

Considerations Regarding the Conflict Management



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Abstract. *The conflict has always been present among people. It arises at the level of human relationships and has a specific form of expression, according to its evolutionary stage. Because of the fact that people are part of an organization, they bring the conflict with themselves. Any attempt of efficiently managing an organization without taking into account the fact that organizational conflicts are inevitable are bound to failure. In order to successfully handle conflicting situations, old habits and empirical pieces of knowledge are no longer sufficient. We therefore witness the birth of new theoretical concepts and innovative practices, as well as the coming into being of different strategies and approaches regarding conflict management which are based on a set of clear ideas that we will develop in the following article.*

Key words: conflict; conflict management; conflict models; culture; strategy.



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1. The nature of conflict

The conflict always existed and exists between people. Wherever there are people, there are *ideas, values, circumstances, styles and standards* that can be in conflict. This means that anything can be the *cause of a conflict*: objectives, goals, aspirations, unfulfilled expectations, habits, prejudices, personalities and ideologies, competition, sensitivity and offence, aggressiveness and many other things.

According to *Sam Deep and Lyle Sussman*, there can be identified three *causes for perpetuating the conflict*:

- we live in a world that is more and more complex and diverse; different persons that wish different things and *there are few things that can please everybody*;
- no matter where we work, we have something in common with all the other employees; we work with people and *this means confronting inevitably with the conflict*; misunderstandings, incompatibilities, aspirations, offended egos;

- we live and work in a world that imposes *limits on resources*; the conflict appears because of the *scarce resources and organizational constraints*.

Consequently, at any level *the conflict* interferes between people under any circumstances, *it is expressed specifically human* at any stage and the attempts of analysis or solving that do not take into account this truth will fail.

Moreover, like any other social organism, *the existence and the dynamic of any organization* involve both cooperation or dialogue, and *conflict*, because "*conflict is an inherent organizational process*", as *Richard H. Hall* stresses.

Consequently there is no perfect organization because, as *G. A. Cole* states, there are no relations without difficulties and the relations with the employees within organizations are no exception from this rule. In other words, *conflict is an important part of the corporatist*

life, and its main forms are already well known by any person concerned with the organization problems.

Even if the situations when people are conflicting within the organization are almost infinite, there are still some main reasons that favour the conflict.

- *the existence of a dualism* in people's relationships;
- *responsibility* in various situations consists of managing "*the whole*" (the organization objectives and values) by managing the "*parts*" (independent individuals);
- no matter how many people agree with the established objectives, they will have different opinions on the way of fulfilling them.

As a result, the concept of conflict takes into account all antagonist kinds of opposition and interaction, all forms of intolerance, deriving, as Judith R. Gordon specifies, from the attempts with incompatible influence between and within individuals, groups and organizations.

According to other authors, such as Robert E. Callahan and his collaborators, the term of conflict is used to describe:

- *problematic states* (resource crisis);
- *individuals' affective states* (hostility, frustration, struggle, anxiety);
- *cognitive states* (awareness of the conflict situations);
- *behavioral states* (from the passive resistance to open aggression, without forgetting secrecy, pettiness etc.).

All these aspects and many others made Laurie J. Mullins state: "Conflict is a characteristic of the imbalanced nature of the organization life."

Under these circumstances, some specialists in the field, such as Rahim, stress the fact that "conflict management should be understood as the success management". According to other authors, this means:

- to understand why the control of the conflict should be positive and oriented towards obtaining high performance;
- to be aware of the necessity of special analyses in the field of conflicts;
- to be able to put into practice the principles of harmonious relations.

As a result, it must be promoted a culture of understanding and conflict resolution, without neglecting the skills necessary to recognize the existence of a conflict, to understand how serious it is and to be able to approach it in an adequate way.

In order to promote such success strategies regarding the conflict management, it is necessary that the specialist should try, as G. A. Cole states, to enhance the prestige and the reputation of their profession.

