

Conceptualizing Workplace Conflict from Diverse Perspectives

Ahmed Hamden Lafta

University of Bagdad

Abstract: *This paper discusses issues of workplace conflict in relation to the principle of lifelong learning. The discussion addresses the questions of what really does workplace conflicts mean, how workplace conflicts can be categorized and various factors that affect workplace conflicts. The argument here is that conflicts are inevitable, but strategies could be formulated to minimize or eradicate them although there might be some implications to these conflicts in workplace. This is particularly relevant in the context of workplaces as site where adults meet for production purposes conflict can be appreciated, a situation where adults as individuals can have difference in the way they see things. It has to be understood that conflicts in any organization are a natural part of any relationship and of any group. As far as adult education is concerned, conflicts are part of learning process and if handled constructively, they can extremely be valuable in transformation process – transformation is one of the theory of adult learning. Knowing how and why we respond to certain situation including conflict in our workplace, the way they do provide us with awareness for building skills for positive conflict resolution are part of learning. Application of strategies for dealing with demands and anger on an individual level will contribute to organizational success.*

Key Words: *workplace conflicts, lifelong learning, adult learning, conflict resolution, transformation processes*

I. Introduction

When we understand the critical issues of a conflict, it can be approached with the desire to create a mutually beneficial resolution. Then we can build stronger relationships and accomplish tasks from an adult learning point of view or rather we can be able to accommodate differences among ourselves, and therefore we can be more productive. According to De Dreu (2008, p.1) “workplace conflict has been linked to learning, to higher levels of creativity and innovation, to improved quality of group decision-making, and to increased overall team effectiveness”. On a global level, people are increasingly concerned with creating and maintaining peace. Understanding conflict and how to resolve are two issues directly related to accomplishing this goal, given that resolution of conflict helps to sustain non-violent relations (Blumberg, 1998).

There is empirical evidence suggesting that conflict is a fundamental concerns in influencing organizational team works and affects groups’ performance (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Team conflict is multidimensional, consisting of both relationship- and task-based elements (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Korsgaard, Jeong, Mahony, & Pitariu, 2008). Relationship conflict refers to disagreements among team members emanating from interpersonal incompatibilities and typically includes tension, annoyance, and animosity (Jehn, 1995). Task conflict describes disagreements among group members related to the content of their decisions and differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions about the task (Jehn, 1995; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

II. Conceptualizing Workplace Conflict

There are many factors that can prevent adults from open and direct communication. The result of predominance of these inevitable factors may lead into conflicts situations. Different authors particularly in the field of management and organisation behaviour define conflict in various ways. However, these authors tend to agree on the definition of conflict as a process of social interaction and a social situation, where interests and activities of participants in the workplace or in groups (normally adults) who essentially, or seemingly, challenge, block and disable the realization of one party’s objectives (De Dreu and Gelfand, 2008). It is actually a situation whereby one person deliberately makes an effort to oppose another person with an opposing idea or action which results in frustrating the other person not achieve his goal or satisfy his interests (Robbins, 1995). Conflict can well be defined as a “process that starts when an individual or group perceives differences and opposition between itself and another individual or group about interests and resources, beliefs, values, or practices that matter to them” (De Dreu and Gelfand, 2008, p. 6). Conflicts can be looked at various organisational points, in this regard the attention is on conflicts as they are perceived by the individual employee. Furthermore, De Dreu and Weingart (2003, p. 741) define conflict as disagreements about the “distribution of resources, procedures and policies, and decisions made (*among adults and training needs of adults in an origination*) and explanation of realities“. For example, two adults who have to organise their efforts in order to accomplish a particular task may differ on how to come at the best resolution to get the task

completed. This might suggest that different approaches must be taken to get the task done which might also suggest different skills back ground as a result of different training obtained. This again requires the manager to device different methods and training for solving the same problem that might arise in an organization.

III. Types Of Workplace Conflict

Different authors tend to categorize conflicts into different forms. While Ongori (2009) classify conflicts into three forms, namely task conflict, interpersonal conflict and procedural conflict the free encyclopedia distinguish between personal conflict, intragroup conflict and intergroup conflict. In this paper, we will try to examine these types of conflicts and show how needs can help these types of conflicts in formal organizations where adults interact as they do work. However, discussions of types of conflicts in workplace in organization tend to overlap and mutually related.

3.1 Task Conflict

Different authors have associated conflict to increased performance at the personal and group levels (Tidd, McIntyre & Friedman, 2004). According Ongori (2009), task conflict can be fruitful by successful improving the quality of decisions and critical thinking processes in organization. As a consequence, task based conflicts have the tendency to help both individuals and organizations. Due to this fact, organization need to device training needs for individuals that improve their performance, the trainings can as well offer employees with direction on how to create innovative ideas as a part of what they do (Shalley & Gilson, 2004). In This regards, employee as adult learner can get opportunity to practice their creativity through practicing of new roles, tasks and activities in the organization which they work. Further, Shalley and Gilson (2004, p.46) argues “given that creativity can be a requirement of the job, it may be helpful to match more creative types to jobs that require higher levels of creativity. Training can be used to increase the incidence of creative thought processes and provide educational opportunities that can enhance task domain expertise.”

