PATTERNS AND STRATEGIES OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS MEDIATION DURING THE PROJECTS

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Abstract:
Through this paper, we are intending to underline the negative impact which the interpersonal conflict may have during projects. After reviewing the most important factors which generate this type of conflicts, we have discussed the main aspects about the principles and steps which a project manager must follow in order to be prepared for mediation of interpersonal conflicts. In the second part of this article, we've analyzed some patterns of solving conflicts as avoidance, compulsion, adaptability, cooperation or compromise, revealing their advantages. Classifying the types of confliction's interventions, we distinguished the negotiation, a communicational process in order to reach an understanding between the two sides, the mediation, who promotes the communication in order to reach a compromise and the arbitrage, that supposes the existence of a third person, which has a special authority. In the last part, we revealed mediation's strategies which involved a higher or lower control of the result and the process of conflict's decision, and then we have discussed the situational key-factors who influences the choice of the strategy.

Keywords: project management, conflict management

How do interpersonal conflicts manifest?

A study made by the American Management Association has revealed the fact that the superior and middle managers use two hours of their daily time in solving confliction situations. Considering this, more and more specialists consider confliction management being as important as the other functions of management. The potential for conflict exists whenever and wherever people have contact [1]. The conflict isn't the problem, but when conflict is poorly managed that is the problem [2]. Conflict is a problem when it hampers productivity or lowers morale and when it causes more and continued conflicts or inappropriate behaviours.

The conflicts may be intrapersonal or interpersonal. The intrapersonal conflicts are attributed only to those who participate in the project (conflicts of values, of priorities etc). The interpersonal conflicts or the social conflicts are conflicts that manifest between people which are involved in the project or between different groups of interest. The interpersonal conflict is the process through which a person or a department frustrates another from obtaining the wanted result. The observation of this kind of conflict it is very important even from the beginning in order to be stopped, and for this a good specialist has certain clues which he can use discreetly.

The interpersonal conflict may have several *causes*, but in this article we will look only upon some of them.

Identification and dislocation from the group. Not all groups within an organization are compact, they may be formed after principles that are not always objective. In a team where relationships are not well bonded, of course there will always be an "advantage taker" which will identify him with the group in case there is a success noticed, and in case the group

fails in a project the person in question will step back from the group finding always an excuse. From this case there can easily rise a conflict because no one likes to be accused of someone else mistakes and also for someone else to take credit for his success.

*The differences of power, status and culture***.** When the power of decision is in the way which one person has the power over the other, conflict may appear if the authorised person in taking decisions is unjust and doesn't take write decisions.

Ambiguity. An economical organisation must have for its best function a clear internal structure. As long as this fact is not accomplished, the company's manager will be very hard to appreciate or to criticise the responsible person with the success or with a failure. This injustice in taking decisions could be an important factor in starting a conflict, because no one likes to be criticised for something he didn't do and in the same way there is no one that likes to see someone else taking credit for something he has done. So, there is very important for a company to have a clear and explicit structure in order to eliminate this risk factor in starting conflicts.

Insufficient resources. The lack of logistical and material resources from a project is in most of the times a conflict factor or it can also be a strong accelerator of this kind of conflict. Let's pretend that in a company, for a better developing of the project, it is brought a new and advanced computer. It is obvious that all team members will want to have access to that computer, and a conflict appears when it is to decide who has and who has not access to that particular computer.

The pressure of time. The dead line or other kind of pressure can generate destructive emotional reactions [4]. When dead line is imposed, the managers must take into consideration also the capacity of the employee to adapt. In the same time, the avoidance of introducing dead lines in certain phase of the project

encourages commodity and generates conflicts between team members.

Differences of personality. (Strong personalities, persons with problems or internal problems). The internal conflict is usually the cause of all other conflicts at a higher level, because or they understand in a wrong way the behaviour and objectives of those around them, or they express themselves in a wrong way and from this the conflict begins to turn to interpersonal level. The differences of personality are sometimes the cause of the communication problems. The barriers or disturbances make the messages to be wrongly transmitted or received, and from here the affect upon relationships between employees that see as a threat the purposes and the personal objectives [5].

