Review

Organizational Conflict and Conflict Management: a synthesis of literature

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Abstract
This literature review offers a synthesis of the past and contemporary studies about conflict and types of conflict. Factors that influence the nature of such disagreements and transform them into dysfunctional or functional conflicts have been explored. A model has been developed based on the literature review identifying the key types and relationship between the factors that trigger, promote or diminish organizational conflict.
Keywords: Organizational Conflict, Task Conflict, Relationship Conflict, Procedural Conflict, Negative emotionality, Resolution potential.

1. Introduction

Conflict in the workplace has been a profound area of interest for management as well as research scholars (Litterer, 1996; Pondy, 1992). Researchers have also extensively studied the various modes through which conflict is resolved in the workplace (Gross & Guerrero, 2000). There is a wide array of researches illustrating how conflict affects workplace productivity at an individual, group and organizational level (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Alper, Tjosvold & Law, 2000; Rahim, 2002). This paper intends to draw the key themes from the extant literature on nature of conflict and its key dimensions, thus, formulating a cohesive framework for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of organizational conflict. In addition this, factors that contribute to conflict escalation or mitigation will also be discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Conflict

It is difficult to put forward a definition of conflict that is commonly accepted by all scholars. Conflict has been perceived differently by different scholars, indicating that the single phenomena of conflict can be given different subjective interpretations. Some perceive it as a reflection of interpersonal hostility, while others regard it as an interpersonal disagreement stemming out of different choices or preferences (Barki & Hartwick, 2001).

Earlier researchers focused on developing a generic definition that encompasses the entire phenomenon and its processes, such as antecedent conditions, emotions, perceptions, behavior (Pondy, 1969). Corwin (1969) conceptualized conflict as some form of interpersonal or intergroup strain, or as actions (e.g., disputes and information distortions) which violates the norms of cooperation within the organization. A similar point has been presented by Thomas (1992), who identified conflict as the "process which begins when one party perceives that another has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his" (p. 265). These definitions have a common theme revolving around identification of elements that trigger and propagate conflict

Conflict is not necessarily related to the differences in the perception of ends. It can also occur when people share the same perception of goals with disagreement related to means. The theoretical underpinning pertaining to conflict and its origin have received a great deal of attention from the ends perspective. Jehn (1997) has postulated that this may

not be the case in every situation as conflict is likely to arise out of the disagreement related to means of managing work. The classification of conflict based on means versus ends is one of the commonly used approaches to encapsulate the phenomenon; however, other antecedents of conflict also need to be taken into consideration.

Putnam and Poole (1987) argued that the description of conflict essentially needs to be viewed from the perspective of interpersonal interaction. The individuals or groups are incompatible however the work requirements propel them to coordinate with each other, thus illustrating the presence of interdependence. Nevertheless, the incompatibility due to personal, emotional or social reasons results in frequent recurrence of conflict. Recent researchers have also explored this notion, identifying the presence conflict a result of personal and environmental influences on the group members (Almost, Doran, McGillis & Spence, 2010).

Based on this background, a working definition of conflict can be derived as "a cohesive framework of behavior and perception of organizational members, which is triggered (or maintained) by the feelings of being deprived with an awareness of incompatibility with others".

2.2 Nature of conflict: Healthy or Unhealthy for Organizations

Classical Organizational theory perceived conflict as undesirable and something that should be eliminated. As pointed out by Litterer (1966) the probability of conflict occurring in the organization could be mitigated through adequate job definition, detailed specification of relationships among positions, careful selection of people to fill positions, and thorough training of people once they had been assigned. Later researchers have viewed conflict as a pre-requisite of growing organization, linking differences of opinion a necessity for innovation and creativity (Chen, 2006; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003).