In order to reach such objectives, personnel managers have to, according to the *Deontological Code for the professional institution* in Great Britain, comply for example with a series of norms regarding the employees:

- to maintain high standards of accuracy regarding information;
- to make sure that information from personnel will remain confidential;
- to be prepared to act as counselors or negotiators;
- to maintain equitable and reasonable standards in their treatment.

As concerns the issue of the organizational conflict, this has a specific history, because the conflict did not raise a particular interest. However, this does not mean that the subject is less important, but the fact that researches in this field have not paralleled yet the researches dedicated to other functions of the human resources management.

2. Approaches regarding conflict

For a better understanding of the nature of the conflict, one of the first necessities is to know its evolution in time.

Although the specific literature display numerous points of view regarding the nature or the definition of the conflict, eventually there have appeared the following approaches regarding the conflict within organizations: traditional approach; human relations approach; interactionist approach.

■ *The traditional approach* considers conflict as being dysfunctional by definition. This makes its approach negative and many individuals still consider it so. According to Gary Johns, in the day-to-day life there have been stressed especially the negative and dysfunctional aspects of the conflict.

The conflict is perceived not only as harmful, abnormal and useless, but also as an energy and time consumer. Consequently, the traditional approach considers that it is necessary to avoid or eliminate it by removing its causes.

This idea represents a simplistic approach of the conflict and an out-of-date standard for its assessment, because it brings forward the conflict itself and not its management, which can lead to the improvement of performance.

■ *The human relations approach* has as a premise the interpersonal relations established between individuals with different personalities, objectives, mentalities, education value systems and behaviours, which generate conflicts.

The representatives of this school of human relations consider conflict a natural and inevitable result that should not be perceived only as a negative force, but also as a positive force that can influence the performance of the group or organization. As the conflict is inevitable, this idea supports the acceptance of the conflict.

This approach considers the conflict the result of a defective management, this meaning that the manager should not eliminate at any cost any conflict, but only those conflicts that prove to be real obstacles for accomplishing the objectives. Consequently, this approach regards those management strategies focused both on recognizing conflicts and on solving or eliminating them.

■ *The interactionist approach*, which is the most recent one, views the conflict not only as inevitable, but also as absolutely necessary, as an important force that stimulates innovation and changing. In this regard, Gary Johns mentions that such an approach suggests the fact that there are situations when the managers can favour the change by a strategy of stimulating the conflicts. The real problem does not concern the conflict itself, but the ways it can be managed in order to enhance its positive effects and diminish the negative ones. According to such an approach, the conflict is neither good nor bad, it simply exists, but it can be functional or constructive when it is managed correctly.

The main contribution of this approach consists of the fact that it encourages, as Robert E. Callahan and his collaborators mention, preserving a medium or optimum level of conflict, which can be correlated with the evolution of the organizational processes or with the obtained performance. As Townsend states, it should be taken into account the fact that *up to a certain point, conflict can be seen as a sign of a healthy organization*.

Consequently, the approaches regarding conflict evolved in time, together with the changing of focus from the problem that generates conflict to the way of approaching it.

3. The causes of conflicts

Solving successfully the conflict situations requires also identifying and being aware of the causes of the conflicts in order to be able to use properly the positive effects and to reduce as much as possible the negative consequences.

Although the sources of conflict are extremely diverse, according to the managerial theory and practice in the field, the main causes of the conflicts are:

- different points of view on the priorities and on the ways of reaching the objectives;

- differences in the way of perception or in the system of values;
- lack of communication or faulty communication;
- competition regarding the scarce resources or competition for supremacy;
- differences of power, status and culture;
- „trespassing” of the territory, which is not limited to the physical space, but includes also the other scarce resources for which people compete (spaces, investments, personnel, endowments, rewards etc.). According to Laurie J. Mullins, establishing or conferring the territory can be made formally (organizational structure), informally (norms of the group) or by other procedures (committees);
- ambiguity; unclear purposes and objectives, imprecision;
- nature of the activities and interdependence of the tasks;
- a change in the external environment of the organization;
- aggressiveness and stubbornness, because some individuals live their lives as they are permanently searching for competitors, as Sam Deep and Lyle Sussman noticed.

