SOURCES OF CONFLICTS WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS AND METHODS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Abstract:
Inherent components of group life, conflicts include both positive and negative aspects from a psycho-social point of view. They can generate chaos and progress, separation and cohesion. More and more specialists believe that conflict management is as important as the other management functions. We can say that there is no organization without conflicts and no social group without disputes. The present paper tries to identify the modality in which conflicts are born, as well as to present various strategies of conflict resolution, on the basis of a cost analysis generated by conflicts at organizational level.

Key words: conflict, dispute, resistance, opposition, hostility, organizational conflict

The conflict comprises a series of human affective states such as: anxiety, hostility, resistance, open aggression, as well as the types of opposition and antagonistic interaction, including competition. On the other hand, where at least two persons interact, there is an adequate environment for the emergence and development of conflicts. In spite of all this, few people know what a conflict really is. It represents an opposition and confrontation process between different individuals or groups when each of them pursues his own interest. Webster, 1967 defines the conflict as: ”disapprobation ... war, fight and collision, emotional tension... opposition manifested by people...”. One must observe that a group conflict can only appear when the groups differ but they are dependent one of each other.

The term *conflict* considers all forms of intolerance and results from an incompatible influence between individuals, groups and organizations; it is used to describe:

➢ States of conflict;

➢ Affective states of individuals (hostility, frustration, care, anxiety);

➢ Cognitive states (consciousness of conflict states);

➢ Behaviorist states (from passive resistance to declared aggression, without neglecting secretiveness, abjection).

Conflicts may also have beneficial effects:

1. The diminution of accumulated tensions, being a real help for the stability and integration of members.

2. The possibility of groups to express their opinions and wishes. The impulses emerged thus might be consumed more efficiently due to the transformation effect into various changes.

3. The maintenance of the stimulation level necessary for creativity, inter-group conflicts representing a motivation source when looking for changes.

4. Suggesting a group identity.

The organizational practice shows that conflict states are used as important strategies to obtain a better result as opposed to the others’

progress. Consequently, the conflict must be regarded as an important side of organizational life, a feature of its unequal nature, due to the divergences existing in attitudes, purposes, acting modalities or a situation aroused in the management process. Richard H. Hall said that the conflict is "an inherent organizational process". The practice of successful management imposes from the very beginning the identification of conflict states as well as the factors that favor their orientation to the diminution of managerial performance.

General sources of conflict within organizations

Lack of communication is often a source of conflict. In such situations, the only way of solving the conflict is represented by co-operation which allows each party to find the position and the other party's arguments if the people involved in the conflict want to cooperate in order to find the most acceptable solution. The information exchange allows each party to access the other party's thinking and knowledge, mistrust, confusion and misunderstanding being thus highly diminished.

Disagreement refers to the ethical aspects, the modalities in which power should be exercised, taking into account moral probity and correctness. Such differences affect both the choice of objectives and methods. Some managers have the tendency to increase and escalade interpersonal conflicts in order to strengthen their positions within the organization. The ambiguity of the information, the wrong presentation of reality, denaturizing the others' thinking are the main reasons for incompetent managers.

In case of *limited resources* at organizational level, the development of some structural elements affects the possibilities of the other departments. The relations between the departments of the organization are determined by some people's reactions to the other people's needs, by the correctness of the information exchange or the attitude of the members within a department to the other departments and their members.

The higher chances of some groups to have a *social status* considered to be more honorable by others represent another reason for a structural conflict (the relations between the production and administration compartments of many companies where we find interactions and feelings that define a conflict state).

This was a general outlay of the possible causes of conflicts. If we take into consideration the specific conflict types, we may also identify further motives generating conflicts according to their peculiarity:

• *Interpersonal conflicts* – the main reasons are: the differences in professional training; stress resistance, effort capacity; non-correspondence of character and behavior; sexual harassment; sexism;

• *Intergroup conflicts* – the main reasons are: wrong communication; different value systems; different purposes; organizational ambiguities; dependence of limited resources; mutual department influence, dissatisfaction to the professional status.

