

## Conflict – A Necessary Evil

**Stelian PARIS**

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### Abstract

*Conflict in organizations represents an important topic for managers. People often assume that all conflict is necessary bad and should be eliminated. On the contrary, there are some circumstances in which a moderate amount of conflict can be helpful. Where conflict already exists, something must be done. The techniques should be viewed as continuum, ranging from strategies that focus on changing behaviors near the top of the scale to strategies that focus on changing attitudes near the bottom of the scale.*

**Keywords:** conflict, strategies, management styles, public health, changing behaviors

### PERSPECTIVES ON CONFLICT

In the specialized literature conflict is seen from many perspectives. These can be grouped into four major categories (traditional perspective, pluralist perspective, radical or Marxist perspective).

The way in which conflict is seen determines the way the involved parties react.

#### 1. Traditional (unitary) perspective on conflict

Conflicts are a “malformation” that appears in a group, department or organization. Instability that leads to conflict is the result of a lack of confidence, opening and proper communication. Managers are considered responsible of dissatisfaction

of the employees' needs and expectations. From this perspective, the manager's task is to identify the causes of the conflict, to eliminate them and to restore order. Organizations have been present from this unitary perspective as cooperative, harmonious structures, where there is no conflict of interests. Conflicts are exceptional situations. They appear due to misunderstandings and confusion, personality factors, extra-organizational factors (where the organization has no control), and because of the employees expectations, which seem sometimes inflexible.

Organizations are seen as teams built in order to meet common objectives. <In any business there must be a real team that shall join efforts into a common effort. Each member shall bring their different part but all for the same common purpose. Their efforts must be directed in the same direction without frictions, without doubling the effort. > (Drucker, 1968).

## **2. The pluralist (behavior) perspective on conflict**

Conflict is a natural phenomenon that can be found in each organization or group. Since it is inevitable and cannot be eliminated, it must be accepted. In some circumstances, it can increase the personal or the group's performance and acts as an agent of change.

Conflict is not necessarily good or bad, but it must be evaluated according to the personal and organizational functions and dysfunctions. Generally, conflict generates pressure within the group for its decrease, but <chronic> conflicts persist and are managed in certain circumstances, being created consciously and preserved by the political – administrative structures. Conflict (in certain limits) assists the development change rather than the revolutionary change.

Conflict is like a safety valve that makes the organization responsible of the internal and external changes, meanwhile the essential elements, such as hierarchy within the organization and the distribution power remain intact.

A flexible society benefits from the conflict, because this behavior generates and changes standards, assists development in the circumstances of change.

## **3. The interactionist perspective**

This perspective promotes both the conflict and its solution. From this perspective, a group or a department which is peaceful, balanced and cooperative can become apathetic, and non-cooperative in circumstances of change.

This perspective encourages leaders to maintain a minimum level of conflict which is enough for the group to be viable, self-critical and creative. Managers should not eliminate conflict but to maintain an optimum level of it to obtain a maximum efficiency. The circumstances when managers have to enhance the conflict situation are the following:

- Changes within the organization: conflict is the tool that the organization uses to radically change; the power of structures, attitudes, they all can be changed through conflict;
- When it is necessary to increase the cohesion of the group;
- In order to increase the groups and organization's performance.

## **4. The radical (Marxist) perspective**

This considers stability and lack of conflict as an issue. Conflict is seen as a way to initiate a revolutionary change. The Marxist perspective sees the organization as one of the "war theaters" where classes are fighting and the organizational conflict, as part of the inevitable fight between the ones that possess control and the ones that don't (working classes, parties, etc.).

The organizations are arenas for personal and group conflicts. The combatants fight for professional values, restricted resources, and development in career, privileges, and other rewards. The goals of the organization are sometimes ambiguous. They do not determine behaviors but are used rather to justify certain actions. The individual and organizational interests rarely are in unison.

The conflict can improve taking organizational decisions rather than prevent them. When the ones with opposite ideas try to find a common way, they develop a better understanding of the positions of each one of them; they confront the differences and reach a satisfactory decision for both parties.

Groups and persons have different perspectives on the organization and their place within. People have different points of view on conflict. Understanding the conflict is the first step to resolve it.

### **The Positive and Negative Face of the Conflict**

People consider that conflict is a negative thing that has to be eliminated. Nevertheless, there are some circumstances when a certain level of conflict can be good. For example, conflict can lead to finding new ideas and new mechanisms, as solutions to organizational issues. Conflict can stimulate innovation and change. Also, it can facilitate the employees' motivation when employees feel the need to excel and to reach the desired performances.

Conflict can help the group members to develop as identities. Conflict appears as the result of some antagonistic tensions, having at the same time a balancer and integrative function for relationships. By allowing the revendications, the unsatisfaction sources are eliminated. Multiple conflicts serve to eliminate the causes of dissociations and to reestablish unity.

But there are some negative consequences of the conflict both for individuals and for the organization; when people use their energy to solve conflicts and not to obtain performance. The constant conflict affects the psychological health; it has a major purpose in generating stress and psycho-physical consequences of the stress. It can also affect the social climate of the group and inhibit the group's cohesion.

According to the nature, intensity or its duration, the conflict can be both functional and dysfunctional. Indeed, too much conflict or too little can lead to a multitude of negative consequences. In such circumstances, a moderate quantity of conflict can be the best way of action.

The management must take into account not eliminating the conflict but finding ways to solve it and to manage it.