Researchers have cited other functional aspects of conflict in the organization, suggesting that occurrence of conflict helps the management in identification of inadequate functioning of the processes or people (Jehn, 1997). So to summarize it can be stated that conflict at the workplace serves as an indicator, identifying the malfunctioning systems within an organization, helping us in their identification and alerting us to strategically take the necessary steps to manage it effectively. Conflict has the capacity to change important aspects of the organization, such as reward or resource allocation and administrative allocation. It's not only the existence of conflict that can lead to such alterations. It depends on the magnitude of the conflict that what type of changes will occur as a result of it and which areas will be influenced by it (Harolds & Wood, 2006). The point of this discussion is not to create a list of its advantages,

but to emphasize that conflict is not always dysfunctional and it can be of importance at times. Nevertheless, the discussion also draws attention towards the prospect that assuming conflict as a functional part of people and processes portrays a partial aspect of this phenomenon.

Conflict under certain conditions is deemed as useful and acceptable within the organizations. However, the group norms also determine if the conflict is viewed as desirable or something unfavorable that needs to be eradicated. De Dreu (2008) has offered further speculation for the nature of conflict as being functional or damaging for the organization. It has been argued that conflict can support organization in moving towards growth, though, such generalizations portray it as an innately beneficial factor for the organization. It has been further stated that the dysfunctional aspects of conflict tends to have a more profound effect on the groups and teams at the workplace as compared to functional aspect. Based on this conclusion, De Dreu (2008) has again raised doubts about the assumptions researchers and organizational management had about the positive impact of workplace conflict.

2.3 Dimensions of Conflict

A commonly used model to understand conflict types focuses on interpersonal, intergroup and intragroup conflict within the workplace (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Nelson, 1989). Other models of conflict have adopted a different perspective to this phenomenon. Instead of limiting their perspective to the direction of conflict within or outside the group, researchers have delved into more generic models of conflict (Guetzkow & Gyr, 1954; Rahim, 2002). A resultant output is the classification of affective and substantive conflict, also referred to as relationship and task conflict (Simons and Peterson, 2000, Pinkley, 1990). These forms of conflict are found to be applicable on both within group and between groups setting in the organization. According to Passos and Caetano (2005), affective conflict arises when an incongruity occurs in the emotional experience of two or more employees. On the other hand substantive conflict is related to the organizational processes, where employees may experience disagreement in terms of the ways in which specific organizational tasks can be performed.

Task conflict can be manifested in scenarios when team members get different directions from different department. The employees may have to face instructions from their supervisor and other departmental heads which may are incompatible. In some cases, team members hold different opinions about the means of performing the allocated tasks. It becomes difficult to identify that which viewpoint is the most suitable one under the circumstances as the task conflict may escalate into affective one due to inclusion of negative emotions. Jehn, Northcraft and

Neale (1999) have identified the interconnectedness of different dimensions of conflict.

From a constructive perspective, task conflict enhances creativity, members get alternate ideas for the task at hand, it stimulates discussion and constructive feedback from the group members is likely to flow in, so as a result the group performs better. It has also been observed that availability of varied perspectives helps the workplace teams to offer better productivity as the knowledge of different employees is assimilated to perform the allocated tasks (Wlodarczyk 2010). Jehn (1995) asserted that moderate level of substantive conflict can have beneficial implications for the work teams as the team members are encouraged to speculate the different ideas, engage in cognitive analysis of the available options and work towards reaching a mutually agreed conclusion. Jehn (1995) has further supported this notion by arguing that absence of substantive conflict may deprive the team members of the needed cognitive stimulation, thus limiting their level of productivity. However, it should also be considered that a high level of task conflict can create barriers in the effective functioning of the team. To recapitulate, even if task related conflict has advantages, it can shift from one dimension to the other, bringing in the negative influences with that transformation.

As noted earlier, task conflict can turn into relationship conflict if the responses generated by the differences of opinion shift towards negative emotionality. The feedback a group member provides to another may be received with hostility, thus depicting feelings of dislike among the recipient. Moreover, perception of the feedback as a manifestation of personal dislike can further amplify the loss of group functioning. Relationship conflict is associated with different negative outcomes such as loss of productivity, breakdown of group unity, poor performance of employees etc (Simons & Peterson, 2000). When a conflict is triggered by negative emotionality of the group members, the work teams are likely to progressively degenerate as the focus on employees shifts from task completion towards unrelated issues. In case of relationship or affective conflict members often emphasize the need to address personal attacks directed at them and respond to threats from other group members. Furthermore, relationship conflict may provide the team members a rationale for focusing on enhancing their personal power and dominating the decision making process.