The efficient solution for conflict situations imposes the identification and consciousness of conflicts in order to act properly, to utilize the positive effects as well as to reduce the negative effects (the possible ones). The causes that generate the states of conflict may be searched both in the psycho-sociological elements and in the structural elements featuring organizations.

According to Sam Deep and Lyle Sussman, the essential causes of conflicts are:

1. **Different points of view regarding the priority objectives** – the

existence of different purposes or objectives frequently leads to conflicts of interests or priorities even when the organizations have the same purposes;

2. **Different points of view regarding the methods used** – the persons or the groups may have common objectives but different opinions regarding their accomplishment;

3. **Perception differences or differences in the value system** - the majority of conflicts reside in the different way in which people see the reality, as not all of them perceive the same reality, and conflicts appear due to the fact that we do not see the same reality;

4. **Lack of communication or wrong communication** that leads to the emergence of some misunderstandings. In such cases, the only solution for a conflict is the co-operation which allows each party to find the position and the arguments of the other party;

5. **Competition regarding insufficient resources** – the limited character of organizational resources and the dependence to such resources may generate competitions that might turn into conflicts; the insufficiency of resources has the capacity to transform masked or slow conflicts into open and acute conflicts; also, the more limited are the resources, the higher is the conflict potential;

6. **Difference of power, status and culture** in the situations in which the parties have a significant difference in power, status and culture.

7. **Competition for supremacy** – is present when a person tries to compete or outshine another person, such as when two employees are in a fierce competition to get a promotion or an influential position within the same organization;

8. **Invading the territory**, that, as it is mentioned in the specialty literature, is not limited to the physical space, but to al the other finite resources for which people get into competition (spaces, investments, personnel, equipments, rewards);

9. **Ambiguity** – the ambiguous purposes and objectives, the imprecision in establishing tasks, authority and responsibility of some jobs and compartments, lack of clarity in transmitting decisions or the deformed presentation of reality are sources of conflict;

10. **The activity nature and the presence of tasks** are potential sources of conflict when individuals, groups or departments are mutually dependent in order to reach their own objectives, which the interaction of the parties so that they might coordinate their interests;

11. **Changing the external environment of the organization**, while the rising of competition, the governmental interventions, the new technologies and the change of social values may constitute major causes of conflict;

12. **Aggressiveness and stubbornness**, since some individuals move through life in a way in which they seem to be looking for opponents. Conflicting states can be determined by:

• the inability of a group's member to perform the tasks that were assigned to him/her;

• dissatisfaction with the way of distributing the tasks;

• wrong perceptions and misinterpretations;

• lack of open and honest communication;

• difficult interpersonal relationships;

• the existence of a climate of mistrust between people;

• aggression; potential

• fear of allowing others to show their potential;

• competition, etc.

These cases belong more to the psycho-sociology of the group. In an

organization pursuing an economic activity, usually one meets the structural conflict.

The sources of such a conflict must be sought in:

• demarcation of departments according to their different objectives;

• mutual departmental dependence;

• dissatisfaction with the employment status;

• inaccurate delineation of responsibilities;

• the limited nature of resources and communication in the organization.

Sam Deep and Lyle Sussman recommend managers to stimulate beneficial conflicts within organizations through the following measures:

➢ encourage the employees to have different opinions and to ask questions about the facts; rewarded them when they do so;

➢ employ people who do not think the same way as you do, but make sure that they will respect the authority;

➢ when you suspect that your subordinates are afraid to admit that they have different opinions, tell them you want to listen to that opinion;

➢ do not react negatively to bad news, on the contrary, praise the employees who keep you informed;

➢ help the team to see projects coming from outside to increase the cohesion of its members;

➢ raise the level of your objectives and expectations towards your employees;

➢ Make your subordinates compete with each other, but do not allow them to sabotage each other.

