

Nature of Conflict and Conflict Management Strategies

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Abstract:

Conflict is part and parcel of not only school life but of all organizations. Where there is human interaction there is the possibility of one or other type of conflict. Conflict arises within the individual thus intrapersonal conflict and if it is between two individuals then it is called interpersonal conflict. Whatever type and nature of conflict might be, it is a fact that it can't be avoided. Conflicts have positive as well as negative impact on individual and organizational performance. This paper discusses in detail conflict and its nature in school. Furthermore it has also discussed different conflict management strategies.

Introduction:

Human interaction to meet and fulfill organizational goal is a necessary part of organizational life, hence conflict in a work place relationship is a natural and unavoidable phenomena. Conflicts at their face value seem neither good nor bad but the ways through which these are managed make them either constructive or disruptive. Schools which had no conflict were deemed to be as safe and secure havens in the past but new trends and approach about conflict is that "whatever the nature of conflict is, it has the potential for having a destructive or much creativity and positive social change (Kreisberg, 1998). To keep its destructive potential to the minimum and its constructive outcomes to its maximum should be the focus of all the top educational administrators.

This paper will describe in brief nature of conflict and the strategies adopted for its management at various school/organizational levels.

Nature of Conflict: This section discusses the nature of conflict, i.e. whether this conflict is between two individuals, groups in a school, school board and the community etc. It has always remained an essential force in all human interactions in all types of organizations. Conflicts thus occur between (a) school board and school community (b) Building and District (c) Teacher and Teacher (d) Teacher and Staff (e) Teacher and Student (f) Teacher and Parent (g) Teacher and Administrator (h) Student and Student (Batton, 2002:482-83).

It has been proved by researches that conflicts occur at personal, group and organizational levels i.e. the major types of conflicts are intrapersonal, interpersonal, Intragroup, intergroup and organizational levels. A brief detail of the different levels of conflict is given below:

1. **Intrapersonal conflict:** Conflict which arises because of multifarious reasons within the individual is known as intrapersonal conflict. Kroon (1991:437), holds that conflict within the individual i.e. intrapersonal is significant of the fact that it can indicate the presence of simultaneous, opposing, divergent and conflicting ideas, feelings and activities. Some of the major characteristics of such tension within the individual are uncertainty, hesitation, stress, anxiety, depression and insomnia. At times, for example, a principal's main thrust will be on the accomplishment of some organizational task for which he might sacrifice the human relations. Such type of conflict may cause stress within the principal which brings him to a state of uncertainty as whether to admonish an educator who fails to come up with the principal's expectation and whose work is not up to standard.
2. **Interpersonal Conflict:** Interpersonal conflict represents conflict between two individuals. Barki and Harwick (2001) define interpersonal conflict "as a phenomenon that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals" (p. 197).
3. **Intraorganizational conflict:** Intra-organisational conflict occurs when management and staff disagree about working conditions, goals, authority and decisions (Swart, 2001:368). While Van der Westhuizen (1991:306) states that this type of conflict can also originate between certain groups in a school or school system it can occur between members of a certain subject interest group, for example between history teachers, concerning a certain approach to the work. When more than one person is involved, coalitions are created within the interest groups.
4. **Intragroup conflict:** Saddler (1998:18) describes intragroup conflict as largely interpersonal conflict between persons in a group. Interpersonal conflict is always present in groups because individuals differ in terms of values, beliefs, attitudes and behavior. As a result some people are more attracted to some than to others. The better underlying relationships, the easier it is for people to work together. Conflicts in small groups can, however, play a constructive role since it can stimulate creativity and renewal in that they start to communicate and work together as a unit. Working together, promotes the spirit of ubuntu – having good human relations including respect, caring, love etc. among them.
5. **Intergroup conflict:** Intergroup conflict occurs between different groups in the school, such as different departments, especially if they are competing for scarce resources like number of educators, time allocation for extramural activities, textbooks and other learning material, teaching aids and so on (Van der Bank, 1995:168).

Conflict Management Strategies: Whatever type and nature of conflict, it never anticipates its outcomes as constructive or destructive. The way it is handled makes it either positive or negative. Conflicts are creative if parties involved are interdependent and its management is satisfactory to all parties. Conflict management strategies vary from situation to situation.

Some common strategies/model used for conflict management is;

(1) Negotiation and Mediation:

Bodin and Crawford (1999:155) maintains that since school is an entity which composes of different people with different generational ages and that negotiation and mediation must be identified as the best strategies for eliminating conflicts. According to Kramer and Messick (1995: 18-19), negotiators are usually faced with three types of conflicts, namely; relationship and task conflict, emotional and intellectual conflict and compromise and win conflict, because “a negotiation is a situation that frequently involves win /lose beliefs.” Conflict management is deemed to be successful if it has achieved its goal by reaching a win-win, or approach-approach or consensual agreement which is accepted by both parties.

