Understanding and Managing Conflicts

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Abstract

Among interpersonal communication skills, managing a conflict is one of the most challenging skills because the conflict often involves emotional elements in the application. Conflicts are everywhere that drain thoughts, emotions and energy. If a conflict is not handled properly, new problems will usually arise and the effects could be worse than expected. If one is a leader, the ability to manage conflict is very important. According to a research conducted by The American Management Association, 20 percent of a leader's time is used to manage conflict. Meanwhile, research results from the Queensland Government show that more time, namely 30% of manager's time, is used to resolve conflicts in the office. A conflict is due to the differences that arise both in the views and interests of people in formal or social interactions. The differences which have become conflicts result in incompatibility and disagreement. Since the incompatibility and disagreement use up abundant energy, traditional views mention that (1) conflict should be avoided because it will use not only energy but create cost as well. However, the people with the human relations view consider that (2) conflict is something natural and it normally occurs in any organisation. Moreover, the interactionist group views that (3) conflict is a necessary and positive force that is imminent for an organisation to perform more effectively.

Keywords: Conflict; Interpersonal Communication; Human Relations; Values; Leadership

1. INTRODUCTION

Stephen P. Robbins (1996) in his book Organizational Behavior, mentions that the conditions that cause conflicts consist of 3 main problems, namely Communication, Organisational Structure, and Personal Variables. Unsmooth communication between one person and another due to variations in ways and meanings is a potential that can cause conflict. Furthermore, an organisational structure that is wide or too specialised tends not to support good employee relations. Conflicts often occur because each part of the organisation has its own interests where a common vision is not formed. Personal variables are related to personality type and choice of role and style of social interaction.

With an understanding of existing conflicts, a leader shall have the ability to control and direct the best decision to be able to manage and overcome the adverse effects of a conflict. This paper is written to give causes of conflicts and suggest ways to handle the conflicts in order that the conflicts will be manageable and avoid the disruption to organisation productivity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Causes of Conflict

A conflict does not exist by itself, it is actually the results of the interaction of two or more organisational components. By observing various factors involved, several reasons can be identified as the common causes of conflict, including:

i. Breaking a Promise

When one party does not carry out the agreement that has been mutually agreed upon, then one will be disappointed and may trigger a change in outlook from positive to negative. This will obviously result in conflicts between the parties.

ii. One is Less Proficient at Work

A work group where one member has less skills, causes a slowdown and disruption to the work rhythm. Disruption of work rhythm may cause work targets not to be achieved which can create a tense and uncomfortable atmosphere in the group.

iii. The Occurrence of Miscommunication and Inaccurate Information

Inaccurate Information and improper communication bear potential to cause uncertainty

and hoaxes. Communication means the way of conveying information. If it is done without taking into account the atmosphere and the *type* of person being spoken to, differences of opinion and way of responding to ideas can lead to a conflict. Meanwhile, inaccurate information will create an incorrect perception which is different from what is intended to. Humans are very easy to change or stick to their views through the information they receive.

iv. Values and Interests Are Not The Same

A person's value system is influenced by his family background and beliefs. There is no problem with different value systems if they do not touch the personal sphere. But if it touches the personal realm, direct or indirect conflict can occur.

Different interests are often the cause of a conflict as well. However, the level of conflict that arises is generally not too heavy because usually people tend to 'give in', since differences in interests are not too principled.

v. Discrimination

Differentiating the treatment of one person from another will clearly become a source of strong conflict. This is because discrimination alludes to an essential aspect of humanity, namely human rights. Differences or discrimination, in this case, can be made in terms of assignment and execution of tasks, but not in treatment.

vi. Contrasting Personality Styles

When referring to the personality styles discussed in other articles, there are personality styles that differ markedly from one person to another. These refer to, for example, the Charles Handy (1990) model of Basic Characteristics in which he used the Greek Myth gods and goddess to describe the people's characteristics. Handy named Zeus, Apollo, Athena and Dionysus.
A person who has the characteristics of *Zeus* is firm, fast, result-oriented and impatient. This person will have a potential conflict with a person with the characteristics of 'Apollo' who has opposite characteristics, that is calm, considerate and accuracy oriented to systems and correct implementation, even if it means sacrificing speed. If there are two people who work with the characteristics of 'Zeus' and 'Apollo', the two people will usually experience significant conflicts. Though those who are more dominant (Zeus) will be more decisive and the non-dominant (Apollo) will succumb, there are conflicts that can develop

if there are no efforts to get reconciliation or common goals.

