Managing Organizational Conflict

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Abstract: The concept of conflict, being an outcome of behaviours, is an integral part of human life. Wherever there is a difference of opinion there are chances of conflict. Managing conflict effectively demands multifarious professional abilities and acumen. To resolve and manage conflict, the organisations must understand the causes, theories, approaches and strategies of conflict management. Conflict and stress are interlinked as they are dependent on each other. It is a psychological phenomenon that requires a high level of attention and thorough understanding. It appears that there is a very little margin to remain unaffected from the clutches of stress in contemporary time.

Keywords: conflict, stress, management, organization, strategy.

Introduction

Conflict in the workplace can be incredibly destructive to good teamwork. Managed in the wrong way, real and legitimate differences between people can quickly spiral out of control, resulting in situations where cooperation breaks down and the team's mission is threatened. This is particularly the case where the wrong approaches to conflict resolution are used. Stress is basically the impact of one object on
another. There are three terms which are used synonymously to denote this phenomenon: stress, strain, and pressure, however, there are thin differences in these terms. The amount of stress an event will cause in an individual will depend on the way that individual thinks about or appraises the event. If there's conflict in your workplace it's normal - but it's not easy. Conflict is identified over and over as a major cause of workplace stress. Unresolved conflict is the computer virus of the workplace. In an organization an early symptom is a drop in productivity. The need of the hour in front of the organization is to back up and look at own thoughts and to resolve conflict. It is observed that numerous studies have been attempted to understand the nuances of conflict management.

Nature and Scope of Stress and Conflict

Sociological studies have shifted from the notion of power as a source of conflict to the impact conflict has on workplace stress and the resultant levels of productivity. Schuler’s definition (1980 cited in Arnold, et al. 1998) is one that is frequently adopted: “stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what they desire and for which the outcome is perceived to both uncertain and important”. With regard to sources of stress, researchers have identified different aspects of a person’s work environment, which have been implicated as sources of potential stress. Researchers have, for instance, found that high levels of role ambiguity (extent of a person's uncertainty about aspects of his or her job, including priorities, expectations, etc.) and role conflict (the degree to which the job is characterized by conflicting demands) are associated with low levels of job satisfaction and poor mental health (Ross, 1995).

An additional source of stress in the work environment is work
overload. Several studies have shown that perceptions of work overload have significant negative relationships with measures of job satisfaction and more general measures of wellbeing (Caplan, et al. 1975; Parkes, 1991). There is also evidence to suggest that if one’s abilities and knowledge are not being utilized, it can result in another source of stress. Caplan, et al. (1975), for instance, found that under-utilization of skills was associated with high levels of both job-related boredom and job dissatisfaction, while other studies have linked under utilization to psychological strain and depression (Orpen and King, 1986). It is due to all the stress dimensions which give finally raise to the conflicts (Ganster, et al. 1986).

While conflict is inevitable in groups and organizations due to the complexity and interdependence of organizational life, theorists have differed about whether it is harmful or beneficial to organizations. Early organizational conflict theorists suggested that conflict was detrimental to organizational productivity (Pondy, 1967; Brown, 1983). It focused much of their attention on the causes and resolution of conflict (Schmidt and Kochan, 1972; Brett, 1984).

The research findings have shown that conflict is associated with reduced productivity and dissatisfaction in groups (Gladstein, 1984; Wall and Nolan, 1986) and that the absence of strife within top management teams and decision-making groups is related to increased performance at the group and organizational levels.

In contrast, some sociologists have theorized that conflict is beneficial under some circumstances (Tjosvold, 1991; Van de and De Dreu, 1994). There are evidence which has demonstrated that conflict within teams improves decision, quality and strategic planning, financial performance, and organizational growth (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990).
Psychological Dimensions of Stress and Conflict

Research on communication, group interaction processes, and diversity in groups and organizations has also indicated that conflict can be beneficial as well as detrimental (Wagner, et al. 1984; Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990). From a psychological perspective, the investigation of stress in the workplace supports this dialectic. Stress is not necessarily the result of work demands, being anxious or having a heavy workload. Stress can be the result of a lack of fit between a person (in terms of their personality, aptitudes and abilities) and the environment, and a consequent inability to cope effectively with the various demands.

Although, mainly considered as an adverse condition, psychologists do not always consider stress a negative function. Selye (1976) cited in Simmons and Nelson, 2001) distinguished between eustress (a pleasant experience, a culmination of a superior physical/mental effort) and distress. Stress in any context is usually associated with constraints and demands. He identifies that two conditions are necessary to the translation of potential stress into actual stress which involves 1) uncertainty over the outcome and 2) importance attached to the outcome. Robbins, et al. (1998) describes this relationship thus: regardless of the conditions, it’s only when there is doubt or uncertainty about whether the opportunity will be seized, the constraint removed, or the loss avoided that there is stress. That is, stress is highest for those individuals who perceive that they are uncertain as to whether they will win or lose and lowest for those individuals who think that winning or losing is a certainty. But importance is also critical. If winning or losing is an unimportant outcome, there is no stress.

Robbins et al. (1998) classified a number of factors relevant to stress as either potential sources of stress and consequences of stress. However, differences in individual and organizational factors in the form of management style act as filters to both the experience of stress and the consequences of stress. Central to this line of argument is that
people with different dispositions tend to create different social environments for themselves. Thus, a person’s “situation” depends not only on external conditions, but also on his or her own approach to people and problems.