Concerning *the frequency of appearance*, appear the following conflicts within projects: the conflict regarding respecting or not the dead lines; the priorities, the insurance of necessary personal, conflicts regarding technical problems, of project administration, of personality or connected to the cost. In different phases of the project, the sources of conflict might have different levels. So, in the phase of organizing the project, conflicts regarding priorities and then the ones regarding the project's management have a higher level. In the first steps of the project we can find most likely conflicts concerning dead lines and priorities while during the project are more frequent conflicts regarding deadlines and technical problems, and through the end are to be found conflicts regarding deadlines and staff.

Concerning the *level of conflict* we can establish: the discomfort (the people involved have a discomfort feeling that passes, which does not effect in a fundamental way the relationship); the incident (an unfortunate incident, not being taken into consideration, but passing, who's echo lasts from few minutes till few days); the misunderstanding (the

confuse understanding of the message and the actions of the other (through the movement of the accent, giving other meaning, elimination of context) and the tension (similar to discomfort but more intense: the constant change of the attitude of people involved in project's groups, followed by persistent opinions) The higher the level is, more difficult the mediation is, so is better the conflict to be identified and be resolved from the primary stages.

How does a manager have to prepare the mediation of interpersonal conflicts?

Some *rules and general principles* help the project manager to solve confliction situations during the project implementation.

Confliction situations have to be approached as soon as possible. The conflicts cannot be solved in an emotional or tensioned atmosphere. The project manager has to action only after the emotions has decreased reaching a normal level. In the same time, he has to pursuit very carefully the solving of conflicts in order to avoid the extension and aggravation of conflict situation.

Analyzing more carefully, we'll realize that the shallow conflicts derive from emotional tensioned relationships, which are very profound. For solving conflicts, the project manager has to listen patiently and open-minded, taking care of not choosing a winner and a looser. He has to solve the conflict in such a manner that every side remains with a positive feeling, with an acceptable result. (The principle "win-win").[3]

When it' about a team, for solving conflict, the project manager has to discuss with the entire team and together to try to find solutions. For that, we propose the steps described in table 1.

Table 1

The steps in order to solve conflicts in a project team

Establishment of the climate	The persons which are involved have to intend to participate.
Analyze the image	Every one has to understand how he sees the others and how others see him.
The collections of information	Every person will give his opinion and their feelings.
The usage of the information	All persons which are involved must have access to relevant information.
The establishment of the instant priorities	That will be done during a meeting.
Organizing the team	That will be done for solving the problem, without functional or hierarchical considerations.
Solving the problem and the development of an action plan	On everyone's positive decision decisions are established, priorities and terms for solving the conflict.
The implementation of the plan	Practical application of taken decisions.
The control of conflict solving	According with the feed-back made during the implementation of the plan.

Not all the confliction situations can be solved. The project manager has to analyse carefully the situations, because he doesn't have to solve all the conflicts, but to clarify the problems and to motivate the team to pass over that situations in the benefit of the project. If that is not possible, the final solution is that one or more persons are to be changed. Clarifying the goals in conflict is a first step toward conflict resolution [7].

Which are the most representative's patterns in solving conflicts?

People are trying to solve their interpersonal conflicts in many ways which we will present shortly.

The avoidance means unassertive and uncooperative behaviour. People use this style in order to keep away from conflicts, to ignore the misunderstandings or to remain natural. When unsolved conflicts interfere in reaching the purpose, the avoidance style leads to negative results for the project. In certain circumstances, this style can be desirable when: (1) the problem is minor and only of low importance and so the energy consumed for creating a conflict is not justified; (2) the available information that a person has is not enough in order to be preoccupied with a conflict in that time; (3) the power of a person is to little in comparison with the other's, so there are small chances to make a change; (4) others are more likely to solve the conflict.