Affective or Relationship conflict is an intricate pheonomenon as various factors can trigger or inhibit its presence in a work team. Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto and Thatcher (2009) have identified workgroup 'faultlines' as a key feature which promotes conflict among the group. Since members associate themselves with the subgroups within a larger work team, this association can result in issues such as prejudice towards some members of the group. As a consequence, the employees experience affective conflict within the team. In addition to this, faultlines can also stir negative feelings of one work team towards another, leading to intergroup conflict. A few of the likely outcomes of relationship conflict is decreasing level of trust, increased sense of resentment and heightened degree of frustration.

A third dimension of conflict is also evident in the literature, is procedural or process conflict, which entails the differences of opinion pertaining to the distribution of work responsibilities. Within the context of procedural conflict, the group members may debate over which task should be performed by whom, putting forward different perspectives (Jehn, 1997). It has been further argued that intricate nature of workplace procedures and presence of bureaucratic organizational structure may enhance the chances of such procedural conflict (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Een though allocation of work responsibilities can give rise to conflict among work teams, the management continues to use the tools of job rotation and job enrichment to increase the level of motivation of the employees. This indicates that procedural conflict doesn't carry as damaging consequences as affective conflict. Nevertheless, arguments over job responsibilities can extend beyond simple procedural discussion, moving towards personal based argument, thus triggering affective conflict. On the contrary, procedural conflict can help the group members in identifying the person job fit within the group, taking the various perspectives into consideration.

There is a possibility that one dimension of conflict is damaging while the other one purport generation of different ideas, thus facilitating analytic thinking among employees. Due to this implication, management continues to view conflict in a positive as well as a negative framework. An interesting thing to note here is that differences of opinion are encouraged, yet a substantial amount of emphasis is placed on conflict resolution as well (Rahim, 2002). The dual response to organizational conflict can be attributed to the multi-dimensional nature of conflict in the workplace. Since affective and substantive conflict have different impact on the work groups, the managerial perception and response towards these conflict types also varies.

A great deal of research in the domain of organizational conflict has been centered on the personal factors and their contribution in creating, maintaining and enhancing conflict within an organization. Task conflict on the other hand has not received the same level of attention from the scholars. Task conflict primarily is viewed as a disagreement related to the end result of the organizational processes (Tidd, McIntyre & Friedman, 2004; Vodosek, 2007).

2.4 Components of Intragroup conflict

Jehn (1997) has made an important contribution by identifying the presence of four components of intragroup conflict: negative emotionality, importance, acceptability and resolution potential. These components are not only related to the context of intragroup conflict, but can also be applied on interpersonal and intergroup conflict within the workplace.

Negative Emotionality:

Researchers have realized that felt and expressed emotions by group members can play an integral role in the occurrence, continuation and resolution of conflict (Jehn, 1997). When group members are dominated by negative emotions, their cognition and behaviour reflects the same negativity. Thomas (1992) has observed that negative emotions can hamper rational thinking process of the individuals in the work team, thus illustrating the damaging consequences of negative emotions on decision making skills. Nair (2008) has further supported these findings by indicating that emotional experiences of group members during conflict determines the relative ease with which the conflict can be addressed. The path to conflict resolution can become difficult if the employees experience a high level of negative emotions. The reasons why affective or relationship conflict hampers productivity of the employees is that the workers focus on brooding over the arguments instead of investing their time in managing their work responsibilities. Moreover, focusing on emotional component of interacting with others results in decreased use of intellectual framework for dealing with the situation. As discussed above, if people interpret a group member's feedback as a personal attack, and if that interpretation is compounded with negative emotionality, the resultant conflict can be a damaging one.

