Understanding Conflict in Management : Nature, Levels, Issues involved and Effective Strategies

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Max Lucado, renowned U.S. motivational speaker has rightly remarked that, "Conflict is inevitable but combat is optional." This clearly illustrates that conflict in pervasive in all organizations and management cannot distance itself from it. The day to day activities of employees at the workplace are essentially dependent on interpersonal communications. Chances of conflict are minimized if communication channels are transparent and well established and if information flow is free and frank. However, if there are differences based on past experiences or if the messages are implied but left unsaid, conflict is bound to arise. Good interpersonal skills come to the rescue of managers and employees when confronted with difficult situations. Conflict builds an environment of stress and results in de-motivation. The presence of conflict needs to be recognized and not to be underestimated at any cost. Conflict may arise due to disagreement of employees over specific issues or if friction is created by relational problems between individuals or group. Conflict management must always be worked out in a way that is beneficial for employees yet, not

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detrimental to the organization. Once the cause of conflict is ascertained, it may call for redefining certain policies by the management in an organization. Conflict resolution is an art that calls for very active and efficient listening skills, it may occur at various levels like individual or amongst groups at workplace. It has serious implication on the work and efficiency of workforce. Nature and severity of the conflict determines the degree to which it will impact an organization. Hence, conflict management is the essence of a good workplace environment.

1. Introduction

Conflict involves a situation between at least two inter-dependent parties who have perceived differences on an issue. Strong emotions are attached on both sides and both realize and recognize that there can be no compatibility or favourable outcome to the given situation. It is not a problem exclusive to the workplace but a natural part of human interaction. A majority of employees accept its existence at all levels and experience it to some degree. If considered in insolation, conflict may be neutral i.e. it may be neither constructive nor destructive. How it is managed determines what consequence it is likely to have on individuals and on the management. Badly managed conflicts at workplace leads to an environment of aggressive behaviour, pessimism, antagonism and feeling of dissatisfaction. It may in extreme level result in employees quitting their jobs and productivity is also hampered. There is impaired collaboration and inefficiency and absenteeism also increase. Conflict at the workplace takes its toll on the psychological work environment too. On the other hand, if conflict is managed well through right tolls and expertise it can result is personal and organizational growth. It enhances team spirit and creates a congenial work environment. It also helps to inculcate a sharpened sense of identity and solidarity. Conflict resolution by management helps strengthen mutual understanding, improves productivity and results and also fosters innovation in employees. Conflict is not the same as dispute which is a one off incident- it conflict in contrast, is an ongoing process. However if disputes got unattended then can develop into conflict. It has been rightly said that conflict is one of the engines of evolution that allows us to grow, learn and progress. Hence it is vital to effectively manage conflict and tap the potential of the employees to the fullest.

2. Contemporary Understanding of the Concept and Nature of Conflicts and its Management

The term conflict is used by different people to convey different things conflict in mind may denote dilemma over a certain issue which prevents you from taking a decision; conflicting views may mean difference of opinions thereby conveying that two people/groups are in a state of conflict. Conflict as a term is not synonymous with quarrel, fight or dispute but it does represent a clash between goals, ideas or ideologies. Follett opines, "conflict is the appearance of difference - difference of opinion of interests." This lucidly explains the situation of friction between two opposing parties which lends energy and investment to the interaction. Once the parties recognize the differences they begin to experience conflict. According to Lewis, French and Steane (1997) "organizational conflict arises due to mismatch of people's values and their divergent behaviors." Follett looks at integration as an orientation towards conflict management, an attitude toward the potential for cooperation inherent in conflict situation. On the basis of the above definition the features of conflict may be listed as thus- it arises because of incompatibility between two individuals / group owing to clashes in their goals and interest; conflict occurs when a person is unable choose from the available course of actions; conflict represents a dynamic process wherein several interlocking conflict episodes are interwoven; conflict, in order to be resolved, need to be perceived and expressed. "Conflict is an inevitable part of living for the reason that it relates to situations where resources are scarce, where there is need for functions' division, role-differentiation and power relations" (Azamosa, 2004). "Many a time conflict increases stress, which leads to less than optimal satisfaction for the employees" (Bashir, 2010). This results in higher absenteeism rate.

Traditionally, conflict in organizations were viewed negatively and thought to have a dysfunctional impact. It can adversely impact organizational productivity because groups do so cooperate to complete a task.