**Conflict Management Strategies resolving Conflicts in a Planned Manner**

Organizational factors with the potential to cause stress include: work overload; pressures that are placed upon the worker to avoid errors or complete tasks in a limited period; or demanding/insensitive superior. These stressful factors can stem from: task demands (issues often of a work organization nature related to an individual’s job); role demands (pressures placed on an individual relative to the role/function they play in an organization); interpersonal demands (pressures/difficulties caused by work and related relationships with other employees); organizational structure (level of hierarchy, the effectiveness of the structure in facilitating work relations/performance); organizational life stage (different pressures emerge in the four stages of the organizational life cycle establishment, growth, maturity, decline); and organizational leadership (managerial style/relations of the organization).

Conflict management styles can then have an all-encompassing effect on work life in organizations, by impacting the degree to which an employee experiences ongoing conflict. Therefore, a number of scholars have developed typologies of conflict management styles using the conceptual foundation provided by Blake and Mouton’s (1964) managerial grid. The two dimensions have been labeled “desire to satisfy one’s own concern” and “desire to satisfy other’s concern” (Thomas, 1976 cited in rahim,1983), or “concern for self” and “concern for other” (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979). A person’s conflict style is said to incorporate both dimensions in varying degrees. The High concern for both self and other
defines a “collaborating” or “integrating” style, while low concern for both self and other defines an “avoiding” style. High concern for self, but low concern for other describes a “competing” or “dominating” style. A low concern for self, but high concern for other describes an “accommodating” or “obliging” style. Along with conflict management styles, the organization’s ability to maintain coherent and integrated production through organizational norms also serves as a filter to negative stress (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939; Dunlop 1958). Organizational norms specify that management is responsible for maintaining a coherent and effective system of production that allows employees to meet the demands of their jobs (Whitener, et al. 1998). Coherent organizational procedures are essential for organizational effectiveness (Bass, 1985). Researchers in the area of organizational coherence and integration point to a number of positive consequences (Moore, 1962; Smith, 2001). These include increased citizenship on the part of employees and the creation of a more cooperative and less conflicting workplace (Pfeffer, 1998). Hence, organizational coherence can play a prominent role in mitigating both formal and informal worker resistance. If organizational coherence and integration are missing, employees may define management as illegitimate (Halaby, 1986). Employees also may feel that their individual and collective interests in secure and stable work are threatened (Hodson, 2001). As a result, stress levels increase to a negative state.

It has been widely established that the conflict management strategies of the executives has a definite impact on the work performance of the individuals. However, conflict management strategies adopted by the executives help in reducing their stress levels. But, as to what strategy should be adopted by an individual at a particular stress level is a matter of concern. Crampton, et al. (1995) have emphasized that stress is found in all aspects of life. Hans Selye, a pioneer in stress research, has defined stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demands made upon it”. It is considered to be an internal state or
reaction to anything we consciously or unconsciously perceive as a threat, either real or imagined Clarke (1988). Stress can evoke feelings of frustration, fear, conflict, pressure, hurt, anger, sadness, inadequacy, guilt, loneliness, or confusion Cavanagh (1988). Individuals feel stressed when they are fired or lose a loved one (negative stress) as well as when they are promoted or go on a vacation (positive stress). While many individuals believe they must avoid stress to live longer. It is rightly said that it is the salt and spice of life and that to have no stress we would have to be dead person.

In this difficult economy, one may find it harder than ever to cope with challenges on the job. Both the stress we take with us when we go to work and the stress that awaits us on the job are on the rise-and employers, managers, and workers all feel the added pressure. While some stress is a normal part of life, excessive stress interferes with the productivity and reduces the physical and emotional health, so it’s important to find ways to keep it under control. Fortunately, there is a lot that one can do to manage and reduce stress at work. Segal, et al. (2008), in their study highlighted that the troubled economy may feel like an emotional roller coaster. “Layoffs” and “budget cuts” have become bywords in the workplace, and the result is increased fear, uncertainty, and higher levels of stress. Since job and workplace stress grow in times of economic crisis, it’s important to learn new and better ways of coping with the pressure. The ability to manage stress in the workplace can make the difference between success and failure on the job. The emotions are contagious, and stress has an impact on the quality of your interactions with others.

The better an employee is managing the stress, there will be more positive affect those around and the less other people’s stress will have a negative affect. In order to assist managers in understanding conflict, a number of factors regarding individuals and organizations have been identified. Differences in individual characteristics have been shown to
impact the development of conflict and its potential resolution. Eaton and Bradley (2008) promulgated that individual differences in stress may arise from many sources and the role of gender is one of them where it is generally seen that women endorsed the use of emotion-focused coping strategies more than men, even when perceived stressfulness was controlled.

Conclusions

Conflict in workplace communication also causes employees experience the stress. Workplace communication, like any communication, is basic to the interaction and subsequent performance of the participants. “Workplace communication is different from social communication due to the contrived hierarchy one finds in the workplace. One communicates in the workplace with employees who are in subordinate positions as well as with those who occupy equal or superior positions within the company. Each type of communication requires different levels of formality. Like any form of communication, workplace communication has differing styles. Styles of communication, coupled with the workplace hierarchy, create and increase the stress levels. Finally, workplace diversity leads to communication problems and stress. As the workplace becomes more diversified, methods of communication must become more precise.

References