4. Models of conflict

The development of the managerial theory and practice in the field led to drawing up some models of conflict that allow to acknowledge and understand, more or less in detail, the causes and mechanisms of the conflictual situations. The elaboration of such models, with different levels of specificity, involves also formalizing the concepts of various specialists regarding the way to approach the issue of the conflict management.

Being concerned especially with the conflicts issue, W. K. Thomas considers that the models of conflict can be oriented either to the process or to the structure of the conflict situation. At the same time, taking into account the opinion of another group of researchers regarding the so called organizational models of conflict, it results the following classification of the models of conflict: the conflict episode model; the structural conflict models; the organizational conflict models.

The conflict episode model (Pondy) implies identifying the events that characterize a conflict situation and the sequent relations between the various steps. Each step anticipates the conflict episode and prepares the following events in the next steps. According to Pondy’ s model, the process evolves from the latent conflict to the perceived conflict or to the felt conflict and at least to the manifest conflict (figure 1).

According to the model, the latent conflict is determined by the consequences of previous conflict episodes (figure 1) that result in fact from the fundamental conditions of the conflict.

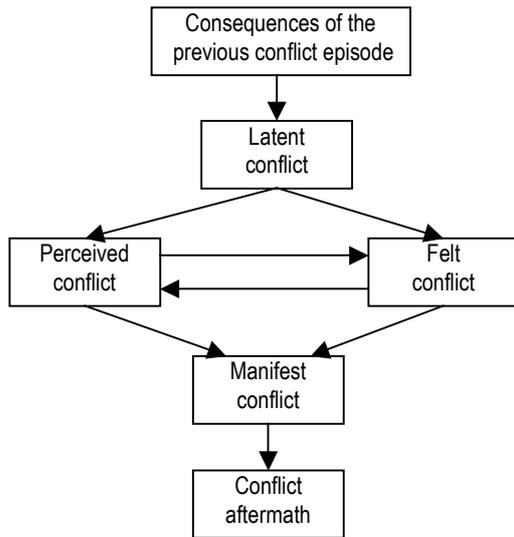


Figure 1. The conflict episode model - Pondy

The way the perceived conflict or the felt conflict becomes manifest conflict (figure 1) depends, according to L.R. Pondy, on the availability of the solving mechanisms. At the same time, the consequences of the conflict situations result then in a factor stimulating the next conflict episode.

The structural conflict model (Thomas) defines the favouring conditions of the conflict and describes the way these influence the conflict behaviour.

According to the model, the circles represents the interacting parties or groups (figure 2). The model suggests the fact that the parties act under certain pressures and constraint that lead eventually to the conflict episode.

Each group manifests certain behavioural predispositions within each conflict episode. At the same time, the groups' behavior can be influenced also by the social pressures. It is taken into account for example the trade union component and the force of its pressures, as well as the management – trade unions relation.

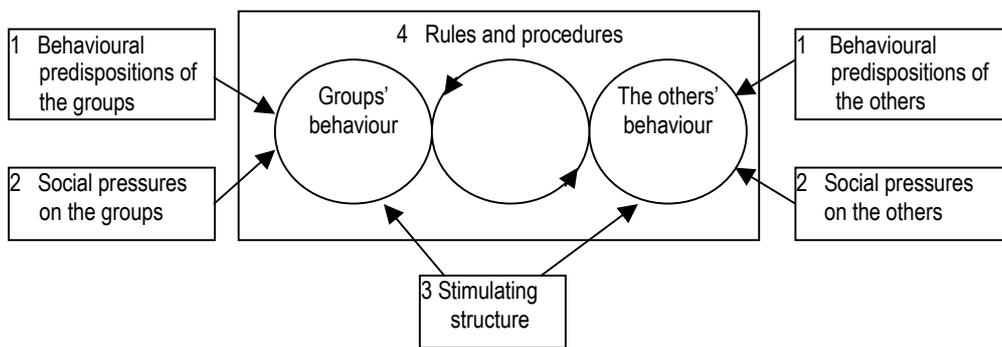


Figure 2. The structural conflict model- Thomas

Another source that influences the conflictual behavior is represented by the stimulating structure or the manner in which the satisfaction of a group is connected to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of another group. The high interests can lead either to competition or to collaboration, according to the level of the conflict of interests. If the interests are insignificant, both competition and any chance to have a conflict are lower.