Conflict has been classified by March and Simon into three categories : (i) Individual conflict, (ii) organizational conflict and (iii) Inter organizational conflict. Individual conflict is stimulated when an individual is not able to decide in a given situation and faces difficulty to choose alternative options owing to the uncertainty and

unacceptability associated with them. Counselling helps employees in such matters organizational conflict may exhibit itself through intra individual i.e. conflict of an individual with self; inter individual conflict i.e. conflict of individual with another; intragroup conflict i.e. conflict amongst members of a group; or inter group conflict i.e. conflict between two separate groups. Lastly, inter-organizational conflict arises in situations when there is differences of opinion amongst two or more organizations. The bone of contention may be varied but they are generally resolved through bargaining by intermediaries who facilitate negotiation and resolution.

Role conflict as the term denotes occurs when there is disagreement related to the performance of a set of activities that a person is expected to perform when holding a particular post or position in an organization. Different people and organization have different expectations with regards to the behaviour of an individual based on the role assigned to him/her. It includes behaviour that should be avoided and behaviour that creates positive impact or what we call, desired behaviour. When the communication of role expectations is distorted, role ambiguity and conflict may occur. As the term suggests, role ambiguity occurs when individuals lack clarity with regard to the expected responsibilities associated with their roles. If there is no certainty and clarity associated with work and role assigned it leads to stress. It shakes one's confidence level and gradually leads to job dissatisfaction. Role ambiguity may be intentional or unintentional. If it is unintentional, it may originate due to communication lapses on part of the manager who may have failed to communicate the duties to the subordinate clearly or the subordinate may have failed to decode the instructions effectively when one is unable to live up to the expectations of others conflict arises. A manager may face role conflict if he/she gets caught up between the expectations of the management and staff. In this situation, the role expectations may even be understood by the manager but he/she may find it difficult to comply with them. Role conflict may be a source of potential tension and there may be repeated attempts to avoid unpleasant work situations.

Conflict may also manifest itself through role overload. This involves a situation where by there are multiple role expectations pinned to an individual at a given time. There is a wide gap between what needs to be done and what can be done. Managers may overload their subordinates and restrict to one way communication, thereby

creating role overload. In the absence of feedback, stress emanates naturally.

Conflict may also be associated with goals. If there is conflict between actual and perceived expectations from self. It leads to pressure and is called intra-personal conflict. It is the outcome of incompatible goals and pressures that it brings. Approach - Approach conflict comes to the forefront when the choice lies between two equally attractive goals.

The conflict may pose itself in the form of option between promotion in the parent organization versus a job offer in another organization. Avoidance - Avoidance conflict emerges when a person has to choose between two alternatives - both bearing negative consequences. Both options may be equally unattractive. Taking the same example as above, the choice for an employee may be between the current job which he dislikes and an equally unattractive job offer from another organization. Approach - avoidance conflict as the name suggests is a situation that offers both-a positive and negative consequence. An example could be when an employee is offered a promotion with a salary like but away from hometown. All these conflict situations lead to incongruency between the individual and organizational goals.

Interpersonal conflicts may be the outcome when two individuals decide to choose two different alternatives from the options available. Difference in opinion may arise due to conflicting information received from same or different sources. Difference in perception may also be the cause when people react differently to the same stimulus due to differences in perception. If the value system of two different individuals is different it may cause interpersonal conflict for example, if manager suggesting lowering of quality to increase profit may be in contradiction to the value system of the subordinate. Similarly, if there is scarcity of resources competition gets higher; for example one vacancy for a higher position and multiple people eying it. Each individual has a distinguished status but if it stands in conflict with the job he/she is expected to do, conflict arises. Whatever be the source, it is important to address the issue of interpersonal conflict to ensure an atmosphere of openness and mutual trust in an organization.

Intergroup conflicts occur between different groups in an organization for example conflict between production and marketing

team. Sometimes there are situations that need joint decision making- this may become breeding ground for conflict because if there is difference in opinions, decision making becomes difficult. The need for joint decision making arises when there is sharing of resources amongst different group. Conflict arises when each group wants a greater share in the limited resources joint decision making also comes into play when there is interdependency between groups and fixing of schedules for completion of jobs. Greater the need for coordination higher the levels of joint decision making. If knowledge and resources are not pooled in effectively in such cases, conflicts are bound to arise. Also if there are sub-goals of each group, they tend to clash with organizational goals.

3. Conflict Management Strategies : Trends and Effective Implementation

Robbins (2005) says that "when the root source of conflict is acknowledged or known, it will bring about proper conflict management within the system." Burton (1998) explains conflict management as "that key process that provides an avenue for the aggrieved members of the organization to properly manage the source of the dispute before it is escalated.

