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Samson Adebisi
Felicia Olaniyi-Adegun

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol7/iss3/7

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Academic Leadership Journal

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Introduction

There is a popular assumption that conflict is so destructive that the goal of good management should be to minimize friction. According to Robert and Judy (2002), the Conflict-Positive Organization takes the opposite position and presents the argument that conflict, when well managed, adds substantial value to the organization. Effects of conflict could be destructive or constructive; it depends on the expertise that manages it in an organization, Lawrence and Jeffrey (1987). Some conflict management experts transform conflict from destructive to a constructive form, making use of opposing ideas to make decisions, negotiate their differences, and deal with anger to strengthen their relationships and get things done. Dean Tjosvold, from Simon Fraser University: “Conflict is the medium by which problems are recognized and solved.” It is needed to improve the innovation and productivity of the company and the competence and well-being of its employees. Conflict is a natural disagreement resulting from individuals or groups that differ in attitudes, beliefs, values, or needs. Conflict is everywhere, and we seem to have difficulty coping with it. In fact, in most cases we flee it. Once we understand that conflict is normal and should not be avoided, resolution itself becomes more normal and part of the skills we need in society and in the communities of interest we call organizations. The society we live in is comprised of different backgrounds, perspectives, and approaches to life. It is therefore not surprising that conflict is established as part and parcel of our everyday life. This is because people have competing interests and competing perspectives in relation to the same issues; as a result, tensions exist between individuals and groups. The idea of ever achieving a society with no conflict is clearly a pipedream. However, this is not necessarily a problem, as conflict can also be creative and constructive. Every conflict holds the opportunity for creating improved processes and developing innovative procedures. However, conflict has a positive side brimming with opportunities only if it is perfectly and efficiently dealt with. Conflict has the ability to foster creativity, higher thinking, better listening skills, and change. These in turn provide management with the tools for significant improvement. It is inevitable that we will run into conflict. Many important changes in the society and in the organizations in which people work have occurred as a result of conflict. Successful organizations generally deal with conflict in a positive, proactive manner. The important question, then, is not so much: “How do we create a world without conflict?”, but, rather: “How do we manage conflict as constructively and positively as we possibly can?”

Managers develop conflict management approaches that fit their personalities and responsibilities. Development of these approaches depends upon the mastering of conflict management skills. Some of the skills in conflict management include listening skills, feedback skills, and conflict-management styles. Neil (2004), the founder and Managing Director of Avenue Consulting Limited, United Kingdom said conflict is concerned with difference. If we were all the same, then there would be little or no conflict. However, thankfully we are not all the same, and so part of the price that we pay for the richness of diversity is that conflicts will arise at certain times. Conflict can be seen to arise from the
incompatibility of aims between individuals and groups – that is, what I am trying to achieve and what you are trying to achieve. If they are significantly different, they can lead to conflict. He maintained that two main problems can arise there. First, we may feel uneasy about the conflict and the tensions that it raises, and therefore try to pretend it is not there, to fudge the issue or brush it under the carpet. This can lead to significant problems in so far as the situation may be allowed to fester and go on for a much longer period than is necessary if we are not prepared to deal with it and move on. Second, we may cause problems by dealing with the conflict in a way which escalates the tensions between people. For example, rather than deal with any conflicts between people constructively and amicably, we may use the opportunity to attack one another, thereby leading to unnecessary additional problems. These, then, are the two main (but not only) problems associated with conflict: fudging and escalation.

The short answer to the question of what causes conflict is quite simply, “life”. Bringing people together in social interaction necessarily involves a set of interpersonal dynamics which sooner or later will lead to conflict. It is for this reason that we have to learn to deal with conflict, rather than simply hope that it will not get in the way of our plans and our dealings with other people. The time and effort involved in learning how to deal with conflict positively and constructively are therefore an important and worthwhile investment of our personal (and organizational) resources. We should be wary of making the common mistake of assuming that conflict is necessarily a problem and is something to be avoided at all costs. That is far too simplistic an approach to the complex subject of conflict management.

