Conflict Resolution in Employee – Supervisor Relationship

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the causes of conflict among employees and their immediate supervisors. Data were gathered using combination of survey and observation design. The data analysis revealed four major causes which lead to conflict situations in employee-supervisor relationship. The study also explored the role of conflict management style and structural approach in conflict resolution.

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When we observe conflict − and later describe it − we particularly note the most obvious elements of the conflict first. This is to say, the angry shouting words or the cold shoulders etc. are all symbolic of the manifest conflict.

However, the physical properties of the conflict, referred to as the manifest conflict, are yet a small part of the conflict process. It must be understood that the source of the conflict is always the point at which conflict is initiated. There are also various reasons as to what could or could not be a source of the conflict, such as: incompatible goals; difference in values; task conflicts; sharing of limited resources; disagreement on rules and barriers in effective communication.

The way we perceive and/or interpret conflict often manifests itself in the decisions and overt behaviors that we have towards each other. The conflict itself may range from cold shouldering to absolute warlike aggression.

Research Questions

So as to achieve the research objectives, answer to following research questions were sought through this study:

1. What are the various causes which lead to conflict situations in employee-supervisor relationship?

2. What types of conflict may occur between employees and supervisor?
3. What measures are taken by actors involved in a conflict situation to manage the conflict?
4. What are the structural approaches offered to manage specific conflict situations?

Literature Review

Although general perception of conflict is that of negative and destructive, however this is not always the case. Conflict has both functional and dysfunctional effects and outcomes. The functional outcomes are as follows:

- Conflicting parties are pushed towards constructive methods of solving a major problem.
- Employees are energized towards experimentation and discovering of new ideas.
- Hidden or suppressed differences can be brought into the light and managed in a more productive manner.
- Once the conflict is managed, the individuals involved can be more committed to the results through their own participation.

The possible dysfunctional outcomes and effects can be:

- If conflict is allowed to drag on for too long, it may become socio-emotional conflict which is far more difficult to manage.
- Teamwork and cooperation may likely be reduced to the point of deterioration.
- Feelings of distrust, defeat and demotivation are likely to arise at individual level, and personal interest in successful task completion may also be reduced to a dangerous level.

Managers need to be aware of conflict situations and be more vigilant towards interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. The anticipation of possible conflicts is helpful for managers in determining the use of the best possible conflict resolution strategy. (Newstrom & Davis, 2002). While in many cases, managers may prefer to not face conflict in their decision making at all, there are certain instances whereby managers are left with no choice but to make conflict causing or avoiding decisions also. Conflict based decisions occur largely in scenarios where organizational peace is at stake or where decision makers would prefer to have a reduced level

of stress, upon having made a decision. There are three possible types of conflict based decisions:

1. A decision is made but is most likely to have a negative impact on the employee who will not respond with a complaint.
2. A decision is made in order to generate some degree of conflict, in order to keep members of the organization more alert.
3. A decision is made in order to push certain problematic employees to the point of willing resignations; this is possible by assigning certain tasks which may not be favored by those employees. (Drafke, 2008)

Previous empirical findings indicate that the style of conflict management adopted in case of conflict has an impact on relationships (Pruitt & Lewis, 1977; Tjosvold & Deemer, 1980). In other words, while the findings show that the style of conflict management may possibly have an impact on relationships, the likelihood that existing relationships will affect the conflict management style selected cannot be ruled out. What we are looking at, is in fact a two-way road on which the effects tend to move in both directions (Andrews & Tjosvold, 1983). It must also be understood that conflict intensity is also dependent upon the amount of time that the conflicting parties spend with each other, either due to a given task or due to there being a prior interpersonal relationship. Stronger relationships and knowledge of each other's backgrounds tends to have a stronger case for more intense conflict scenarios.

The style used to resolve the conflict by each party is also a manifestation of the conflict. It is vital to understand that even these styles are means to influence the other person's point of view and actions in the conflict process. Therefore, either the conflict will be diffused or further fueled for escalation. (Mcshane & Von Glinow, 2007)

Groups as well as individual employees always attempt to find a style of conflict management that best suits their personalities. This attempt is most often with the desire to fulfill their own concern against the concern of others and vice versa. Therefore, a model has been devised to best describe five styles of conflict management which are based on a two-dimension theory of cooperativeness and assertiveness (Daft, 2002).

The following is a brief overview of the five styles:

1. The Competing Style:
   This style calls for quick thinking and a good deal of assertiveness by the decision maker. It is highly effective in situations where time is critical and decisions need to be made without consultation.