If conflict is constructive and functional it should be stimulated by the management and if it is negative and destructive, it should be eliminated through preventive and curative measures. Conflicts can be handled using various strategies. According to Jones and Geaorge (2003), "conflict resolution and conflict stimulation are two techniques under Conflict management."

First is, conflict stimulation which means initiating conflict when there is too much lethargy and conformity in an organization. Changing the structure is in an organization is an effective technique because when work groups and departments are rejigged new roles and responsibilities arise which is ideal to stimulate conflict members may face problems in adjusting and methods of operation may be challenging thereby giving rise to conflict when such conflict is stimulated, it works positively for management.

At times managers may manipulate the way they communicate to initiate conflict. They may do so by ambiguous messages, threatening message. In fact, rumours can be intelligently planted through informal channels of communication. Conflict can also be

introduced by redirecting messages or changing the channels of communication. If conflict is stimulated to have positive effects, it can encourage healthy competition properly administered rewards, incentives, bonus etc. can encourage healthy competitive spirit because each employee tries to outperform the other. Conflict in such cases will yield positive results. Similarly, bringing in outsiders - people whose attitudes, values and styles that are in contrast with the prevailing norms helps to shake up a stagnant organization. Initially there may be conflict and resentment but in the long run it has good consequences because it gives rise to divergent opinions and innovative ideas.

Prevention is better than cure, goes an old saying. Prevention of conflicts is also better than getting into a situation that calls for their resolution. Strategies are in place for this too. The first strategy involves reducing interdependency between individuals and groups, so that there is no sharing of scarce resources involved. Each department must be allocated resources separately - independent of the other departments similarly, rotation of employees between interdependent departments can improve perception and mutual understanding. It enables employees to see the larger picture and overcome narrow perceptions misunderstandings caused by organizational boundaries are minimized and employees become more considerate and co-operated. In most organizations conflict arise when there are differences in common goals. In such circumstances creating superordinate goals i.e. a goal that appeals to all parties and cannot be achieved by the resources of any single party helps the conflicting parties to sink their differences and co-operate with each other. They start believing that for survival of organization they have to work in unison - a common threat acts as a great unifying force. Creating mutual trust and communication and creating liason groups also helps prevent rise of conflict.

Resolving conflicts and charting the future course of action involves minimizing occurrence of conflicts and if at all they do occur, curative measures can be adopted for effective conflict resolution. One of the most effective strategy for resolution of conflict is compromise which is a traditional way. It is like a bargaining. Where give and take type of negotiation helps to arrive at some agreement. Compromise is generally targeted when there is disagreement with regard to goals, attitudes and values. Smoothing is another curative technique where differences between parties are suppressed and

common interests are highlighted. It is based on the principle of accommodation are when the parties are convinced that their mutual interest is at stake they give away the aggressive behaviour. This is however a temporary and short term measure to resolve conflicts. Problem solving as a curative technique attempts to bring the conflicting parties together to share problems and give each other a patient listening questions of who is right or wrong is avoided. This curative technique works best in cases of misunderstanding. Lastly, there is the dominance or confrontation technique where parties the conflict are left to settle scores by mobilizing their strengths and capitalizing weakness of others through fights arguments and intimidation. This technique works best when both parties are rigid. The stronger party ultimately dominates the weaker party.

4.   Conclusion

It is well established that optimum levels of conflict are good for progress and productivity. It may generate undesirable consequence like stress and tension. However the conflicts which support the goals of the group and help improve performance are functional conflicts which have a lot of positive aspects. If, on the other hand, there are conflicts which hinder group performance are dysfunctional conflicts which are bound to hamper growth and have negative consequence. The positive side of conflict is that it helps to release tension and inculcates creative thinking because employees begin to display analytical thinking in identifying various alternatives. It also helps to create challenging situations which put to test your abilities and capacities. It also works wonders for stimulation for change because employees get motivated to adopt themselves to changing situations. It further strengthen group cohesiveness and enables better awareness and decision making. ahe negative side highlights aggravation of tension resulting in hostility anxiety and uncertainty. It lowers productivity resulting due to discontentment. There is growth of feeling of distrust and goal conflict which may even result in loss of dynamic staff. All this may lead to weakening of the organization.

Whether conflict is desirable or not depends on the purpose it serves. Though it may threaten emotional well being it may also be a positive factor for personal development if handled properly. They may produce creative problems solving situations which are vital for survival, growth and progress intelligent management works towards effect me conflict resolution.

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