Condition that Permits the Occurrence of Conflict

Conflict may stem from a variety of causes, and understanding them is the first step in dealing with it effectively. Lawrence (2003), a highly experienced mediator, arbitrator, and instructor and a former trial attorney with a degree in Business Administration expressed a view that different views of values, organizational structural limitations, and historical events are core issues frequently serving as the basis for conflict. For instance, individuals may perceive differences in the chain of command under the corporate organizational structure. Someone may understand that they can only accept assignments from a certain individual. However, the informal managerial structure allows for the individual to perform functions for several managers. The first step in knowing how to manage conflict is to appreciate its emergence and understand why conflict occurs. According to Robert Bruce (1991), conflict within organizations usually occurs because of one or more of the reasons, though cause or sources of organizational conflict can be many and varied. For instance, it originates from past rivalries and personality differences. Other causes of conflict include trying to negotiate before the timing is right or before needed information is available. The most common causes are the following:

Inadequacy of material resources and limited opportunity for career progression: The more limited they are the more likely conflict will occur. “Competition” usually brings out the best in people, as they strive to be top in their field, whether in sport, community affairs, politics, or work. Competition often leads to new sporting achievements, scientific inventions, or outstanding effort in solving a community problem. When competition becomes unfriendly or bitter, though, conflict can begin and this can bring out the worst in people. The major basis for conflict is competition for limited resources. Competition arises over tangible resources such as land, money, food, and water and intangible assets; this includes power, appreciation, status, or companionship. The nature of the competition is further affected by the values, structure, and history in which the players find themselves. Money can be redirected from one department to another to increase productivity. Susan (1988) says in a competitive marketplace,
scarce resources may be allocated to marketing instead of product development or quality assurance. Accounting systems may place a higher value on production levels than on cost efficiency in determining bonuses. Steve and Thomas (1987) says the resulting conflicts between departments can only be effectively resolved if management understands that the problem lies in the structure of the accounting system, not in the personalities of the department heads.

Task interdependence: Conflict is most likely to occur between individuals or groups that are dependent on one another.

Jurisdictional ambiguity: Overlapping responsibilities often lead to conflict. This can occur when one party takes responsibility that another can also claim.

Status struggles: Status struggles can result from perceived inequities. Status struggles can also occur when one person or group believes that it should be giving instructions to another person or group instead of receiving them.

Communication barriers: Conflicts regularly occur because two people or groups do not speak the same language. Technical language can lead to confusion, which can lead to conflict about who said what or what meaning was intended. However, conflict arises out of misunderstandings, erroneous interpretations of communications and emotions form the basis of many conflicts. Accounting terms such as “liabilities” may translate to sales personnel as “stale product lines.” Similarly, frustration over a problem may be interpreted by someone else as anger or scorn.

Differences in values behavioral back-ups and values: Conflict is more likely between groups with differing social, ethnic, racial, or cultural values or beliefs. This is a situation whereby someone deflects controversy for a while, but when put too much pressure, the person becomes confrontational. Others may take offense to the back-up style, which causes conflict.

Managing and Resolving Conflict Situations

Richard (1976) emphasized conflict management as the process of planning to avoid conflict where possible and organizing to resolve conflict where it does happen, as rapidly and smoothly as possible. Henry (1971) pointed out that conflict management refers to the long-term management of intractable conflicts. It is the label for the variety of ways by which people handle grievances standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Those ways include such diverse phenomena as gossip, ridicule, lynching, terrorism, warfare, feuding, genocide, law, mediation, and avoidance. Which forms of conflict management will be used in any given situation can be somewhat predicted and explained by the social structure or social geometry of the case.

Conflict management is often considered to be distinct from conflict resolution. In order for actual conflict to occur, there should be an expression of exclusive patterns, and tell why the conflict was expressed the way it was. Conflict is not just about simple inaptness, but is often connected to a previous issue. The latter refers to resolving the dispute to the approval of one or both parties, whereas the former concerns an ongoing process that may never have a resolution. Conflict in business organization can be reduced through effective dialogue. Such a conversation entails as much listening as talking. Basically, three methods of resolving situations that have reached the stage of open conflict are often used by many different organizations. Bruce and others (1989) argued that it is important to
understand these methods, so that people can decide which methods will work best for them in their specific conflict situation:

1. Collective bargaining or Negotiation
   : This is the process where mandated representatives of groups in a conflict situation meet together in order to resolve their differences and to reach agreement. Especially in workplace situations, it is necessary to have agreed mechanisms in place for groups of people who may be antagonistic (e.g. management and workers) to collectively discuss and resolve issues. This process is often called “collective bargaining,” because representatives of each group come together with a mandate to work out a solution collectively. It is a deliberate process, conducted by representatives of groups, designed to reconcile differences and to reach agreements by consensus. The outcome is often dependent on the power relationship between the groups. Negotiations often involve compromise – one group may win one of their demands and give in on another. In workplaces, Unions and management representatives usually sue negotiations to solve conflicts. Political and community groups also often use this method. Experience has shown that this is far better than avoidance or withdrawal, and puts democratic processes in place to achieve “integrative problem solving,” where people or groups who must find ways of co-operating in the same organization, do so within their own agreed rules and procedures.