2. The Avoiding Style:
   This style encourages the conflict to be suppressed and neither assertion nor cooperation can be seen in such a style. It is highly effective in situations where more time is needed to gather information for appropriate decision making.

3. The Compromising Style:
   This style calls for lose-lose situation, and bears reflection of moderate levels of assertion and cooperation. It is effective in cases where both the conflicting parties have strong opposing ideas and equal power.

4. The Accommodating Style:
   This style leans more towards cooperativeness, and is highly suitable in situations where people are willing to put others before themselves. It is effective when individuals would rather prefer peaceful and harmonious workings over self-interests.

5. The Collaborating Style:
   This style is the most difficult to adopt and possibly the most successful one in complicated situations. It displays a high tendency towards assertiveness and cooperativeness, as the end result is usually a win-win situation for both the conflicting parties. This style is very useful when the interests of both the parties are too important to be compromised upon, and thus a good deal of negotiation and bargaining is required here.

In conflict situations, we normally choose that style of conflict management with which we are most comfortable. However, this may not always prove to work, since every conflict situation is not the same and thus thinking carefully about the best conflict management style is always a good idea.

The styles of conflict management vary from problem solving, avoiding, forcing, and yielding to compromising. The terminology is different for different sources of literature; however the styles to be adopted are eventually the same. Each style has its

own costs and benefits according to its use and appropriate interpretation. The best style is always one which brings out functional outcomes from the conflict situation.

Although much of the literature is indicative of the various instances of conflict as well as the appropriate combination of styles of managing conflict; however not much has been said about the technical as well as the emotional sources of conflict. It is imperative to understand the difference between task and relationship conflict taking place within an organizational framework.

Task conflict arises when differences and disagreements on the nature of a task or the elucidation of a task occur among members of a team. The effects of task conflict are manifest in the way members of a team perceive the goal of the task, the policies and procedures related to task accomplishment, as well as their reactions to each other in the matters of resource allocation and duty assignments. (Amason, 1996; Simons & Peterson, 2000)

Conversely, relationship conflict looks at the emotional side of conflict within a group. It involves clashes which may occur as a result of interpersonal relationships and personality types. Relationship conflict is said to have a non-cognitive core, due to its strong emotional manifestation. Most commonly, relationship conflicts occur due to differences in personal values and perceptions of others' behavior. (Yang & Mossholder, 2004)

Studies have shown that when there is a certain level of task conflict within a group, the chances of a successful task completion are higher for such a group. This is with the view that task conflict entices the group members to keep a watchful eye on the way the other group members are handling the details of the task at hand. By doing so, an informal system of checks and balances takes place, which eventually leads to a higher level of competitiveness and alertness within the group itself.

On the other hand, higher levels of relationship conflict within the group have an overall negative result in terms of the accomplishment of the task at hand. Excessive personal differences and clashes between very strong personalities can in effect derail group members from completing the task successfully. (Alper, Tjosvold & Law, 1998)

While much of the research shows the two types of conflict as distinct and detangled from one another in task groups, there is however alternative research which leans more towards the opposite direction. Yang and Mossholder (2004) in their investigation have discovered that task conflict and relationship conflict may have overlapping effects on group performance.

For instance, in a simple case for task conflict, the disagreements or differences are usually on the bases of facts and figures. Now the way such case of task conflict is managed varies from mere logical discussions on the actual means of accomplishing the task, to forceful imposition of individual interpretations of the task assignment.

The overlapping of task and relationship conflict occurs when those individuals with their own unique interpretations of the given facts and figures try to impose these on other members of the team. The relationship conflict becomes manifest in the use of certain facial expressions, body language, hand gestures and even in the pitch of the voice.

Supporting research by Lovelace, Shapiro and Weingart (2001) show that when asked about the forms of verbal manifestation of task-to-relationship conflict, members of an investigated group offered the following verbal indicators:

➢ "Why are you being so stubborn?"

➢ "You are being difficult and rigid!"

The above statements are indicative of task conflict evolving aggressively into relationship conflict, as emotions begin to pick up momentum during task related debates.

Another research offers that the forcing style of managing a task conflict indicates behaviors which demonstrate obstinate arguments, bullying and using a patronizing tone of voice which may involve strong emotions (Van de Vliert, Nauta, Giebels, & Janssen, 1999).

A comparison between the forcing/competing style and the cooperative style show that the cooperative style is potentially less emotional in nature. The use of the cooperative style in managing task conflict is evident through more enthusiastic and optimistic reactions. Also, efforts to recognize others' views and unbiased communication are manifestation of the cooperative style.