The analysis of the evolution of conflict situations shows that conflict initiation involves the gradual accumulation of stress over time. In this sense several stages of conflict situations can be emphasized:

a) strained state (in which there are all the premises for triggering the conflict);

b) recognizing the conflicting state, increasing the conflicting state (when the strained state accumulates, but without triggering the conflict);

c) triggering the conflict, ceasing the conflict;

The strained state arises when there are elements that may represent sources of conflict: differences between departments, interdependences or shared use of resources. The divergent objectives do not generate the conflict until the moment these divergences are noticed. Now the conflicting situation is recognized and all the people involved focus their attention on the dynamics of the conflict. Increasing the state of conflict consists in building tension, but although the conflict was not triggered yet, it becomes inevitable.

Triggering the conflict implies releasing the conflicting forces and the attempt to assert the divergent interests as strongly as possible. Finally, the conflicting state will end by changing the factors which led to the conflict. The parties shall seek to create new conditions for cooperation, or to build arguments to trigger a new conflict, much stronger this time.

Conflict models

There are several theoretical models of conflict. Robbins's model (Robbins S.P., 1998), (Figure 1) is focused more on the interpersonal relationships and it emphasizes that adopting a particular behavior triggers similar reactions from the others. Thus, to keep the conflicting situation in positive limits, it is important to remember that good relationships are kept with behavior control, being fully aware of the power that the adopted behavior has on the interpersonal relationships.
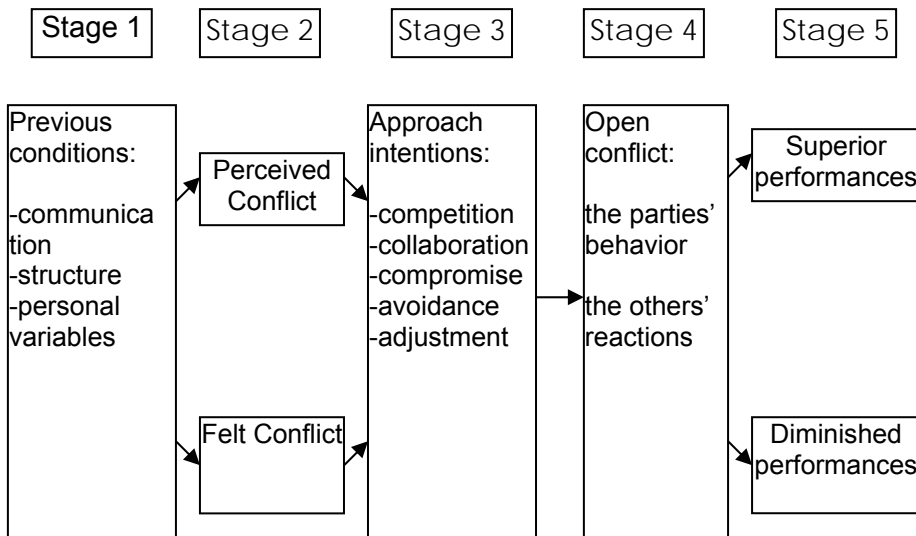
Stage 1 Stage 2 Stage 3 Stage 4 Stage 5

Previous conditions:

-communication
-structure
-personal variables

Perceived Conflict

Felt Conflict

Approach intentions:

-competition
-collaboration
-compromise
-avoidance
-adjustment

Open conflict:

the parties' behavior

the others' reactions

Superior performances

Diminished performances

Figure 1. An explanatory model of the conflicting process

An important aspect of the model is the interdependence between the different stages it passes through and the fact that the parties involved are dependent on each other for the consequences.

Robbins has developed a model that takes into account the new conception on conflicts, as measure in which the parties' interaction improves the outcomes or decreases them.

Stephen P. Robbins underlines five stages of the conflict (Figure 2):

  ➢ potential opposition or incompatibility;
  ➢ recognition and customizing;
  ➢ intentions or goals;
  ➢ behavior;
  ➢ consequences or effects.

