

Conflict in Schools: Its Causes & Management Strategies

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Abstract:

Conflict is an essential and unavoidable human phenomenon because where there is human interaction; there is a likelihood of personal likes and dislikes. These agreements and disagreements among individuals and groups lead them to conflicts. Conflicts are neither constructive nor disruptive but the ways these are handled make them either positive or negative. Schools, like other human organizations, are prone to one or other type of conflict. Various conflict management strategies are adopted for handling conflict; the most important among these are, mediation, negotiation, avoidance, collaborating etc. Main thrust of this paper is on the exploration of the nature of conflicts in schools, its causes and techniques adopted for its management and redressal.

Keywords: *Management, Conflict resolution, Strategic Management*

Introduction:

Conflict presently continues to be a factor in academic life. Schools frequently appear to be centers of tension; on occasion, they are perhaps a manifestation of problems in the community¹. The term conflict is viewed in a variety of ways because of its confusion with those conditions which lead to situations of different conflict.² Thomas (1976) defines conflict as “the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his”³.

Conflict involves situations in which differences are expressed by interdependent people in the process of achieving their needs and goals, and it arises when a difference between two or more people

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necessitates change in at least one person in order for their engagement to continue and develop.⁴

Because of diverse and varied definitions of conflict, attitudes towards it and images of its role are also varied. Conflict in schools takes different forms; for example teachers seem reluctant to obey the principals, they do not seem to follow rules or accept extra work, they do not easily get along with their principals. Principals too adopt an authoritative approach, for example they pressurize teachers for an uninterrupted working of the school activities. It, therefore, becomes common that conflict between teachers and the school principal occur frequently at any time in the school⁷. In institutions, conflict occurs between various individuals because of their frequent interaction with each other. Conflict is an expression of hostility, antagonism and misunderstanding between the staff members.⁸

Conflict is inevitable and often good, for example, good teams always go through a "form, storm, norm and perform" period. Getting the most out of diversity means often-contradictory values, perspectives and opinions.

Conflict is often needed. It:

- i). Helps to raise and address problems.
- ii). Energizes work to be on the most appropriate issues.
- iii). Helps people "be real", for example, it motivates them to participate.
- iv). Helps people learn how to recognize and benefit from their differences.

Conflict in Schools- Its Causes & Management Strategies

Conflict is not the same as discomfort. The conflict isn't the problem - it is when conflict is poorly managed that is the problem.

Conflict is a problem when it:

(1) Hampers productivity (2) Lowers morale (3) Causes more and continued conflicts (4) Causes inappropriate behaviors⁹

Conflict Management in School

The better educators and students understand the nature of conflict, the better able they are to manage conflicts constructively¹⁰. Moran (2001) sees conflict management as “a philosophy and a set of skills that assist individuals and groups in better understanding and dealing with conflict as it arises in all aspects of their lives”¹¹. Conflicts as a concept never remain positive or negative but it has always been seen as a basic and result oriented part of school life.¹²

Conflicts offer competitive as well as cooperative context in the organization but it varies according to the situation. Problems exist in managing conflicts when the context is competitive/individualistic or when the context and the conflict resolution procedures are incongruent. The effectiveness of a conflict resolution and peer mediation program may be limited when the classroom and school context is competitive¹³.

Sources of Conflict

The possible sources of conflict are poor communication, competition for common but scarce resources, incompatible goals and the like¹⁴. Fisher (1997) notes, “...both individuals and groups have undeniable needs for identity, dignity, security, equity, participation in decisions that affect them. Frustration of these basic needs....becomes a source of social conflict”¹⁵

According to Plunkett and Attner (1989), the sources of conflict include; shared resources, differences in goals, difference in perceptions and values, disagreements in the role requirements, nature of work

activities, individual approaches, and the stage of organizational development¹⁶. Gray and Stark (1984) suggested that there are six sources of conflict.