Emotional component is also present in task and process conflict, however, its negative effect is minimal as individuals are more focused on accomplishing their tasks. Nonetheless, disagreement about performing a task in a specific manner can pave the path for negative emotionality which in turn shifts the conflict towards relationship based disagreement (Yang & Mossholder, 2004; Jordan, Lawrence & Troth, 2006). For example, a team leader experiences hostile feeling when his idea is not accepted by team members and an alternative decision is proposed. This hostility if subsides can have no profound impact on group productivity. On the contrary, if this anger turns into resentment towards team members, the leader can experience and express negative emotions towards the team mates, regardless of their contribution in the team. The intention of negative emotional expression will be to gain a feeling of control within the group,

which is a manifestation of underlying relationship conflict.

Importance

Another dimension of conflict is importance which is regarded as the scope or size of a conflict. The importance of the conflict is not only determined by the number of people involved in the issue but is also influenced by the position of those individuals as well as the possible outcomes of the conflict for the organization. Task, relationship of process conflict which is ranked low on the dimension of importance suggests that the outcome doesn't have severe impact for the work teams and organizations. On the other hand, if a conflict is placed at a higher level of importance, such a decision arises out of the span of influence the conflict can have for employees and the organization as a whole. Minor issues are not provided with a lot of attention, while the conflicts which are given higher degree of importance due to high level of risk of organizational failure they carry are dealt with due diligence (Jehn, 1997).

Acceptability

The acceptability as a component of conflict refers to the norms held by the members of a work team or employees of an organization, which create a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours for the personnel. In case if a group encourages its members to discuss about their grievances, seeking solution for the negative feelings of different group members, the team mates are likely to engage in these behaviours. In addition to this, supporting the members in offering their opinion to promote discussion in the group can also be an example of group norm which can facilitate task or process conflict (Rahim, 2002).

Acceptability of task conflict can give rise to an organization culture that allows the employees to engage in active discussion about the different means of handling their work responsibilities (Tjosvold, 2008). Furthermore, organizational norms which suggested that conflict was something to be discouraged, inadvertently, pushed the personnel to look over at their task conflict as something unfavourable. As a result employees tried to avoid open discussion about different opinions and refrained from behaving in conflicting ways. Therefore it shows that the group norms determine the pattern in which the conflict is expressed, the type of conflict that emerges and the process through which it is resolved.

Resolution Potential

The possibility of the disagreement to be resolved successfully is another component of the conflict. It is not only dependent on the magnitude and severity of the conflict but is also affected by the way group

members or individual perceive the situation. Conflict resolution techniques can differ from one group to another. Moreover, the individual characteristics and attributes also give rise to variation in the conflict management approach. Floyd and Lane (2000) indicated that employees in an organization can provide different solutions for a specific conflict. There are certain types of the conflicts which are deemed as having a high potential of successful resolution. For instance process conflicts can be addressed with relative ease (Jehn, 1997), while relationship or affective conflict is more intricate in nature making it difficult to completely mitigate its presence (Ren & Gray, 2009). Conflicts of greater importance such as disagreement about business selection of a suitable business level strategy among top authority is perceived as having low resolution potential.

Conflicts of low importance and emotionality were often perceived as more readily resolvable than high-emotion, high importance conflicts, regardless of conflict type. Jehn (1997) has identified few of the key elements which determine the resolution potential of a disagreement. The personality characteristics of the people involved in the conflict, the dynamics of the group and the presence of other components of the conflict including importance, emotionality and acceptability affect the potential for conflict resolution.

3. Model of Conflict

A high level of process conflict can decrease the focus of employees on work completion, thus it can lead to poor performance. Jehn (1997) has corroborated this notion by asserting that in organizations where work teams have low level of process conflict, the overall output of the team is better as compared to work groups that are exposed to occasional process conflicts. Jehn (1997) has further indicated that the success of the work groups was primarily driven by the presence of medium degree of task conflict, while the process conflict was minimal. It should also be noted that the components of intragroup conflict discussed above have a profound influence on the work output of individual employees and work teams.

Researchers have suggested that the relationship between task conflict and output of the employees goes beyond the simple linear one (De Dreu, 2006). In fact, the presence of some level of task conflict may be needed to ensure that the employees maintain interest in the job and use their cognitive skills to handle the job responsibilities. However, the presence of relationship conflict alongside the task conflict can result in decline in the output of employees and work teams.