According to Judith R. Gordon (Manolescu A, 2003), the stages of conflict are shown in Figure 3, which emphasizes the influence of the environment, of the organization and of the individual on certain types of conflict (latent, understood, felt and manifested), as well as their consequences.

Since the elements of the process often work against achieving a peaceful solution, the cycle of the conflict is self-maintained and the lack of solving it leads to the maintenance of the latent conflict.
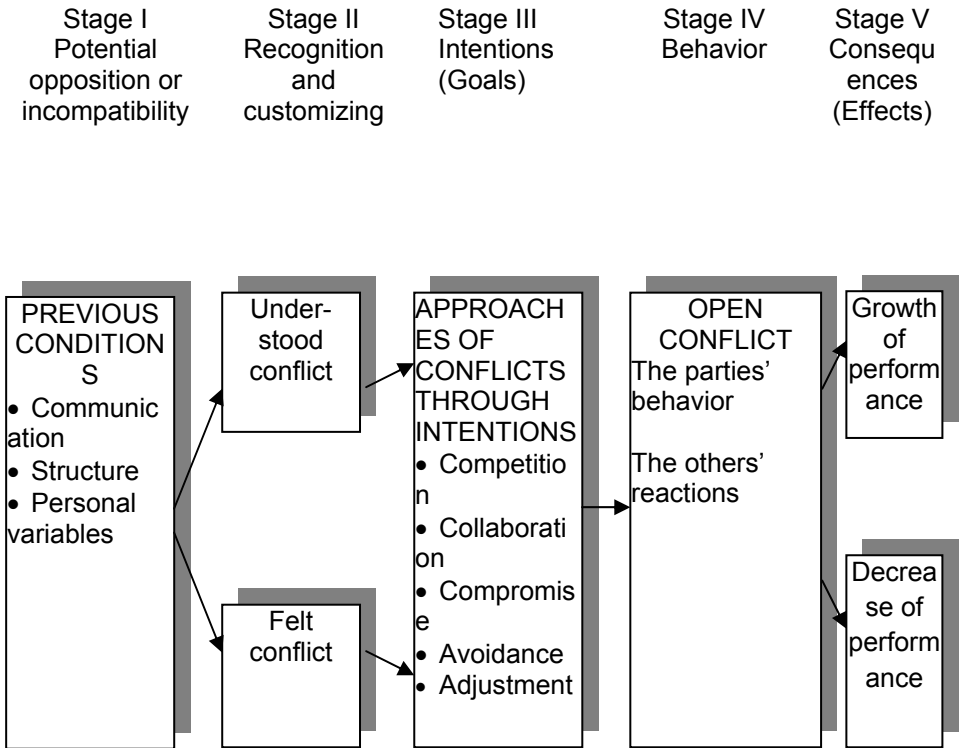
Stage I Potential opposition or incompatibility	Stage II Recognition and customizing	Stage III Intentions (Goals)	Stage IV Behavior	Stage V Consequences (Effects)