On the other hand, the forcing/competing style is evident through actions such as pressurizing and coercion of others, using threats or patronizing remarks, screaming or shouting. By this we are compelled to realize that anyone choosing the forcing/competing style will wind up feeling annoyed, livid and very disturbed. (Alper, Tjosvold & Law, 2000; De Dreu & Van Vianan, 2001; Van de Vliert et al., 1999)

Yang and Mossholder (2004) strongly believe that the emotional effects of task conflict in the form of experience or expression will in turn influence the end result of the task at hand. It is important to realize that while task conflict and relationship conflict are distinct from one another theoretically, in a more practical sense task conflict sets the precedence for relationship conflict. This of course is dependent upon the style of conflict management applied.

The conclusions drawn by Yang and Mossholder (2004) are strongly suggestive of certain criteria restrictions, such as:

1. The actors involved in a task conflict must be independent and largely autonomous in their own right when it comes to making task related decisions.

2. The task group must be free from any higher ranking organizational supervisory and interference.

3. The team members must be free to interact and resolve conflicts without third party mediation.

4. High relationship intensities between individuals must be easily visible in the absence of any higher authorities

Having laid out the ground work with the above limitations, the literature also points out, that individual players must not be overlooked when investigating the links between task and relationship conflict. The main reason for such closed research perimeters is that, in future organizations can use this knowledge in their human resource recruitment and selection processes.

Structural Approaches to Conflict Management

It is understood that conflict management is about how we handle another individual in a conflict situation. However, we also have to realize that sometimes the underlying cause of the conflict

maybe within the structure of the organization. Following are the main structural approaches to conflict management:

1. Emphasizing Superordinate Goals:
    These are the goals which both the conflicting parties hold in higher esteem than the organizational or individual goals. By widening the span of commitment towards organizational goals, the conflicting parties feel less prone to object over more localized goals.

2. Reducing Differentiation:
    A usual culprit for conflict situations is the high level of differentiation between employees in terms of their work experience and/or their backgrounds. This results in high levels of dysfunctional outcomes of conflict. A possible way to reduce these differences is by adopting certain leisure activities to be conducted in groups by which group members will eventually have a common element for discussion afterwards. Furthermore, job rotation has also proven itself to be an effective tool for decreasing differentiation.

3. Improving Communication and Understanding:
    Open channels of communication have always proven to be effective in minimizing dysfunctional outcomes of conflict. The Contact Hypothesis states that the more meaningful interaction we have with someone, the less we rely on stereotype to understand that person.

4. Talking Circles:
    This is a collectivist's approach to increasing functional outcomes of conflict. The approach requires the conflicting parties to be seated in a circle along with other group members and engage in conflict management through a more of a ceremonious method. Each person in the group is given a chance to share their views uninterrupted and thus eliminating any misunderstandings that may have been the cause of the conflict.

5. Increasing Resources:
    Most conflicts occur due to the limitations on resources. By increasing required resources, the conflict can easily be reduced at structural levels and thus more chances of productivity can be created. (Mcshane & Von Glinow, 2007)

The purpose of this research is to investigate the conflict management styles and structural approaches used to resolve employee-supervisor conflict and the impact of such usage on conflict outcome.

Research Methodology and Design

The type of research undertaken for the purpose of this study is qualitative in nature, and therefore contains a detailed narrative account of instances of conflict occurring within the school and how they have been managed by the actors.

Qualitative research is rooted in disciplines such as, sociology and anthropology and is best suited for research studies related to educational purposes. This type of research is also referred to as field research or interpretative research, it adopts the inductive method of reasoning and is of the strong belief that various perspectives should be brought into focus.

The study of social phenomenon is a key feature of qualitative research, as it aims to shed light on the emotions and opinions of the subjects under investigation. The underlying principle here is that knowledge is retrievable from a social setting and that accepting social knowledge is a viable course of action for scientific purposes.

The field of study covers three local branches of an International Private Schooling System. Participants consisted of the heads of each school branch and deputy heads of the branches. The findings of the research were derived from the collection of primary and secondary research data. Secondary data was obtained from official records and documentations, and the primary data was gathered by means of interviews and observations.

Free flowing semi-structured interviews were conducted from 3 school heads and 2 deputy heads. The format of the interviews was informal and conversational, with open ended questions to allow for maximum information sharing and reflection of thoughts. The focus of observations included areas such as staff rooms, branch offices, resource rooms, laboratories, classrooms, corridors and playgrounds.