Group norms that encourage the employees to engage in some level of task conflict seem to have a higher degree of functionality when their members encounter task conflict. The same is not the case for relationship conflict as its presence and acceptability is an indication of troublesome interaction between group members. Consequently, groups where members are allowed to express high level of relationship conflict, the work productivity dwindles.

Based on this notion it can be inferred that optimum performing groups will have moderate level of task conflict with least influence of affective disagreement (De Dreu, & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin, 1999). Furthermore groups that can provide optimal performance are also characterized by the norms that support the presence of task conflict, while discourage the use of negative emotions to deal with the group members. Literature review shows that researchers have positioned conflict as something constructive (Jehn, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Schulz-Hardt, Jochims & Frey, 2002), the harmful impact of unconstructive conflict can't be overlooked either. Issues such as high level of negative emotions can diminish the worker's level of productivity, leading the group towards breakdown and poor performance. A model has been developed on the basis of the literature review, depicting the types and components of organizational conflict (refer to the Appendix).

4. Summary and Conclusion

The research studies have enhanced our understanding of the nature and components of organizational conflict and its effects on group performance. It has been observed that not every incident of conflict is harmful for an organization. Nevertheless, the components of emotionality, acceptability, importance and resolution potential can provide insight into the potential harm a conflict can cause to the group performance and organizational productivity. The type of conflict determines the degree of these components, thus resulting in the increase or decline in employee performance. The interplay of these dimensions in a way create a context within which the members of a work team interact with each other, present different opinions and move towards a mutually agreed course of action. On the other hand, conflict contexts (task, process or relationship) which are marked by high emotionality can be regarded as the formula for definite disaster. To conclude the discussion it can be stated an understanding about the different types of conflict and the influence of its components on group productivity can allow the management and team leaders to decide how to pursue with conflict handling. It can also help them in making decision about mitigating the occurrence of negative conflict in future, while maximizing on the constructive potential of conflict.

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Appendix
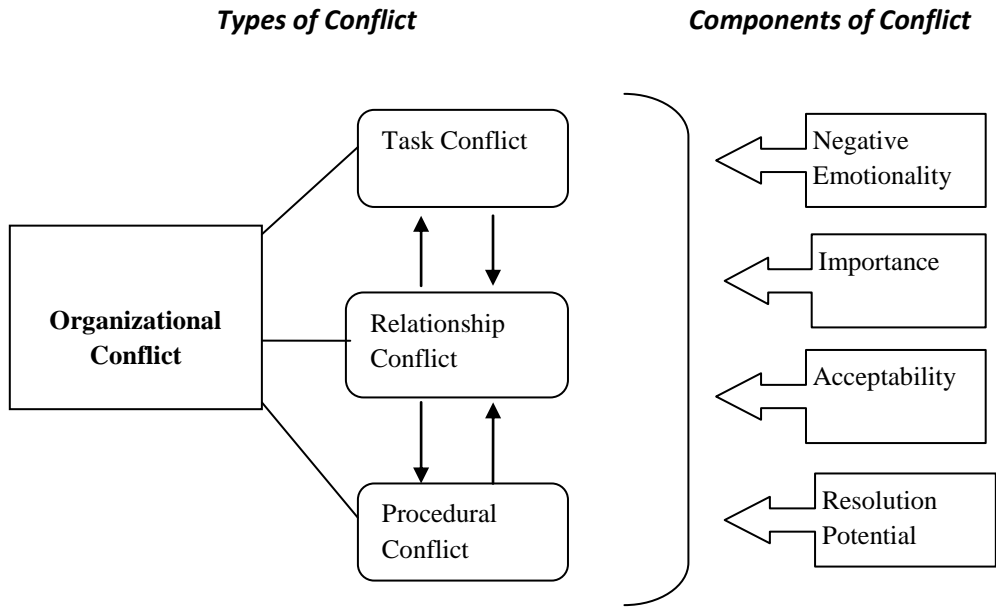
Types of Conflict   *Components of Conflict*

Figure 1: Model of Organizational Conflict