The compulsion supposes an assertive and uncooperative behaviour and shows a win-loose approach of interpersonal conflict. Those who are using this style are trying to reach their own goals without thinking of others. Often, compulsion means a coercive power. We can remember that the attitude "me against you" doesn't gets you too far in business, especially when sides need a long term relationship. With all of these there are situations when the compulsion can be necessary when: (1) emergencies ask for a quick action; (2) must accept more unpopular actions in order to assure the organisation's efficacy and survival; (3) the person must act in order to protect himself and stops the others in taking advantage of him.

The adaptability represents cooperation behaviour, but an unassertive one. Adaptability may represent an act of altruism, a long term strategy in the direction of encouragement in cooperation with the others, in acceptance of the others desires. In general, adaptability is well received by others, but it can be seen sometime as a weakness or as an act of submission. Adaptability can be efficient on a short term, when: (1) people are in an potential confliction situation which must be avoided calmly; (2) the harmony and the avoidance of disruption are important, especially on a short term; (3) conflicts are caused primal by the people's personalities and can not be solved so easily.

The cooperation represents an assertive and powerful behaviour of cooperation. It reflects an approach win-win on interpersonal conflicts. The cooperation appears when the involved sides in the conflict are both looking to fully satisfy all sides' needs and are looking for a positive result for everyone. People close to this style tend to have these characteristics: (1) they consider the conflict as being normal, useful and even leading to a much creative solution if it's properly used; (2) they trust the others; (3) consider that a solved conflict in everyone's best interest leads to a unanimous acceptance of the solution.

Cooperation is useful, especially when: (1) it can be considered a high degree of interdependence, that's why it is justified the use of time and energy for solving the differences between people; (2) people have equal powers, so they feel free to interact within the group; (3) the chances of success are mutual, especially on long term, for solving the conflict through a process winning-winning; (4) there is enough organisational support for acceptance of

time and energy necessary in solving the dispute through cooperation.

The compromise is an intermediate behaviour between cooperation and assertively. That relies on "to offer and to receive" and supposes some concrescences. The compromise is often used as a conflict's solving method. That's not about an evident winner or looser, but we can see a desire for rationalize the object of the conflict and to accept the solution which offers an incomplete satisfaction of sides' needs. So, the distinctive characteristic of the compromise is that every side intends to renounce to something. In comparison of the cooperation, the compromise doesn't maximize the satisfaction, but reaches a moderate satisfaction, which is partial for every side.

This style is used when: (1) the understanding tends to improvement of the situation between the sides or prevents a come-down situation because of the misunderstandings; (2) it's not possible to reach a win-win accord; (3) the confliction intents or opposite interests obstruct the accord with the proposal of one side. The studies show that the people have a certain way for approaching the conflicts. So, some people desire to win no matter what, the others intend to retire or to share the differences.

These five styles of solving conflicts represent in fact an intention of conflict's solving between the sides. But the behaviour of the sides which are in conflict could be different of their intentions because of some mistakes and contents their declarations, actions and reactions.

Classifying the types of confliction's interventions, we can notice: the negotiation, a communicational process in order to reach an understanding between the two sides, through reducing the differences between the points of view; the mediation, who promotes the communication in order to reach a compromise through the explication and the interpretation of the points of view;

the arbitrage, that supposes the existence of a third person, which has a special authority.

The negotiation of the conflict allows the amelioration of conflicts, but it's not about a total conflict's solving: it's impossible to negotiate and to solve a conflict if the two sides don't want to do that and if they are not ready to adopt concessions for conflict's solving [10]. If the sides succeed to solve themselves the problems, it's not necessary the others' intervention. But if the communication is blocked, it's necessary the intervention of a third person [13]. The intervention of the other could be asked by the sides or could be imposed through rules or laws established by the organisation.

The mediation supposes a third part's involvement, which just have to facilitate an agreement. The mediator has a very difficult role, because he has a tampon function between the two sides, but the power of a mediator is limited because he couldn't impose the solutions, just to indicate the points of views of sides in order to attend to a consensus.