Data Analysis

The data gathered through interviews and observations were categorized under the following heads:

- Cause for conflict
- Type of conflict
- Style of conflict management
- Structural approach to conflict management
- Outcome of conflict management approach

The details below show the results of the research conducted by means of the observation method as well as qualitative interviews, to investigate the reasons for conflict to occur, the type of conflict, the style adopted in each case for conflict management, the structural approach for conflict management and finally the outcome in each case of the conflict management styles.

Cause for Conflict – Performance Evaluation

In a school environment it is highly necessary for every teacher's job performance to be regularly evaluated by the school administration. Unfortunately, this often becomes the cause for conflict between teachers and administration, when feedback on evaluations in not discussed in time.

Job performance evaluations not being discussed with teachers during the academic year, but rather only at the end of the year not only eliminates the purposes of the evaluation but also becomes grounds for conflicts.

Type of Conflict

Since feedback on evaluations is not given to the teachers on a regular and timely basis, therefore the type of conflict observed here is due to barriers to effective communication.

Teachers feel irritated and confused by the fact that they are not told of any mistakes or misconduct if and when it may occur. Rather they are only informed of any poor evaluations at the end of the academic year. Furthermore, positive evaluations are hardly ever communicated to teachers, and this action aggravates the situation even more.

Teachers feel confused and disgruntled, and most of them are not willing to accept the performance evaluation on face value.

Style of Conflict Management

For school administration, the most difficult situation is when teachers lose confidence in them. Therefore, the collaborating style of conflict management is adopted by administration here in order to satisfy the disgruntled teachers.

School administrators justify the performance evaluation through arbitrary talks, and for further ease of management choose to give timely feedback as much as possible.

Structural Approach

Emphasizing superordinate goals is one of the means by which the organization supports the situation. Administrators in their discussions with the teachers make an effort to clarify the organizational targets and direct everyone's attention to more important tasks at hand.

Also, through more open and friendly discussions with individual teachers, administrators are able to gradually improve communication and understanding. By doing so, administrators are able to increase teamwork and enhance team performance.

Outcome

Conflict is made more functional once the school administration conducts regular performance evaluations and also gives regular feedback. The team becomes more energized and focused on achieving targets at hand.

Cause for Conflict – Award of Salary Increment

Awarding of salary increments on the basis of annual performance appraisal is always the cause for conflict between teachers and school administration. The cause for this is that the teachers feel that they have not been appraised objectively. Although most of the newly recruited teachers who are eligible for a salary increment choose to avoid commenting on this issue, however they too feel slightly discouraged due to their low performance rating. Alternatively, the senior teachers (those with a higher number of years in service) protest the most in such cases,

and even go to the extent of demanding a full summary of the appraisal from the school administration. Conflict manifestation is observed in the form absenteeism, mild arguments with administrators, gossip spreading about administrators and unusually formal behaviour with administrators.

Type of Conflict

Incompatible goals are the classification for the type of conflict taking place here. Both the conflicting parties are more interested in fulfilling their own goals, rather than paying due consideration to each other.

The administration is of the belief that they cannot satisfy everyone, and that salary increments on the basis of performance appraisals are awarded with a high level of objectivity. The teachers on the other hand, disagree and feel that their potential and effort has been underestimated.

Style of Conflict Management

The styles of managing this conflict which are adopted by school administrators tend to change over the passage of time. By this it is meant that, initially when the conflict arises, the administrators have a competing style of managing the conflict and ensure that no time is wasted by anyone on this issue.

Upon the completion of high priority tasks, the administrators adopt the avoiding style and encourage the conflict to be suppressed as much as possible. The administrators and teachers both are fully aware in this situation that such conflict is bound to arise the same time every year.

Structural Approach

By means of occasional meetings and award ceremonies, the structural approach to managing this type of conflict is the emphasizing of superordinate goals. Everyone's attention is redirected towards hard work and diligence in order to uphold and maintain the school's outstanding academic performance.

This method of conflict management is observed at indefinite times of an academic year.

Outcome

Although this type of conflict is expected to occur annually, however it can take up to several months before things settle down again. Conflict is suppressed by school administration and despite there being no influence on the school's academic performance, teachers still retain the grudge until the next performance appraisal exercise.

Cause for Conflict

Although school makes every effort to ensure that equality and fairness should be observed at all levels, however human nature cannot always be controlled. This one instance of conflict is a perfect is example of how school administrators should not behave. When a particular administrator gets personal with certain teachers and/or shows favoritism, it becomes an ideal situation for inequality and unfair treatments. Passing of sarcastic remarks and taunts, shouting at teachers over non issues in front of students are just some examples of ways in which conflict can be created. Furthermore, favoritism while allocating extra duties as well as during performance appraisal exercises also does not get digested too easily either.