3.2 Interpersonal Conflict

The term interpersonal conflict is used to point out the differences that most people name as a personality confrontation (Ongori, 2009). This opposition may take place in the form of opposed explanations that is related to the personal characteristics of a group member or disregard any organizational goals to compete against a particular group member. Conflict of this nature is conveyed through more understated nonverbal behaviors (Ongori, 2009) and it might include “perceptions about exposure to negative forms of interaction that range from minor disagreements to more severe altercations” (Schieman and Reid, 2008, p.297). Different organization might require different training needs to handle interpersonal conflict in order to deal with various conflict situation in an appropriate manner (Rahim, 2002).

3.3 Procedural Conflict

Procedural conflict happens once members of a group in an organization differ about the procedures to be followed in accomplishing the group goal (Ongori, 2009). In essence, procedural conflict suggests that new procedures may be communicated and a new agenda recommended. Again, this category of conflict emphasizes that even the group goal may be adjusted to disallow such kind of conflict to happen. It is argued that this kind of conflict like the task conflict could contribute to the success of organization (Ongori, 2009).

3.4 Intragroup Conflict

In an effort to define group deployment in workplaces, a large number of literature has emerged the influences and significances of intragroup conflict in organizations. Briefly, the intragroup conflict can generally be well-defined as the process developing from apparent inconsistencies or differences among group members (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). Previous researches has managed to differentiate two forms of intragroup conflicts that is relationship conflict and task conflict (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995), and but also lately the third category of process conflict was correspondingly identified (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). Although task conflict seems to be a form of intragroup conflict, in this paper it is discussed in a nutshell in previous discussions as a different category. The high consideration to intragroup conflict is comprehensible given to the increased dependence on working in group or team work in many organizations. Team work teams in this regards is explained in terms of two or more individuals who work in a complex, dynamic, and interactive manner toward a shared objective (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005). Such kinds of working are found in all levels of organizations where workers as adult being interact to accomplish organizational goals. For stance Yang & Mossholder (2004) suggest the need for screening about members of the group so that support and training can be made available as needed to improve effective working of the members of group.

3.5 Intergroup Conflict

Rahim (2002) give another name for intergroup conflict as interdepartmental conflict. Intergroup conflict is defined as struggle between two or more divisions, departments or groups within an organization (Rahim, 2002). It is maintained that intergroup conflict in all organisation take place in two broad forms. The horizontal tension includes struggle between departments, for example, difference between two departments in the same faculty for instance educational administration versus curriculum and instruction, sales versus production, research and development versus planning, academic versus administrative staff, and so on. The other form is vertical tension involving rivalry between hierarchical levels, for example, workers union versus organization management, line function versus middle management and so on. As far as training need is concerned, these group might need training that will device appropriate organizational tools and support in order to identify, inhibit and stabilise the situation. In this regards, in such circumstances conflict within organizations can only be addressed successfully by linking various but unified competencies, skills, knowledge and experiences, and through cooperation between the members of the organization (Tjosvold, West & Smith, 2003).

IV. Factors Affecting Workplace Conflict

It is argued that the best way workplace conflicts can be able to be solved is by understanding the nature and source of conflicts in organizations. Conflict occurs when there is a perception of irreconcilable benefits between organizational workplace members. There are several factors that can contribute to work place conflicts. Different types of conflict are caused by different factors, however, De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) in Korsgaard et al. (2008, p.1228) suggested that there are three main causes of conflict at work, scarce resources, divergent values, and the need for cognitive consistency, each of which gives rise to a unique form of conflict— process, relationship, and task conflict, respectively. Yet, Beheshtifar & Zare (2013) have categorized factors affecting conflict into two major categories, these are individual and organizational factors. These are personal factors and organizational factors. To avoid imprecise of discussion, this paper will look at the two categories as identified by Beheshtifar and Zare. While personal factors affecting organizational conflict arise from difference in individuals such as individual differences, threat to status quo and failure to exhibit concern, organizational factor derive from nature of organization and the way in which work is organized and reasonability distributed (Beheshtifar & Zare, 2013). For instance, limitation of resources, unfair treatment, role ambiguity information deficiency and other related factors might be the sources of conflict in an organization (Elmagri & Eaton, 2011).

