productivity. Furthermore, De Bono uses the word Confliction to refer to the process of generating or creating conflict (Rahim, 2001, p.13). He demands, in his publications, the management to intervene to raise the level conflict, when there is no conflict or it is low within an organization, to reach a degree when it becomes a functional conflict. Functional or positive conflict in other literatures tends to drive personnel to achieve their objectives, improve their performance, and promote creativity (Darling & Walker, 2001). Another benefit of confliction outcomes is that creating conflict in the right manner will encourage employees to communicate more, compete with each other to prove themselves (Bagshaw, 1998).

On the other hand, in 1986 De Bono invented the term De-confliction, which describes the opposite procedure of confliction. He is also convinced that too much conflict is harmful to the organizational performance and productivity. Therefore, when the level of conflict is high, managers need to react and control the conflict situation before its impact will be damaging to the work place. De Bono states that "De-confliction does not refer to negotiation or bargaining or even to the resolution of conflicts. De-confliction is the effort required to evaporate a conflict. Just as confliction is the setting up of a conflict so de-confliction is the opposite process: the demolition of the conflict." (De Bono, 1986, p. 05).

Fig 3. De Bono's conflict management



Source: Authors' own illustration

As a result, De Bono view conflict management as the combination of confliction and deconfliction. He illustrated a brief side of the role that organizations must do in order to preserve how they operate correctly by creating functional conflict situations when it is low, and making efforts to resolve it when it is high. The contributions of De Bono have made a clear distinguish, from the organization' stand point, between conflict resolution and conflict management, according to him resolution of conflict includes De-confliction, whereas management of conflict consist of both resolutions of conflict and Confliction.

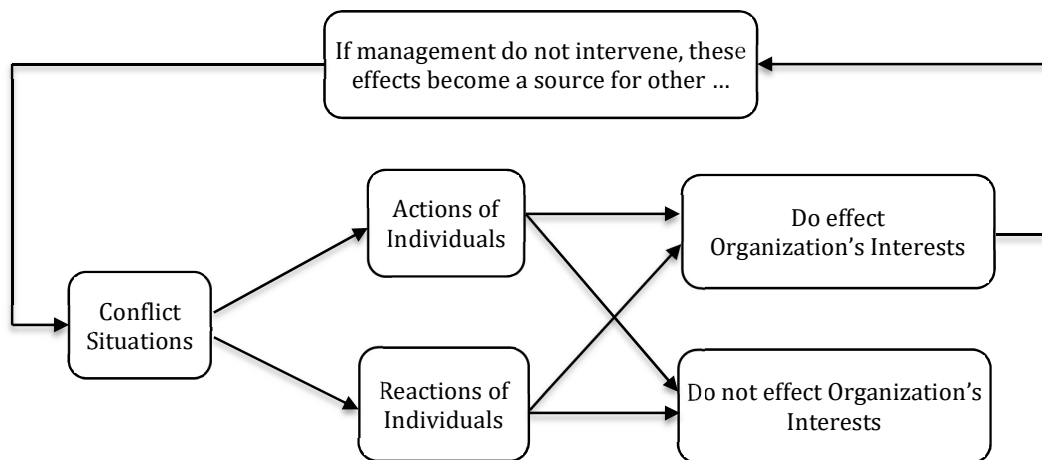
3-2-2- Management's role in conflict situation:

It is evident that organizations must protect their interests (i.e., production, sales, marketing, human resources ... etc.) at any legitimate cost. In a most conflict situations, individuals with influence and power within the organization, whether it was a manager or a supervisor, they will force their preferable conflict management style on their employee. A study by Çelik in 2013 aimed to discover the most used conflict management style by managers in primary schools in Ankara. The study has revealed that the "Dominating Style" is the conflict management strategy that frequently applied upon employees (Erçetin & Banerjee, 2014).

Moreover, it is known that organizational conflict is a form of a disagreement over work emerging from various reasons in work environment (Koçel, 2003). Thus, it has to be that an argument of one party should be in the best interest for the organization more than the other. Supervisors and managers might use the dominating style for example when they believe their opinions are better than their employees'. Whereas in some cases, employees' arguments sometimes are more suitable to work, unfortunately they could not convince their supervisors and managers since they do not have power and hierarchy rank to dominate the conflict situation. In this case, top management should be alert of such situations to guarantee its organizational interests are protected.

The next figure briefly demonstrates the importance of monitoring conflict situations by the organization's management.

Fig 4. why management should intervene in organizational conflict situations



Source: Authors' own illustration

Interactions and behaviours associated with unresolved conflict may lead one party or both to miscommunicate or misrepresent their job to each other, which lead to weakening organizational effectiveness. An employee at marketing department experiencing a type of conflict with other employee at production without the knowledge of management will affect the work relationship between the two departments. Moreover, these behaviours and actions might escalate and trigger other conflict situations in upcoming times.

Hence, in similar circumstances, management need to be closely monitoring the handling of conflict situations between individuals to make sure the conflict management style adopted will not harm organizational interests, as well as the style used is somehow satisfactory for both parties so the actions and reactions will not be sparks for other conflict situations in the future.

4- Conclusion:

An organization without conflicts is no healthy organization, due to that organizational conflicts represent diversity in culture, in thinking, in expression and values, which are important ingredients for success. The diversifications and differences in background, education, culture and other things are more likely the causes or sources of conflict. We have presented in this articles statements and explanations from different authors proving conflict is a natural workplace phenomenon that occur between employees.

Academicians agree that conflicts take different forms within organizations, in general they approve four types of conflict: intrapersonal conflict occur within an individual himself; interpersonal conflict occur between two employees; intragroup conflict which happens within a group of workers; and intergroup conflict is conflict between two groups or more.

Techniques have developed to conflict with diverse approaches, the most recognized of them all, as mentioned in this paper, are the five styles of conflict management. These styles allow staff to handle conflict in multiple manners based on their preferable concern for self or for others.

When noticing organizational conflict, usually the first thing that comes to mind is the negativity of it and the damage that could cause. Whereas in fact, it has been argued that conflicts have a positive side as well. We have demonstrated that a right amount of conflict should promote communications and competition between employees, which will increase their performance.

Despite that individuals tend to resolve their conflicts with mutual satisfaction, management should not hesitate to be part of such situations for several reasons discussed earlier. There is no assurance that conflict management outcomes will profit the parties involved and the organization as well. Therefore, organizations need to learn about any conflicts occur and their resolution consequences.

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