According to the model, the finale source of the conflicts is represented by the rules and procedures that govern the groups' negotiations. The compliance with the rules and procedures that may be, as W. K. Thomas stresses, formal or informal agreements, can represent an important factor in settling or solving the disputes or the conflict states. In the way the parties involved comply with the established rules and procedures, an essential role is played by the cultural values, tradition and current practices.

The organizational conflict model (Robbins) imagines conflict as having the following main sources: communication; structure; factors of personal behaviour (figure 3).

Communication. As Stephen P. Robbins mentions, although there is no classification of the sources of conflict according to their importance, it is considered that most of the conflicts are due to the communication problems. There are many situations when there is used partial, ambiguous or threatening information or when it is transmitted a quantity of information that is too high and that cannot be perceived properly.

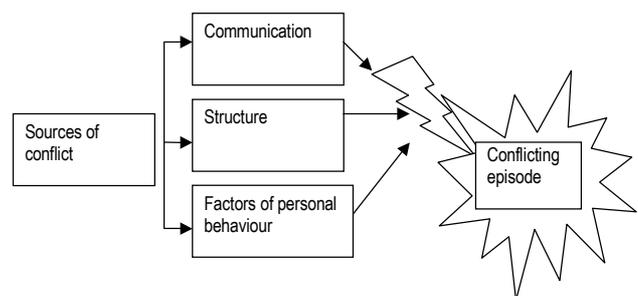


Figure 3. Model of conflict – Robbins

Structure. The author considers that the structural variables, such as the beaurocratic elements, the reward

systems, the interdependence of the tasks and the heterogeneity of the personnel, can create conflicts both between individuals and between groups.

Factors of personal behaviour. According to Stephen P. Robbins, each of the factors of personal behavior (personality, satisfaction, the status or the objectives) can favour or diminish the conflict. For example, it should not be neglected the reaction of the individual confronted with incompatible objectives.

The organizational conflict model (Brown) brings forward the confrontation areas or “territories” which have the larger meaning of those “scarce resources for which people are competing”. As on the confrontation areas the social groups are face to face, they have to interact. In this regard, Brown suggests four types of interferences:

- Department interferences;
- Hierarchical level interferences;
- Cultural interferences;
- Organizational interferences.

5. Conflict management strategies

The managerial theory and practice in this field reveal numerous strategies of solving the conflictual situations within an organization, such as:

- Strategy oriented towards avoiding (avoiding/neglecting);
- Strategy oriented towards accommodation (adaptation/concession);
- Strategy oriented towards competition (authority/power);
- Strategy oriented towards compromise (sharing);
- Strategy oriented towards collaboration (integration).

The strategy oriented towards avoiding (avoiding/neglecting) is characterized by the fact that, although the parties in conflict admit the existence of the conflict, they do not want to have a confrontation. As Jean-M. Hiltrop and Sheila Udall mention, this approach regards conflict as a situation that must be avoided by any means. A similar idea is expressed by Derek Torrington and Laura Hall who think that conflict can be kept under control by ignorance or neglect.

Although avoiding conflicts can offer a certain diminishing of the stress created by the rigors of the conflict, as a matter of fact the situation does not change. This means that the efficiency of this strategy is limited. If there are not taken measures solving the conflict, it is very likely to reappear. As Rodica and Dan Cădea state, the conflict does not disappear “by itself”, but remains in a latent state.

The main *disadvantage* of this strategy is that it ignores the conditions that generate the conflicts.