vii. Resources are Lacking and Inadequate

An organisation needs the right people and strong resources to run well. Resources that do not exist or are lacking, both in terms of quantity and quality will trigger conflicts since the movement of the organisation is limited and may create difficulties in mission execution.

viii. Organisational Problems

Organisations that do not have clear goals will make everyone who works in the organisation lose their ways. Each of the employees or workers will work without motivation and tend to bring their own desires. Organisations like this require effort so that organisational goals are shared and understood by every employee. This will create a sense of belonging in the hearts of the employees and ensure the maintenance of high performance of the organisation.

b. Leadership and Conflict Management

Conflict is a necessity or normalcy that should be faced by every leader of an organisation or institution. Conflicts or differences of opinion with tension are never separated from an organisation, as long as the interaction is running normally. Conflict is not to be avoided, but to be managed.

Conflicts if ignored will usually escalate and increase in intensity and will disrupt organisational performance. Sometimes, leaders who dislike conflicts tend to let it go on, believing that eventually the conflict will end. Whereas as long as the source of the conflict is not identified and nothing is done, the uncomfortable and tense atmosphere will continue. One day it will get out of control. What is clear is the more a conflict is allowed to take place, the more likely the organisation will lose its best employees, because the next stage of conflict is, sooner or later, mutual hatred and discomfort at work which will be very unproductive for the organisation.

c. The Benefits of Developing the Ability to Manage Conflict

The ability to develop effective conflict management is indispensable in building, developing and growing business or organisation. What can be cured by resolving conflicts is low productivity, inhibited creativity, and the creation of a wall or a barrier that holds collaboration or cooperation.

Conflicts as part of organisational dynamics are challenges for leaders to create opportunities to further strengthen togetherness within the organisation. Conflicts seem trivial and even if they are avoided, then perhaps we as individuals will not be directly affected. But a leader should think about the sustainability of the organisation and how to improve its performance. Conflict resolution is one of the important skills of a leader and will help to make his/her organisation run and improve performance.

Another aspect of conflict resolution is awareness of all elements of the organisation that conflict resolution is not one way. Although the initiation of conflict resolution usually comes from the leader, all parties must realise that conflicts should be handled properly in order not to escalate. Successful conflict resolution provides benefits for everyone, including the conflicting parties.

3. HOW TO DEVELOP CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Conflict management skills can be learned through training and mentoring (coaching). Training is conducted in class with some theories and practices. While mentoring or coaching is conducted in a day to day program in which a trainee is having close contacts to the skills model. The model can be his/her boss or anyone that has been decided that he/she should follow in any circumstances or situations.

These are the techniques to be used for developing skills of conflict management.

a. Understand the Characteristics of People in Conflict

By observing and understanding the characteristics of each person in conflict, the correct initial treatment will increase the success of conflict resolution. It is necessary to study other articles about the 4 basic characteristics based on Charles Handy's study, namely the types of Zeus, Apollo, Athena and Dionysus; or use typology from the work of William M Moulton, namely Dominant, Influencer, Steady or Compliant types. Understanding a person's characteristics is very helpful to formulate ways to deal with people, since we learn not only the characteristics but also the challenge of adjusting ourselves to the situations in handling people.

a. Identify the Source of Conflict

A conflict does not happen in an empty space. There must be a reason for it to happen. In this article, 8 (eight) causes of conflict are identified. By knowing the source then the method used, the sequence of steps, the facts collected and the jargon to be used can be prepared more quickly and precisely.

By identifying the source of conflict, then the efforts can be made to prevent conflict from occurring. This means that by controlling the source of the conflict, the subsequent impact of a conflict can be avoided.

b. Define and Agree on Acceptable Behaviour

It is important to formulate and agree on work standards, patterns and job descriptions and sanctions so that differences of opinion caused by unclear aspects of the above can be controlled and conflicts will not arise. The well formulated operational aspects of work will reduce the possibility of ambiguity in the work system.