2. Mediation or Conciliation
   : The dictionary defines conciliation as “the act of procuring good will or inducing a friendly feeling.” South African labor relations legislation provides for the process of conciliation in the workplace, whereby groups who are in conflict and who have failed to reach agreement, can come together once again to attempt to settle their differences. This is usually attempted before the more serious step of a strike by workers or a lock-out by management is taken; and it has been found useful to involve a facilitator in the conciliation process. Similarly, any other organization (e.g. sports club, youth group, or community organization) could try conciliation as a first step. When negotiations fail or get stuck, parties often call in an independent mediator. This person or group will try to facilitate settlement of the conflict. The mediator plays an active part in the process, advises both or all groups, acts as intermediary, and suggests possible solutions. In contrast to arbitration mediators who act only in an advisory capacity – they have no decision-making powers and cannot impose a settlement on the conflicting parties. Skilled mediators are able to gain trust and confidence from the conflicting groups or individuals.

3. Arbitration: Means the appointment of an independent person to act as an adjudicator (or judge) in a dispute, to decide on the terms of a settlement. Both parties in a conflict have to agree about who the arbitrator should be, and that the decision of the arbitrator will be binding on them all. Arbitration differs from mediation and negotiation in that it does not promote the continuation of collective bargaining: the arbitrator listens to and investigates the demands and counter-demands and takes over the role of decision-maker. People or organizations can agree on having either a single arbitrator or a panel of arbitrators whom they respect and whose decision they will accept as final, in order to resolve the conflict.

Running a Mediation Process

Dudley (1992) suggests mediation process can be broadly divided into the following three stages:
Stage 1: Introduction and establishment of credibility

During the first stage, the mediator plays a passive role. The main task is to gain the trust and acceptance of the conflicting parties, so that they begin to believe that he will be capable of assisting them fairly as a person on whom they can rely at all times. An experienced mediator will leave most of the talking to the disputing parties, but will listen attentively and ask probing questions to pinpoint the causes of the dispute, obstacles to a possible settlement and to identify the issues in order of priority. Once credibility is achieved and sufficient background knowledge gained, the mediator may begin to persuade the parties to resume negotiations, possibly with a fresh perspective.

Stage 2: Steering the negotiation process

In the second stage, the mediator intervenes more actively in steering the negotiations. He may offer advice to the parties, attempt to establish the actual resistance point of each party and to discover areas in which compromises could be reached. The mediator will encourage parties to put forward proposals and counter-proposals and (when a solution appears feasible) will begin to urge or even pressurize the participants towards acceptance of a settlement.

Stage 3: Movement towards a final settlement

An experienced mediator will know when to use diplomacy and when to exert pressure towards final settlement of the dispute. Timing and sensitivity to personalities and strategic positions is important to maintain credibility and avoid rejection by one or more parties in the process. He might use bi-lateral discussions with individuals or groups and during the final stages may actually suggest or draft proposals for consideration. In the event of a final settlement being reached, the mediator usually assists the parties in the drafting of their agreement, ensuring that both sides are satisfied with the wording and terms and conditions of the agreement.

The process of mediation is dynamic and finely-tuned. A good mediator has to be flexible and inventive, and must ensure that his or her personal values are not imposed on the conflicting parties. At most a mediator can advise, persuade, or cajole them towards agreement.

Recommendations

This article recommends that handling workplace conflict in a way that propels growth in business organizations requires an expert who is able to discover how to get to the real cause of the problem, disarm disagreeable people, defuse tense situations, and how to handle anger (your own and others’). It recommends strict adherence to the 3 stages of running a mediation process.

Conclusions

From the foregoing, this paper concludes that significantly strengthening workplace relationships by knowing how to work through disagreements is very critical to the organizational development. Conflict management experts should be able to recognize symptoms of brewing conflict – and head it off before it happens. They also need to resolve conflict quickly using the three stages of running a mediation process. There is a need to use disagreement as a tool to strengthen an organization’s team and improve cooperation, enjoy a calmer, more harmonious work environment where people get along and
communicate clearly to end mixed messages that can lead to disagreements.

References