The arbitrage is the most drastic form of negotiation because if the two sides attend to this level, they have to choose: "everything or nothing". In this situation, the arbiter of the conflict has the entire power, his decisions being like lows. As a consequence of this thing, someone could win everything and the other could lose it all, so because of this reason, the sides prefer to appeal to the other solving ways.

Which are the most adequate mediation strategies of confliction situations?

Before giving a description of the main mediation strategies, we have to determine that an intervention is successfully if the conflicts are fully approached, if it's about a timely final decision and if the sides which are involved in conflict are ready to respect the final decision. [4]

Mediation control strategy (MCS): The manager intervenes in conflict

through influencing the process in getting the final decision. More exactly, he facilitates the communication between the sides, he clarifies the problems and he maintains the order during the discussions, but he doesn't try to dictate a final decision. That decision is established by the sides which are involved, so it's about a higher control of the process, but a low control of the result.

Partial control strategy (PCS): The project manager intervenes in solving the conflict through influencing the result of the final decision. More exactly, he assumes the entire control of the final decision and he dictates the final decision for the sides which are involved, but he doesn't try to influence the process. So, it's about a higher control of the result, but a low control of the process.

Low control strategy (LCS): The manager doesn't intervene in an active way in solving the conflict. He encourages the sides to solve themselves the conflict or he just remains outside the conflict. So, it's about a low control of the process and in the same time of the result.

Total control strategy (TCS): The project manager intervenes in conflict through influencing the process and the result. More exactly, he decides what kind of information will be presented and the way they are to be presented. He asks specific questions about the conflict to the sides which are involved, but he has the final decision. So, the manager has a higher control of the conflict's process and result.

Limited control strategy (LCS): The project manager intervenes in conflict by sharing with the sides the control of the process and in the same time of the result. More exactly, the manager and the sides establish together the process of taking the final decision and they try to reach to a consensus about the solving decision. The manager works with the sides which are involved, helping them to get a solution, by facilitating the communication and through discussions of the problems.

Also, he has an active role in evaluating the options, recommending solutions, persuading the sides to accept that solutions. In this case, the control of the conflict's process and result is moderate.

So, a project manager who attends to TCS in order to mediate a conflict could control the process as well as the result of the final decision: the manager can decides what information must be presented and in what way, he addresses specific questions, he decides over a solution and he imposes it. When he uses MCS, the project manager could control only the process and not the result. He could explain the ideas of one side to another, could clarify the problems, could maintain the order during the conversations and he could establish rules for conflict approach.

In the contrary, using PCS, the manager could leave the sides which are involved to control the process (for example, to decide what information to present and the presentation way), but takes full control concerning the result through deciding the final solution and imposing it. A manager who attends to LCS could suggest the sides to solve the conflict on their one, but would not intervene in an active way in the conflict. Finely, when LCS it is used, the project manager could share the control and the result over the process with the sides which are in conflict. They should work together with the manager in taking a final decision, the manager facilitating the interaction, clarifying the problems, evaluating the options, recommending solutions and persuading the sides to accept them.

Situational key-factors who influences the choice of the strategy

Analyzing the fifth strategies which we have already described, the question is when does every strategy must be used? In other words, the way in which the manager establishes a certain conflict needs specific strategies in order to maximize the success of the intervention? Obvious, this thing asks for evaluation of every conflict to identify

some key-characteristics or situational factors that might suggest the fact that certain strategies fit better then others in solving that conflict. Although we can concentrate on the multitude of the factors in order to crate a conflict's profile, it's important and useful to concentrate only on the most important factors of the conflict, which were identified by the specialists in conflict management.

The importance of conflicts. How important is the conflict? A conflict is important if it's vital for the survival of a group or an organisation. From a certain point of view, the project manager must be primarily more preoccupied by the conflict when the importance of the conflict is higher then when it's low. When the importance of the conflict is high, it is necessary more care and control over the results and so the mediating manager must not chose a strategy which offers to the sides which are in conflict full control over the result.