Figure 2. The conflicting process

Source: Aurel Manolescu, *Managementul resurselor umane (Human resources management),* 4th ed., Editura Economică, Bucureşti, 2003
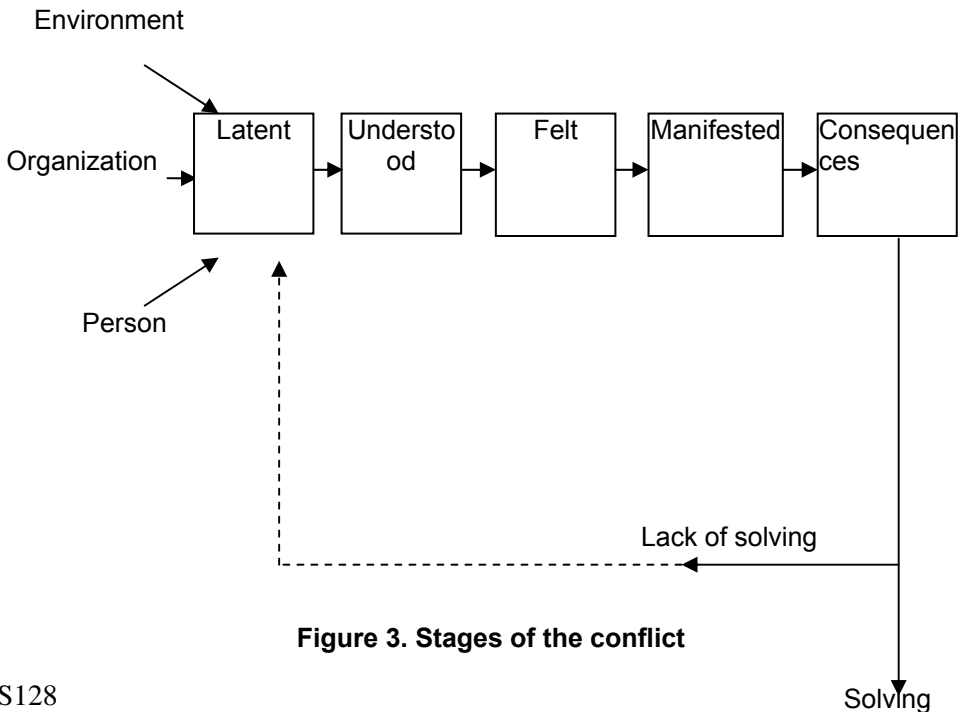

Figure 3. Stages of the conflict

Conflict management strategies

Knowing the essence and causes of conflicts, managers can avoid them, or, when necessary, they can guide the carrying out of conflicts within controllable limits. Whatever the specific method of conflict solving, three prior actions could lead to greater chances of success:

> ➢ precisely defining the subject of the dispute;
> ➢ narrowing the area of the dispute;
> ➢ widening the spectrum of solution possibilities.

In some conflicting situations it is advisable to use the strategy of limited relaxation; it refers to achieving some agreement on a certain number of individual issues that can be separated from the wider and more important aspects of the dispute whose settlement is more difficult to accomplish. Thus, one passes from a total conflicting situation, in which the only solving options are victory or defeat, to a dispute with a wider range of possibilities to be solved, from which both sides can benefit.

Given the degree of satisfaction, both of one's interests and of the adverse group, Thomas identifies five methods of conflict settlement (Table1):

Table 1
Methods of conflict settlement

Methods	Contextual situations
Avoidance	o The problem is unimportant or other more important problems have become more pressing; o There is no chance of satisfying your interests; o Triggering a conflict is more plausible than solving the problem; o To give people time to calm down and to have a perspective on the development of the events; o Additional information is needed; o Others may resolve a conflict in a more effective manner; o The problems seem to be essential or symptomatic;
Collaboration	o Finding some integrative solutions for interests of major importance; o When one's own goal is to learn; o Combining contradictory opinions; o Winning everybody's adherence by considering multiple interests and by achieving a general consensus;
Competition	o When decisional fastness is of vital importance; o In important problems in which unpopular actions must be implemented; o In the issues vital to the firm, when managers are convinced that their view is correct; o Against those who take advantage of a lenient attitude;
Compromise	o Goals are important, but the risk of triggering a conflict is too high. o Opponents with equal power are determined to implement ideas that exclude each other. o To achieve a temporary balance. o To ensure an "honorable" withdrawal, when collaboration or

	competition cannot lead to a positive outcome in terms of satisfying their own interests.
Adjustment	o When one reaches the conclusion that one's judgments are not correct; o To allow another better option to be applied; o To obtain a social loan in anticipation of future more important problems; o To minimize losses; o When the situation is out of control; o When harmony and stability are essential.