Type of Conflict

Most certainly the type of conflict seen here is due to the differences in values. Those teachers who are in that particular administrator's good books will naturally neither complain nor will they ever feel uncomfortable. Alternatively, those who are not the favorites feel discouraged to a good extent and do not wish to cross paths with the opposing party.

Style of Conflict Management

The competing style of conflict management is adopted by the particular administrator in this case, where duties and responsibilities etc. will be allocated without consulting with everyone. Furthermore, even if anyone complains about their given task as being unfair, he/she is told off and sent to complete the task assigned.

The avoiding style is also adopted by teachers who are not being treated fairly, as no one wishes to get into any unnecessary arguments and tussles with the administration.

Structural Approach

No structural approach is adopted here since issues like these are seen as abstract problems which can not necessarily be proven in many instances. It is also noted, that such cases of conflict hardly ever reach the eyes and ears of upper management.

Outcome

As such no major dysfunctional outcomes have been visible as such; at the most a teacher who is truly disgruntled by such behavior by a particular administrator resigns from the school or requests a transfer to another branch. This case of a conflict is suppressed as no one is willing to confront the school administration about it.

Cause for Conflict – School Head is Younger than Teachers

One of the rarest situations of conflict in this organization is seen where the school head is younger in age compared to many of the teachers and other staff. This particular scenario becomes ground for uncomfortable feelings where senior teachers would prefer not to receive any directives from the head who is much younger than them.

Incidents of noncompliance and non-cooperativeness by the senior most teachers are observed, and it is then left up to the head to either adopt strictness or leniency depending on the situation at hand.

Type of Conflict

Disagreement on rules is a possible classification for the type of conflict taking place here. Although the manifestation does not take place in the form of arguments and cold shouldering, however this type of conflict is innate and only becomes visible when certain tasks are assigned by the head.

Style of Conflict Management

Despite the major age difference between the school head and the senior teachers, the head is still required to show a higher degree of maturity when managing this conflict. Often, the administrator is seen to adopt the accommodating style and is willing to show leniency to a certain extent in order to keep everyone satisfied.

Alternatively, in very critical occasions the head adopts the collaborating style, and this being due to the high level of priority given to the task at hand and yet at the same time keeping the members of the team motivated to perform the task.

Structural Approach

Improving communication and understanding & emphasizing superordinate goals are the two methods by which the structural approach is implemented to manage this conflict scenario. The school head is required to keep the channels of communication open as much as possible in order to reduce any further aggravations.

Regular talks and meetings with the teachers, aid in the adjustment process and at the same time allow the administrator to remind everyone of the important tasks and their timely completion.

Outcome

Conflict is made functional when the administrator openly communicates very often with teachers and allows them to freely discuss whatever reservations they may be feeling. The administrator also makes an effort towards team building. The outcome of this approach is the slow and gradual process of acceptance and understanding of team dynamics and leadership skills by both parties.

Table 1. *Summary of Causes & Types of Conflicts, Styles & Approaches to Conflict Management and Corresponding Outcomes*

Cause	Type	Style	Structural Approach	Outcome
Performance Evaluation	Barriers to Effective Communication	Collaborating Style	Emphasizing Superordinate Goals	Regular performance evaluation; the team becomes more energized and focused on achieving targets
Award of Salary Increment	Incompatible Goals	Competing Style/ Avoiding Style	Emphasizing Superordinate Goals	Conflict is suppressed; no influence on the school's academic performance; teachers retain grudge until the next performance appraisal
Administrator gets personal with certain teachers and/or shows favoritism	Difference in Values	Competing Style/ Avoiding Style	No Structural Approach	In extreme cases a teacher who is truly disgruntled by such behavior by a particular administrator resigns from the school or requests a transfer to another branch

School head is younger in age compared to many of the teachers and other staff.	Disagreement on Rules	Accommodating Style/ Collaborating Style	Improving Communication; Emphasizing Superordinate Goals	Slow and gradual process of acceptance and understanding of team dynamics and leadership skills by both parties

Discussion and Conclusion

The study explored the causes of conflict between employees and their immediate supervisors and found that such conflicts arise out of barriers in effective communication, disagreement in rules or difference in values. It was found that if dealt properly some conflicts may have functional outcomes whereby in fact increasing the organizational performance.

The research methodology adopted for the data analysis proved to be very useful and it allowed insights into the workplace settings and conflict scenarios. The nature of conflict was better captured through observation and free flowing interviews as it would have been possible through a structured questionnaire.

The study has added to the existing body of literature on the subject by analyzing the data in light of internationally accepted conflict management styles and structural approaches. The results may be of use to the administrators of educational institutions.

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