Mediation is another way of conflict management used today. Bentley (1996:4) describes mediation as a form of problem solving process where a neutral third party assists disputants to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Mediation proves as an effective method because it involves a democratic and structured process that enables disputants to resolve their own conflict, with the assistance of trained peers (D’Oosterlinck & Broekaert, 2003:222). Deutsch (2005:15) argues that mediators follow these steps:

(a) They establish a working alliance with the parties, (b) they improve the climate between the parties, (c) they address the issues, and that (d) they apply pressure for settlement.

Mediators should adopt the following skills in order to handle conflict, namely;

- a. They must be able to establish a working relation with each of the conflicting parties,
- b. They must be able to establish a cooperative problem-solving attitude among the parties,
- c. They must be able to develop a creative group process and group decision making, and
- d. They must gather considerable substantive knowledge about the problems around which the conflict centers.

(2)The Holton Model for Conflict Management:

The Holton Model for Conflict Management is one which can be used with any conflict in any setting. With the following three steps of the Holton Conflict Management process, any conflict which you face can be managed.

(1) Identify the conflict (2) Identify solutions (3) Implement solutions

1. Identify the Conflict:

The identification phase of conflict management is a six-step phase, and all of the steps are necessary to understand the conflict.

Who Is Involved?

Identify all of the parties who are involved in the conflict, as well as all who are not directly involved but may be affected by it. What is the relationship of those who are involved? In what ways are they interdependent?

What Is the Conflict?

What happened? What are the specific, observable data about the conflict? What are the feelings and emotions surrounding the conflict? What are the presenting issues? What are the secondary (and tertiary) issues?

When Did It Happen?

When did the conflict begin? Is there a specific incident which can be identified? Is it ongoing? Is it cyclical? Is it intermittent? Does it escalate or die down?

Where Did It Happen?

Where physically did the conflict occur? Where, within the organizational structure, did it occur?

What Management Attempts Have Been Made?

What attempts have been made to manage the conflict? If it is a recurring conflict, what attempts have been made in the past? In what ways were they successful? In what ways were they not?

What Are the Consequences of the Conflict?

What will happen if the conflict is not managed? What will happen if it is? What gains and losses are perceived to exist as a result of solutions?

2. Identify Solutions:

The development of solutions is rarely a simple process. Setting the stage and getting parties to communicate and work together is a necessary part of this phase of the conflict management process.

Develop a Positive Attitude

Unless those involved in a conflict are willing to work together toward a mutually agreeable solution, no management is possible. And so the first step is to work with the parties to develop a positive attitude.

Establish Ground Rules

Conflict produces a feeling of chaos. It is therefore important to work with the parties to establish ground rules for the conflict management. Ground rules typically include agreements on communication and structure.

Identify Interests of the Parties

Parties must understand their priorities and the outcome(s) they want. Fisher and Ury (1981) have written extensively about the importance of interests versus positions.

Develop Alternatives

Now that the issues of the conflict are understood, it is important to identify alternative solutions for managing it. Brainstorming is the best process to develop alternatives. In an environment of trust (usually facilitated by the neutral third party), disputants can work together to develop multiple alternatives. It is also helpful to identify ways that similar issues have been managed in other situations.

Identify Criteria

Not all of the ideas generated during the previous stage will be appropriate to manage this conflict, so it is necessary to identify appropriate criteria and use those criteria to determine the best solutions. First, there are often objective criteria, given the nature of the conflict. Some criteria are also subjective. These are often overlooked to the peril of the conflict management.

Weigh Solutions against Criteria

The solutions should be weighed against the prioritized criteria, and a best solution will result. It is important to determine whether that solution is, in fact, felt to be the best by all parties. Too often, after a solution has been agreed upon, parties realize that they left out some important

criteria. They may, for example, have identified only rational, logical criteria and ignored any emotional aspects of the decision. Or they may agree on a solution, but realize that they don't have the time to implement it.

3. Implement Solutions:

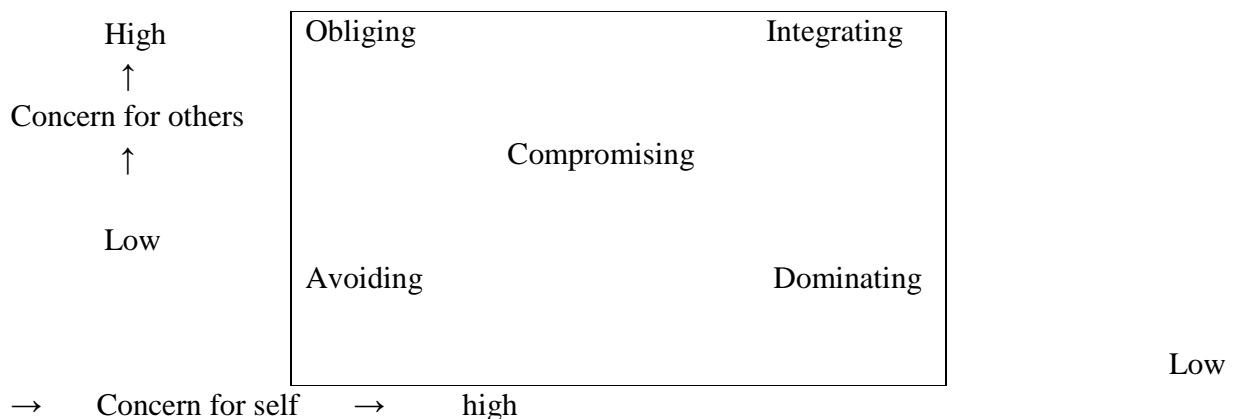
Even when significant time is spent on identification of the conflict and identification of potential solutions, the implementation phase is too often rushed. To have a successful conflict management, the parties must be diligent about the implementation phase.