Other authors argue that in conflict management the following strategies can be used:

➢ **Ignoring the conflict** – if there is danger of a destructive conflict, the manager's failure of addressing it can be interpreted as an escape from the managerial responsibilities.

➢ **Tolerance the conflict** – if the conflict is not very strong and it is believed that it will lead to increasing the organizational performance, it can be tolerated; the manager's responsibility is to keep the conflict constantly under observation in order for it not to become destructive.

In the specialized literature one can find the following approaches to solve conflicts in terms of the manager's action:

• *Withdrawal* – the manager does not show interested in solving the conflict and prefers not to get involved; this strategy is dangerous because it can lead to blockage of communication both horizontally and vertically in the organization.

• *Reconcilement* - is the strategy used by those managers who seek the others' approval, rather than seeking to get the organizational objectives achieved; they will try to placate everyone.

• *Forcing* - is the approach of the manager who, unlike the above-mentioned one, wants at any price to achieve the objectives of productivity and will resort to coercion, excessively using his/her power.

• *Compromise* – is situated in terms of the manager's attitude between the second and the third form of strategy, often being achieved through negotiations.

• *Confrontation* – is the only approach that can lead to the final settlement of the conflict, taking into account both the need of productivity and the one of interpersonal cooperation.

Conflict generated costs

The awareness of the costs due to the conflicts and tensions in organizations is difficult because there is no account in the accounting statements showing in figures these losses.

In an organization, conflicts generate costs in terms of time, energy, decrease of productivity, increase of stress. But they are rather an investment instrument than a cost in itself. Not many organizations afford to invest in proper and constructive management of conflicts, but those which do it are those which quickly evolve towards the best performance. It costs quite a long time, especially energy and, if we turn time and energy into money, we will find that conflicts are not cheap.

Specialized studies in the field show that the decrease of labor productivity because of conflicts may even reach up to 50%, entailing additional costs for the company.

According to the specialists from Mediators, the only organization specialized in mediating conflicts between employees, collaboration is the favored behavior of managers in the organizations they lead in order to achieve the planned productivity. The employees' accumulated frustrations represent a factor that cannot be measured accurately and which mainly becomes concrete in the employee's lack of responsibility in accomplishing his/her duties. However, the collaboration between employees is not always something perfectly controllable, and maintaining a relaxed atmosphere is already recognized as being utopia.

Studies show that 42% of the managers' time is dedicated to solving conflicts and to the attempt of persuading employees to do the right thing. The Mediators specialists point out that the decrease in percentage of up to 50% of labor productivity is caused by conflicts. In their view, the managers of large organizations in Romania, with over 1,000 employees, announced costs of up to 1.5 million Euros per year. But the benefits of well managed conflicts are often much higher than the cost of the "investment" in conflict.

Focusing on evaluating conflicts in an organization and the consultation of some specialists who can provide viable solutions can mean the increase of the turnover by at least 10%. Another benefit is the growth of maintaining the qualified labor force and formed according to the company's profile. Removing the atmosphere of tension in an organization brings in this economic circumstance an advantage in the real-time of reaction to what happens on the market. The unfavorable circumstance changes into an opportunity. Explicit communication encourages team brainstorming and solutions appear when there was no hope. The concerns of the organization's members are to maintain the business on the market, not to give up. The organization's image on the market is positively promoted by employees as long as they feel well at work. The number of customer complaints is significantly reduced, quantifiable. Moreover, the value of each employee increases by the accumulation of experience in the organization, which brings real benefits to the business.

Conclusions

From the above described analysis the following conclusions can be drawn:

- conflict must be considered an inevitable part of the organizations' life;
- most people consider conflicts as destructive collisions, irreconcilable, after which some gain at the expense of others;
- a medium-level conflict is necessary to enable the development of organizational processes and pave the way for change;
- conflict may lead to the motivation of solving problems that otherwise go unnoticed, being able to lead to creative behavior;
- in the future it is necessary for managers to have more knowledge about the possibilities of constructive settlement of conflicting situations.

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