This will assure a certain managerial influence over the result and from here will lead to a healthy solution for the company. Although, in the same time, in order to be assured by the commitment of both sides, the project manager must check if the process is takes places normally and not unjust, because of the power and other differences between the side and to assure that the parts which are in the conflict consider that they have a certain influence in solving the conflict (the manager also needs to keep to himself a certain degree of control over the process).

The time pressure. Some conflicts have to be solved more quickly than others. Because it's necessary that a strategy leads faster or not to a result, it's important that the project manager to chose the suitable strategy. When the time pressure is higher, the manager doesn't have to choose a strategy in which there is a total sides' control of process and of the result.

The type of the conflict. The question is if the conflict it's about an interpretation, implementation or execution of a rule or procedure or the conflict it's about the creation of new procedures or systems or about the changing of these who does already exist. There are two kind of conflicts: interpretable type of conflicts (ITC), when the source of the conflict are misunderstandings or ambiguities and changing type of conflict (CTC), when the focus is upon the system's modifications.

A conflict about the increasing of the maximums amount for protocol expenses it' a CTC, but when the sides which are in conflict chose to be assisted by a mediator it's about an ITC. That means that an intervention strategy which gives to the mediator a certain degree of the result will be more suitable for a CTC and so, the project manager doesn't have to appeal to a limited control strategies. But an ITC has a higher impact upon the feelings and values and it's very important that the sides which are involved to understand and to accept any system's changing. In such a situation, the manager has to influence the process in order to assure a normal deployment, but he has to let the final solution in the hands of the sides; so, for solving a ITC, the manager have to chose a strategy with a limited control upon the result.

The type of relationships. The question is that the sides which are in conflict are in an old relationship or there is not probable that they have any interaction after the conflict solving. The major objective of the organisation is that relationships to be normal and positives, so it's important to be chose a strategy that fallows this objective.

So, if the sides are involved in a long term relationship, the project manager has to be sure that they have a certain degree of influence upon the conflict's solving. More, the manager has to influence the process in order to be sure that it's fair and honest deployment. On the other side, if it's not probable that the sides doesn't interact anymore in the future, the project manager may assume a higher control of the result, because the impact of the

conflict's solving upon the relationship it's not very important.

Probability of the engagement. That it's about the probability that the sides which are in conflict to be ready for a solution if that would be a one-sided decision of the project manager. That depends of the kind of relationship between the project manager and the sides, including the degree of power of the manager and the trust and the loyalty of the subalterns. It's important to say that, for getting a long-term efficacy, it isn't enough that the sides to declare just the acceptance of the problem's solving; they have to honour the spirit of solving and to not go on feeling a conflict and being showing an attitude against the execution of the final decision.

That thing suggests that the manager has to evaluate the probability that the engagement for imposing the final decision and to chose a suitable intervention strategy. A low probability of the engagement implies the fact that if the managers should impose a certain conflict's solving, then the sides which are in conflict doesn't be ready to respect it. In these situations, the interventions strategies that don't allow the control of the sides will not be so efficacy than that who allows the control of the sides. If the project manager forecasts a high probability of engagement undertaking, then he could control more the result and to impose a final decision every time when it's necessary.

The orientation of the sides which are in conflict. That it's about the question: "What is the probability that the sides which are in conflict to reach to a proper solution for the project, if they have the control upon the final decision?" If the orientation of the sides is high, then the probability that they reach to a proper solution is higher, but if the orientation is low, the probability is low, too.

Talking about the strategy's choice, if the project manager considers that the orientation of the sides is low, and then he doesn't have to choose the intervention's strategies who give to the subalterns the total control of the result. That means that the manager has a certain control and could influence the final solving. In the same time, if the orientation of the sides is higher, then the project manager has to chose strategies in that the sides has a certain degree of control upon the result, in order to promote the satisfaction and the engagement.

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