c. Understanding WBFM Factors

Understanding **WBFM** (What's the Benefit For Me?) is very important in managing conflict. The motivation of someone in conflict needs to be understood and considered. One of the main ways to avoid wider conflict is to help those in conflict achieve their **personal** goals. If the leader uses the conflict resolution approach as a way to achieve the goals of each in conflict, then the obstacles of getting solutions will be reduced. However, it is not easy to manage conflicts and determine solutions that benefit all parties. Hard work is needed to get the best results for all at least through the stages of collaboration, accommodation or compromise, whichever is more appropriate. Accommodation is all accepting the needs of all or one that is less affected by a conflict. Collaboration is cooperation between the two parties with the aim of getting the best results for all; and Compromise is sacrificing some interests and accepting some positive aspects.

d. Choose the Right Conflict

Choose your battlefield and avoid conflict for the conflict's sake. Do not let conflicts that are none of your business are taken. If the issues, situations that exist and relate to the organisation are considered important, it will be valuable time and energy to manage these conflicts and establish communication channels to deal with them.

d. Conflict as an Opportunity

Conflict is often a problem and seen as a negative aspect of life. But an organisation that is too long in the same rhythm and monotonous, so that the work atmosphere is no longer challenging, requires a dynamic that is triggered through the creation of a conflict. This atmosphere can be created in special sessions within the framework of training or workshops. The end of this activity is the unification of the vision and mission of the organisation so that all organisational components can work together again.

4. HOW TO HANDLE CONFLICT

There are two ways proposed by Stephen P Robbins in dealing with conflict, namely the *Conflict Resolution Technique and the Conflict Stimulation Technique*. Conflict Resolution Technique is an attempt to control conflict. Meanwhile, Stimulation of Conflict is a way for conflicts to be initiated so that organisational dynamics arise. Anticipating ways to reduce the effects of created conflict must be properly prepared so that it will not get out of control. The types of these two techniques are as follows:

a. Conflict Resolutions Techniques

These are the techniques that can be used to make a conflict manageable and the adverse effects can be avoided. These are the loose techniques which can be applied when the situations need treatments. The abilities to determine what techniques to be implemented need to be gained through training and coaching. However, in the explanation, the relative causes are mentioned so that the techniques to be used can be determined. Hence, the training program that focuses on the conflicts resolutions with a number of simulations and discussions is required to implement the techniques.

Table 1. Conflict Resolutions Techniques

Techniques	Explanation
Solving Problem	Face-to-face meetings between conflicting parties to solve problems through discussion
Identical Purpose	Creating goals that are believed to be common goals that cannot be achieved if the conflicting parties do not work together
Resource Enhancement	When the conflict is caused by a lack of resources, for example facilities or funds, then expanding or procuring resources will eliminate the conflict.
Avoidance	Conflicts are avoided if they are not harmful and are not in the domain of the conflicting parties
Stress Reduction	Reducing the weight of differences while emphasising common aspects is important for the conflicting parties
Compromise	Each conflicting party sacrifices several things that are important to them for the sake of solving the problem
Authority Use	Management uses its authority to stop conflicts and communicate its intentions to the conflicting parties
Behavioural Variable Change	Using behaviour change techniques through training that focuses on conflict-causing behaviours
Organisational Structural Change	Changing the organisational structure and interaction patterns that cause conflict.

2. Conflict Simulation Techniques

These techniques are a kind of practical strategy to induce the situation with ways that trigger a conflict. However, the follow up action needs to be prepared well, so that the conflict will not go further and become uncontrollable. There should be a point when the process needs to be stopped and the follow up action is implemented. The follow up action shall be in the form of the explanation of reasons why the techniques are applied. This is a form of clarifications that the people involved

realised that the conflicts are just created for the sake of the good thing for the organisation.

Again, the techniques need to be in a training or workshop format, so that the understanding and the implementation are well controlled.

Table 2. Conflict Simulation Techniques

Techniques	Explanation
Communication	Using ambiguous or threatening messages to increase the level of conflict intensity.
Outsider Inclusion	Adding new employees to certain sections whose characters differ greatly from members of that section
Organisational Restructuring	Working groups are activated, changing systems and rules, increasing interdependence and other modes of change in order to move from the status quo
Determine devil's advocate	Assigning someone whose job it is to criticise the general attitude of the group, so that conflict will arise

5. CONCLUSION

Conflict is something that naturally occurs because of the dynamics that exist within the organisation. The most important thing is how we are prepared to manage conflict so as not to harm or reduce productivity. Energy and attention must still be allocated to handling conflicts. Handling conflict is a challenge for leaders and subordinates to make conflict an opportunity to improve performance. W. Wrigley, Jr in Robbins (1996) said that "When two people in business activities always agree with each other, then one is not required to exist".

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