These are: 1) Limited resources; 2) Interdependent work activities; 3) Differentiation of activities; 4) Communication problems; 5) Differences in perceptions; 6) The environment of the organization. According to these writers, conflict can also arise from a number of other sources, such as: 1) Individual differences (some people enjoy conflict while others don't); 2) Unclear authority structures (people don't know how far their authority extends); 3) Differences in attitudes; 4) Task symmetries (one group is more powerful than another and the weaker group tries to change the situation; 5) Difference in time horizons¹⁷ (some departments have a long-run view and others have a short -run view). Another author Deutch in camp bell et-al (1983:187) identified a list of sources of conflict. These are; control over resources, preferences and nuisances, values, beliefs, and the nature of relationships between the parties¹⁸.

The classification of conflict is often made on the basis of the antecedent conditions that lead to conflict. Conflict may originate from a number of sources, such as tasks, values, goals, and so on. It has been found appropriate to classify conflict on the basis of these sources for proper understanding of its nature and implications. Following is a brief description of this classification.

Causes/ Factors leading to conflict:

Affective Conflict

This is defined as “a condition in which group members have interpersonal clashes characterized by anger, frustration, and other negative feelings”¹⁹.

Substantive Conflict

Jehn (1997b) characterized this type of conflict as “disagreements among group members’ ideas and opinions about the task being performed, such as disagreement regarding an organization’s current strategic position or determining the correct data to include in a report”²⁰.

Conflict of Interest

This is defined as an inconsistency between two parties in their preferences for the allocation of a scarce resource. This type of conflict occurs “when each party, sharing the same understanding of the situation, prefers a different and somewhat incompatible solution to a problem involving either a distribution of scarce resources between them or a decision to share the work of solving it”²¹

Conflict of Values

This occurs when two social entities differ in their values or ideologies on certain issues²². This is also called ideological conflict.

Goal Conflict

This occurs when a preferred outcome or an end-state of two social entities is inconsistent. In rare cases “it may involve divergent preferences over all of the decision outcomes, constituting a zero-sum game”²³.

Realistic versus Nonrealistic Conflict

Realistic conflict is associated with “mostly rational or goal-oriented” disagreement, nonrealistic conflict “is an end in itself having little to do with group or organizational goals”²⁴.

Institutionalized versus Non-institutionalized Conflict

The former is characterized by situations in which actors follow explicit rules, and display predictable behavior, and their relationship has continuity, as in the case of line–staff conflict or labor–management

negotiations. Most racial conflict is non-institutionalized where these three conditions are nonexistent.

Retributive Conflict

This conflict is characterized by a situation where the conflicting entities or factions feel the need for a drawn-out conflict to punish the opponent. In other words, each party determines its gains, in part, by incurring costs to the other party²⁵.

Misattributed Conflict

This relates to the incorrect assignment of causes (behaviors, parties, or issues) to conflict. For example, an employee may wrongly attribute to his or her supervisor a cut in the employee's department budget, which may have been done by higher-level managers over the protest of the supervisor.²⁶

Displaced Conflict

This type of conflict occurs when the conflicting parties either direct their frustrations or hostilities to social entities that are not involved in conflict or argue over secondary, not major, issues²⁷.

Conflict Resolution Skills/ Strategies

David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson (1996) hold that Conflict resolution and peer mediation programs are often promoted as a way to reduce violence (and destructively managed conflicts) in schools²⁸. Management of conflict is a human relations concept long recognized in business and industry as a necessary component of the developmental process²⁹. Sweeney and Caruthers (1996) define conflict resolution in a most general and concise way, "the process used by parties in conflict to reach a settlement"³⁰.

Hocker and Wilmot (1985) initially discuss conflict management styles in terms of assumptions. Their assumptions are:

- People develop patterned response to conflict.
- People develop conflict styles for reasons that make sense to them.
- No one style is automatically better than another.
- People's styles undergo change in order to adapt to the demands of new situations³¹.

Robbins (1974) concentrates on strategies specifically labeled as resolution techniques. He lists eight techniques as follows:

(1) Problem solving (2) Super ordinate goals (3) Avoidance (4) Smoothing (5) Compromise (6) Authoritative command (7) Altering the human variable (8) Altering structural variables³².