Develop a Plan of Action

It is not enough to agree to a nebulous solution; all parties in the conflict must agree to the specifics. The plan of action should include:

- Who is going to be involved in the implementation of the solutions? If some people outside the immediate system of the parties are involved, how are they going to be brought in to the solution phase?
- What exactly is to be done? Be as specific as possible about the actions that are to be taken? When the parties are going to act? By what date will the complete solution be in place? Include in the timeline some check-in dates, when the parties will get together to talk about the solution, about the progress that is being made, and work with any issues that arise during the implementation phase.
- Who is responsible for mediating any differences between the parties during the implementation phase? The plan of action should be written up and signed by all parties, including any neutral third party. This document will be more valuable if every aspect of the agreement is clearly spelled out, in terms that will not be debatable down the line.

(3) Conflict Management Styles (Kroon, 1991:404)



The above model or framework will be discussed briefly.

(a) Avoidance or withdrawal

Withdrawal or avoidance is one of the simplest of all conflict management styles. It means to do nothing in any conflicting situation; it assumes that by ignoring the conflict it will be resolved by itself. Avoidance is not a successful method for achieving a long-term solution since the original cause of the conflict remains (Truter, 2003:42)

Principal can utilize this style when he perceives that; when the parties involved regard that the issue is minor one, and when both parties require additional time to cool off.

(b) The dominating response I win/you lose

This management style seems an undesirable one because of the outcomes for various situations, particularly in a high school when the stakes are high for both the conflict parties. This leads to destructive results because the conflict is not resolved and there is the possibility of its further escalation. This conflict management style is disruptive in nature as it always involves the use of power and aggressive behaviour in attaining self-concerns. Such behaviour ignores the lack of respect for the rights and feelings of the opposite party involved. Tactics and strategies include attacking others ideas and beliefs, offering derogatory remarks, and demanding concessions from others. Nonverbal behaviour includes glaring or condescending eye contact, an attacking or threatening body posture, and hostile facial expressions (Wheeler, 2005:18).

The principal can use this style when he feels that there is in an emergency situation and quick decisions are needed; he thinks that unpopular changes need to be implemented; and that all other methods have failed for resolving the issue.

(c) Integrative/collaborating, powerful-powerful, win-win

This conflict management style is replete with mutual differences, but both the parties consider that conflict is natural and healthy. Objective behaviour of both the parties is a positive point in reaching a mutually agreed solution of the problem. Because of objectivity involved, this style is termed as one of co-operation and win-win.

The educational leader plays a dynamic management role in creating the correct climate for co-operation, and training people in communication skills and group dynamics (Saddler, 1998:25).

The principal take this style when he understands that;

There is a need to merge the feeling and experience of people from different backgrounds, perspectives and perceptions;

There is a felt need to resolve a long-standing issue, which may negatively effect the working relationship; and when he/she understands that the staff have got creative solutions for specific problems.

(d) The obliging response “I lose/you win”

This style displays one party's self-sacrifice for resolving the dispute. The obliging person can't say “No” to others' unreasonable requests and also has guilt feelings. Its effects for the obliging person are long-term because he'll become a pushover in all future conflicts. The obligor tends to avoid eye contact, display nervous body movement, and maintains a closed body posture (Johnson, 2005:22)

The principal use this style when he sees that; the relationship with the school staff is more important; the person is important not the issue; and the principal deems it important that the other person should express his/her point of view.

(e) Compromise win-lose-win-lose

This style stresses at reaching a solution, by both the parties, of the problem by mutual give and take. This always involves bargaining by both the conflicting parties and is successful when the situation provides an equal chance to both the parties to be in a better position or at least in no worse position after the conflict is resolved. With compromise each person wins some major issues and loses others (Bartol and Martin, 1991:580).

Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana, (1997:130) argue that the way in which people respond to conflict tends to be a reflection of both their assertiveness and their tendency to collaborate. A person who tends to be non collaborative and non-assertive will probably try to avoid conflict. Also, a person who is collaborative and non-assertive will tend to oblige, and a person who is collaborative and assertive, will tend to negotiate and problem-solve.

This style is adopted by the principal when he considers that the parties involved have equal power; and that he prefers to reach a temporary settlement in complex matters.

Conclusion:

In all organizational settings, conflict is an inevitable phenomenon. Conflicts, if handled diligently end in positive outcomes both for the individual and the organizations as well. No

particular conflict management strategy/model can be termed as more appropriate than another one because it depends on the situation, whether conflict is of serious nature or it is a mild one. Therefore different principals/managers utilize different conflict management or conflict resolution strategy/models used for handling of conflicts.

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