In this regards, identifying learning needs for solving these conflicts in organizations should be a major focus as far adult education and continuous professional education is concerned. It is necessary because by itself, learning is important for both improving different professions in organizations and human resource development in terms of solving difference of opinion in the formal organizations (Bierema & Eraut, 2004). It is from this particular point that Bierema & Eraut (2004, p. 52) emphasize “the workplace is both a rich context for learning and the main focus for the majority of human resource development (HRD) supported learning and a substantial proportion of continuing professional education (CPE) activities.”

V. Strategies To Handle Workplace Conflicts

Conflict management strategies should be designed to satisfy the needs and expectations of the strategic constituencies (stakeholders) and to attain a balance among them. Mitroff (1998) strongly suggests there is a need of picking the right stakeholders to solve the right problems. Sometimes multiple parties are involved in a conflict in an organization and the challenge of conflict management would be to involve these parties in a problem solving process that will lead to collective learning and organizational effectiveness. It is expected that this process will lead to satisfaction of the relevant stakeholders (Rahim, 2002) also conflict management. These strategies and mediation processes for solving conflict in organizations have to consider the nature, context and settings so that the measures take cannot be destructive.

Jehn

Authors have tried to enumerate different strategies on how to handle conflict in workplaces. One of the prominent figure is Angela Stringfellow who is also a Personal Relation (PR) and MarComm Consultant and Social Media Strategist has offered the following strategies for managing conflicts in workplace:

5.1 Hear Both Sides. Give Both Parties a Chance to Share Their Side of the Story in Full

Sometimes getting everything on the table can reveal an easy solution that wasn't obvious before the issues were verbalized. Often, employees feel better just knowing they've had a chance to share their concerns and be heard. Brian V. Moore, team-building expert and founder of Celebrating Humanity, says it's important to create a level playing field where each person feels as though they can speak without being ridiculed or embarrassed.

5.2 Get to the Root of the Problem

Easier said than done, but it's critical for developing a win-win solution that keeps the organization's goals at the forefront. As a small-business owner, the more conflicts you mediate, the easier this will become. That's why giving both parties a chance to explain their side of the story in detail is imperative; it will help you identify the core issue.

Is it a personality conflict? Are the employees in conflict coming from different departments with different goals? Knowing the real issue at hand is the only way to develop the right solution. In some cases, it may be putting the two employees on separate projects or realigning project goals to accommodate different needs is the best solution.

5.3 Teach Employees to Appreciate Their Differences

Once everyone has gotten things off their chest, it's a good idea to look at the situation objectively and analyse how the different approaches can actually complement one another. It might be possible to realign the roles each party has in a given situation to better utilize their respective strengths and minimize differences of opinion.

If you're experiencing multiple conflicts among employees or divisions, it's a good idea to implement a diversity program, which can help mitigate future conflicts before they boil over to the point that they require mediation from you or your HR manager. You can also bring in a consultant to help you create a program that will work best for your company.

5.4 Find Common Ground

No matter how significant a conflict or how drastic differences of opinion are, there's almost always something you can find on which the two employees in conflict can agree. This is a critical step in rebuilding lost rapport and creating a platform for problem solving. Some of the areas of possible consensus include:

- Agreeing on the problem
- Agreeing on a worst-case scenario
- Agreeing on one small, simple change that can improve the chances for success

5.5 Get Both Parties to Buy In To the Solution

Find a solution that keeps the goals of your organization in mind while satisfying both parties in conflict. It may take some time to reach this point, and it will require compromise on all fronts. Imposing a solution and forcing both parties to comply may be necessary in some instances, but the ideal resolution is to identify a plan of action that both parties can live with and agree on. Giving both parties an opportunity to participate in the problem-solving process and a sense of ownership in the solution drastically increases your chances of long-lasting success. Conflict resolution isn't easy, especially if you're dealing with two employees who simply have a personality conflict. Not all disagreements are resolvable. It's up to you as a small-business owner to take a proactive approach to conflicts developing in your workplace and taking the appropriate steps to develop win-win solutions. If you approach each situation the right way, giving both sides a chance to speak without fear of ridicule, finding a common ground and including both employees in the process of developing a solution, you'll have a much higher success rate in dissolving conflicts.

VI. Implication Conflicts In Workplace

When conflicts take place in the workplace they can have extensive and disturbing consequences for both workers and organization. For example if it extends to the extent of breaking down relationships between colleagues, then individuals, whether they are management, team leaders or team members, may experience feelings of confusion, anguish and interruption from colleagues. Although other members might not directly be involved in the conflicts, they will also be influenced and the impact of this can be seen several area such: poor workplace morale, decreased motivation within the organisation, health issues, such as stress and depression, affecting attendance and performance, poor performance and reduced output, increased staff turnover, problems in recruiting staff and damage to the reputation of the organisation.