Thomas (1971) examines conflict management strategies by focusing on general strategies used by administrators in an educational setting. In his research he points out that there is no difference between management and leadership; hence, manager is synonymous with leader. Thomas eight strategies for management are:

(1) Citizens advisories (2) Confrontation sessions (3) Sensitivity training (4) Process involvement (5) Educational pluralism (6) Volunteerism (7) Cooperative studies (8) Failure³³.

Since conflict is seemingly unavoidable, particularly in a scholarly setting, it is obviously necessary for administrators to be able to recognize conflict, to view its constructive as well as destructive potential, to learn how to manage conflict, and to apply conflict management strategies in a practical way³⁴.

Jhonson & Jhonson (1996) state that conflicts are resolved constructively when they (a) result in an outcome that all disputants are satisfied with, (b) improve the relationship between the disputants, and

(c) improve the ability of disputants to resolve future conflicts in a constructive manner³⁵. Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) and Ohio Department of Education (ODE) define conflict resolution as a philosophy and set of skills that assist individuals and groups to better understand and deal with conflict as it arises in all aspects of their lives.³⁶

Bodin and Crawford (1999) maintains that since school is an entity which composes of different people with different generational ages and that negotiation and mediation must be identified as the best strategies for eliminating conflicts³⁷. Three types of situations demand from the negotiator to face and find solution to them; these situations are task and relationship oriented conflict, intellectual and emotion oriented conflict and compromise and win conflict³⁸. Conflict management is deemed to be successful if it has achieved its goal by reaching a win-win, or approach-approach or consensual agreement which is accepted by both parties.

Mediation is another way of conflict management used today. Bentley (1996) describes mediation as a form of problem solving process where a neutral third party assists disputants to reach a mutually acceptable agreement³⁹. Mediation proves as an effective method because it involves a democratic and structured process that enables disputants to resolve their own conflict, with the assistance of trained peers⁴⁰. Deutsch (2005) argues that mediators follow these steps:

(a) They establish a working alliance with the parties, (b) they improve the climate between the parties, (c) they address the issues, and that (d) they apply pressure for settlement⁴¹.

Mediators should adopt the following skills in order to handle conflict, namely;

- a. They must be able to establish a working relation with each of the conflicting parties,
- b. They must be able to establish a cooperative problem-solving attitude among the parties,
- c. They must be able to develop a creative group process and group decision making, and
- d. They must gather considerable substantive knowledge about the problems around which the conflict centers¹⁴².

Conclusion:

Conflict management styles are essential in order to utilize them for handling conflicts in the schools. Prominent conflict handling styles include; competing, avoiding, collaborating, compromising and accommodating. Competing style characterizes assertiveness and uncooperativeness and it occurs when the parties involved work for their respective gains at the expense of opposite party. This style is described as power-focused style and might is right approach can best summarize this approach. Second style is avoiding which is both unassertive and uncooperative; in this the person involved work neither for his own benefit nor bothers about the other party. This is sometimes considered as best because it works on the principle of leave one alone. Collaborating approach is opposite of avoiding and is characterized by both assertiveness and cooperativeness. This style focuses on satisfying the needs of both parties involved. In this both parties agree on working together. A collaborative approach to conflict management, we argue, may enhance levels of trust and cooperation between the president and the board. Collaboration may be an especially useful strategy for resolving and/or regulating conflicts and loosening the grip of dissension where confrontation involves stakeholders with differential power and

resource⁴². Compromising style is a mid way approach for conflict management, it adopts an intermediate course between assertiveness and cooperativeness and it is effective when both parties agree on sacrificing some concerns for achieving a solution. Finally, accommodating style is characterized by both unassertiveness and cooperativeness and it is the opposite of competing style. In this style an individual gives up some of his concerns so as to accommodate the needs of his adversary.

There is still, however, a long way to go before conflict resolution and peer mediation training is managed constructively in every classroom and school⁴³. However, it may be underscored that conflict-free atmosphere is conducive to constructive and creative work. Sincere efforts should be made to resolve tensions & cultivate an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and tolerance, accommodation & understanding. Uncalled for tensions & conflicts so often lead to mental stresses & strains that, in turn, cause psycho-somatic diseases & deformities.

End Notes:

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