The strategy oriented towards accommodation (adaptation/concession) is that strategy of solving the

conflicts in which the parties involved do not try to impose their own point of view, but rather to satisfy the others’ needs. This means that “accommodation”, as a way of approaching the conflict, determines the managers to cooperate and to tend to satisfy the others’ needs and at the cost of their own interests, especially when harmony and stability are very important values. Such a strategy can be adopted to obtain and build a social credit social for the future case of more important problems or when situation is simply out of control. Also, this way to approach the conflict is preferred in order to show the common sense, when the aggressiveness of the other party implies an unacceptable behavior.

As Jean-M. Hiltrop and Sheila Udall mention, this approach of the conflict involves maintaining the interpersonal relations by any means, without taking into account the personal objectives of the parties involved. In other words, the parties in conflict overestimate the value of maintaining the interpersonal relations and undervalue the importance of reaching the personal objectives.

Consequently, this strategy can reduce the felt conflict and can be sometimes useful or efficient on a short term. However, on a long term, people cannot be always willing to sacrifice their objectives or their personal needs only to maintain the interpersonal or collaboration relations. More than that, this kind of strategy of accommodation or adaptation can limit the creativity and stop the emergence of new ideas and solutions for solving the conflicts.

Strategy oriented towards competition (authority/power) is in direct opposition with strategy of accommodation and represents that strategy of solving the conflicts that, according to Gary Johns, tends to maximize the weight of the own interest or point of view and minimize cooperation. We have thus the tendency to frame the conflict within a strategy win/loss or “winner-loser” that can have multiple negative consequences and eventually, if the parties have equal forces, they arrive to a dead end and no decision can be made.

That is why Jean-M. Hiltrop and Sheila Udall stress the fact that this strategy represents a way of approaching the conflict oriented towards power, in which it is used any kind of power that seems appropriate to defend a position considered correct or that can win by any means.

This strategy is considered appropriate especially in the situations when it is much power involved, when there is the certainty of the real facts, in vital problems for the success of the organization or when situation is really a win-loss type.

The strategy oriented towards compromise (sharing) represents this type of conflict management that combines in intermediary or medium doses imposing the own interest or point of view and cooperation or satisfying the others’ needs. The parties involved in the conflict, being aware

that the risk of stirring a conflict is too big, take into account both their and the other party's interests. In other words, it is accepted partially the point of view of the other party, this meaning "sharing the difference".

This way of approaching conflicts involves, as Jean-M Hiltrop and Sheila Udall state, admitting the fact that a win-win strategy is not possible. As this strategy usually involves a negotiation, in which it is adopted a position that eventually will lead to a small gain and a limited loss both from the point of view of the interpersonal relations and of the objectives.

The strategy of compromise aims at finding a solution mutually advantageous that should satisfy both parties involved in the conflict. This approach signifies that both parties adopt a position "minimum win – minimum loss". This means that both parties have unsatisfied interests in the same proportion.

Although the compromise is a wise reaction for a temporary balance, this strategy is not always useful, as for example in the case of solving the conflicts derived from the power asymmetry, when the weakest power has much less to offer to the strongest party.

The strategy oriented towards collaboration (integration) represents that way of approaching the conflict

that, as Gary Johns states, maximizes both imposing the own interest or point of view and cooperation or satisfaction of the others' needs in the view of obtaining an integrative agreement or solutions which can satisfy the interests of all the parties involved in the conflict. It tries to combine the opposite opinions or to gain the adhesion of all the parties involved in the conflict in the view of reaching a mutual consensus or reaching the objectives in a peaceful way.

According to Jean M. Hiltrop and Laura Hali, the strategy of collaboration takes into account solving the conflict by maintaining the inter-personal relations between parties and ensuring that both parties will achieve their goals. This strategy requires that both parties should adopt a win-win solution that can lead them to a better position, especially because of the mutually shared values.

Although *the strategy of collaboration* requires time, energy, exercise and creativity, it has obvious advantages that lead eventually to improving the organizational efficiency and efficacy.

All in all, the above strategies regarding the conflict management have some advantages or disadvantages that make them less adequate for a certain conflictual situation, without neglecting the cultural differences influencing them.

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