### **Factors That Generate Conflict**

Conflicts do not appear by themselves, they are generated by certain factors that we shall mention here:

- Tasks' interdependence
- Not knowing the status
- Jurisdictional ambiguities
- Communication issues
- Dependence on common resources
- Lack of a common performance standard
- Individual differences

### **WAYS TO SOLVE CONFLICT**

There are five ways of solving conflict: competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance, accommodation.

**Competition.** Possible situations.

- Emergencies. When is necessary to take quick decisions.
- In important issues. When unpopular measures are implemented, for example: cutting funds, new rules.
- In vital issues for the company's prosperity. When you know you are right.
- Against those who take advantage of the noncompetitive behavior.

### **Collaboration**

1. When a compromising solution must be found because both parties have arguments that are too important to reach a compromise.
2. When the objective is to learn.
3. To have different perspectives on the issue.
4. To obtain the commitment by reaching a consensus.
5. To work beyond the feelings that interfered with a relationship.

### **Compromise**

3When goals are important but does not worth the effort of some assertive methods.

4When the opponents have equal powers, being dedicated to some exclusive purposes.

5To temporary balance conflict.

6When time requires us to find expedite solutions.

7As a backup for the time when collaboration or competition are not productive.

### **Avoidance**

- When an issue is minor and other issues are more urgent.
- When there is no possibility of satisfying the requests.
- When a possible impairment is more relevant than the advantages of a decision.
- To allow people to calm down and reassess the perspectives
- When the collection of information eliminate the immediate decisions.
- When others can resolve conflict more efficiently.
- When the aspects of an issue are tangential with others.

### **Accommodation**

1. When you discover that you are wrong – in order to allow another solution, to learn and show that you are reasonable.
2. When the issue is more important to others than to you – to satisfy others and maintain cooperation.
3. To obtain social credit for later on.
4. To reduce losses when you find yourself in this situation.
5. When harmony and balance are important
6. To allow subordinates to learn from mistakes.

## **STRATEGIES OF PREVENTING CONFLICT**

There are two categories of actions that managers can use: actions of prevention and actions of solving conflicts.

### **Methods of prevention**

- Focus on the organization's goals and efficiency. Focusing on the organization's goals and objectives prevents conflict. Employees see the general picture and work together to reach the desired performance.
- Ensuring some well structured, stable tasks. When activities are well defined, understood and accepted by the employees, conflicts should appear more rarely. Conflicts appear when the uncertainty on tasks is greater. Specifications and structured jobs reduce ambiguity.
- Facilitating communication in groups. The wrong perception on abilities, goals and motivations of others often leads to conflict, therefore, the efforts to facilitate dialogue between groups and distribution of information helps the elimination of conflicts. When people know more about each other, suspicions disappear and collaboration becomes possible between the groups.
- Avoiding the situations of <winner - loser>. When resources are a few, management should find solutions to distribute them in such a way to obtain maximum efficiency. Rewards must be offered for the contribution to the

achievement of the general objectives of the organization; in this way, there shall be created a climate for finding solutions accepted by everyone.

## STRATEGIES OF REDUCING CONFLICT

When conflict already exists, managers have at least two approaches: they can try to change the attitude or behavior of the employees. If the behavior is changed, open conflicts are often reduced, but groups still do not get along well; conflict becomes less visible if groups are separated. Changing the attitude leads to fundamental changes in the way groups get along.

- Physical separation

The easiest and quicker solution of conflict is the physical separation. Separation is useful when conflict groups do not work on a common task or they do not need a high level of interaction. Although this approach does not encourage the group's members to change the attitude, it provides them time for a better accommodation.

- Using rules and procedures

Conflict can be reduced by clearly stating the rules and procedures. This approach, known as bureaucratic method, imposes solutions but does not change the basic attitudes.

- Restriction of the intergroup interaction

When a group's members agree upon a goal cooperation becomes easier and the need of interaction with other groups is no longer felt necessary.

- Using <connection people>

These maintain a good communication between groups or departments. They must be recognized by both parties. They must have a diplomatic approach, identify the common points and find new methods for a future cooperation.

- Confrontation and negotiation

This method places face to face the conflict parties to debate their misunderstandings. It is hoped that by open debates and negotiation they should reach an agreement. Negotiations between unions and organization are an example. If by negotiation, a solution can be found of <win - win> situation, then the chances for the solution to be accepted are increased.

- Advice from a third party (arbitration)

In some cases it is useful to search for advice from a third party which can understand the human behavior and can facilitate finding a solution. The adviser can talk even more directly, not being member of any group.

- Rotation of members

By rotation of members from one group to another, individuals understand the values and attitudes of the other members and communication increases. When they are accepted by the new group, the change in behavior and attitude becomes possible. This is a technique on long term since establishing interpersonal relationships requires time.

- Identifying some interdependence tasks and common goals

A managerial strategy is that of establishing goals that require groups' interaction; to work together to obtain the desired performance (for example, when it is threatened the organization's future). Bankruptcy threat makes the opponents to work together so that they maintain the company in action.

- Training

Experts outside the organization help the members to develop constant mechanisms for team work. Workshops are well structured and training programmes help to improve intergroup attitudes, reaching a constructive intergroup behavior.

Conflict has an important role in the organization. Nevertheless, there are possible conflict situations which managers want to resolve before they become a serious conflict. This is managed by negotiation. We shall approach this subject in a future publication of this magazine.

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