VII. Concluding Remarks And Recommendation

Conflicts in organizations are inevitable phenomena that need to be taken as challenges of managing organizations. As such, organizational conflicts should not essentially be taken too lightly, inhibited, or eradicated, but managed to enhance organizational learning and effectiveness (Rahim, 2002). According to Rahim (2002) the management of conflicts at the individuals, groups, and intergroup might focus following levels on reduction of affective conflict, attainment and maintenance of a moderate amount of substantive conflict for non-routine tasks at each level, and enabling the organizational participants to learn the various

styles of handling interpersonal conflict for dealing with different conflict situations effectively. Effective conflict management should result in organizational learning and effectiveness.

References

- [1]. Amason, A. C. (1996). Distinguishing the effects of functional and dysfunctional conflict on strategic decision making: Resolving a paradox for top management teams. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(1): 123-148.
- [2]. Behestifar, M. & Zare, E. (2013). Effect of Spirituality in Workplace on Job Performance. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Business*, 5(2), 248-254.
- [3]. Bierema, L. L., & Eraut, M. (2004). Workplace-focused learning: Perspective on continuing professional education and human resource development. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 6(1), 52-68.
- [4]. Blumberg, H. H. (1998). Peace psychology after the cold war: A selective review. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, 124 (1): 5-37
- [5]. De Dreu, C. K. (2008). The virtue and vice of workplace conflict: Food for (pessimistic) thought. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 29, 5-18.
- [6]. De Dreu, C. K., & Gelfand, M. J. (2008). Conflict in the workplace: Sources, functions, and dynamics across multiple levels of analysis. In C. K.W. De Dreu, & M. J. Gelfand (Eds.), *The psychology of conflict and conflict management in organizations*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- [7]. De Dreu, C. K., & Weingart, L. R. (2003). Task versus relationship conflict, team performance, and team member satisfaction: a meta-analysis. *Journal of applied Psychology*, 88(4), 741.
- [8]. Elmagri, M. I., & Eaton, D. (2011). *The Built & Human Environment Review: Identifying the Factors Causind Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations*. University of Salford.
- [9]. <https://www.americanexpress.com/us/small-business/openforum/articles/5-strategies-for-managing-workplace-conflicts/> accessed on 08.12.2015
- [10]. Ilgen, D. R., Hollenbeck, J. R., Johnson, M., & Jundt, D. (2005). Teams in organizations: From input-process-output models to IMOI models. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56, 517-543.
- [11]. Jehn, K. A. (1995). A multimethod examination of the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40(2): 256-282.
- [12]. Jehn, K. A., & Bendersky, C. (2003). Intragroup conflict in organizations: A contingency perspective on the conflict outcome relationship. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 25: 187-243.
- [13]. Jehn, K., & Mannix, E. (2001). The dynamic nature of conflict: A longitudinal study of intragroup conflict and group performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44, 238-251.
- [14]. Jehn, K. A., Northcraft, G. B., & Neale, M. A. (1999). Why some differences make a difference: A field study of diversity, conflict, and performance in workgroups. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44: 741-763.
- [15]. Korsgaard, M. A., Jeong, S., Mahony, D. M., & Pitariu, A. H. (2008). A multilevel view of intragroup conflict. *Journal of Management*, 6, 1222-1252.
- [16]. Mitroff, I. I. (1998). *Smart thinking for crazy times: The art of solving the right problems*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- [17]. Ongori, H. (2009). Organizational Conflict and its Effects on Organizational Performance. *Research Journal of Business Management*, 3: 16-24.
- [18]. Rahim, M. A. (2002). Toward a theory of managing organizational conflict. *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, 13: 206-235.
- [19]. Robbins, B. (1995). Less Disciplinary than Thou: Criticism and the Conflict of the Faculties. *Minnesota Review*, 45(1), 95-115.
- [20]. Shalley, C. E., & Gilson, L. L. (2004). What leaders need to know: A review of social and contextual factors that can foster or hinder creativity. *Leadership Quarterly*, 15: 33-53.
- [21]. Simons, T. L., & Peterson, R. S. (2000). Task conflict and relationship conflict in top management teams: The pivotal role of intragroup trust. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85, 102-111.
- [22]. Schieman, S. & Sarah, R. (2008). Job Authority and Interpersonal Conflict in the Workplace. *Work and Occupations* 35:296-326.
- [23]. Tidd, S., McIntyre, H., & Friedman, R. (2004). The importance of role ambiguity and trust in conflict perception: Unpacking the task conflict to relationship conflict linkage. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 15(4): 364-380.
- [24]. Tjosvold, D., West, M.A. and Smith, K.G. (2003). "Teamwork and cooperation: fundamentals of organizational effectiveness", in West, M.A., Tjosvold, D. and Smith, K.G. (Eds), *International Handbook of Organizational Teamwork and Cooperative Working*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, pp. 3-8.
- [25]. Yang, J., & Mossholder, K. W. (2004). Decoupling task and relationship conflict: The role of intragroup emotional processing. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 25, 589-605.