

Models of Conflict Management for Business Process Improvement in organizations

Ugis CITSKOVSKIS
Riga Technical University
Riga, LV-1048, Latvia

ABSTRACT

It is possible to develop models for identification of problems and conflicts in the processes or teams and company managers can try to prevent them in early stages though creating more supportive environment and better company culture. By looking at conflict types for processes it is necessary to develop mechanisms/tools and techniques for precautionary conflict identification and prevention. The paper is devoted to classification of conflicts for managerial purposes. The research is based on systematic literature overview, application of induction and deduction to the analysis of the literature review results.

Keywords: Teams conflicts, task conflicts, conflict management

1. INTRODUCTION

Each organization, group of people within it, as well as its employees have to face various conflicts in their everyday activities. Conflicts may be of different kind. In essence, conflict is a situation when certain misunderstanding or disagreement occurs among people or groups, which may ultimately have destructive effects. Conflicts are generally accompanied by negative human emotions that may be further escalated while parties to the conflict interact. This ultimately leads to the situation when the conflict may not be resolved. Conflicts may be caused by different reasons, such as controversies among people, offence caused by, for example, some person's strife to achieve the goal that potentially is in conflict with the common goal of the team. Unfavorable attitudes people have towards each other may be a serious cause of conflict. Each person has their own goals in various areas of life. However, often people who conduct common business activities may have radically different interests. Thus, a conflict emerges, it disorganizes people, emotions start prevailing over purpose and common sense. Conflict is one of the main adversaries for a manager of an organization or a group since it may have most unpredictable consequences. Therefore, the ability to prevent conflict situations, mitigate their consequences, settle controversies and lead people out from the clash of interests to cooperation and mutual agreement is one of the functions of a manager in their capacity of a person working with people.

The article aims to generalize how conflicts in an organization can be classified and to analyze whether it is possible to apply models of conflict management for business process improvement.

The research is based on systematic literature overview, application of induction and deduction to the analysis of the literature review results.

2. SPECIFICATIONS OF CONFLICT

Analysis of definitions of the notion 'conflict'

In order to be able to manage a conflict, it is necessary to understand its essence. Analysis of the definitions of 'conflict' has been conducted in order to gain deeper understanding of this notion. Conflict is a situation in which actors use conflict behavior against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility [1]

- Conflict is a struggle between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. Defined in broader terms, conflict denotes the incompatibility of subject positions. Pia and Diez (2007) point out that this definition emphasizes the opposition or incompatibility at the heart of the conflict, initially leaving open the exact nature of these incompatibilities, i.e. whether they are between individuals, groups or societal positions; whether they rest in different interests or beliefs; or whether they have a material existence or come into being only through discourse [2];

- Conflict refers to any situation in which individuals or groups have incompatible goals, views or emotions, which causes opposition or antagonistic interaction;

- Conflict may be defined as a clash or contest between the people with opposite needs, ideas, views, values or goals. Conflicts are inevitable in teams; however, the results of conflict are not predetermined. Conflict might escalate and lead to nonproductive results, or it can be beneficially resolved and lead to quality final products [16].

All above-presented definitions of the notion 'conflict' imply that this is a situation that may emerge within a group or among definite individuals with different values or ideas striving to reach incompatible goals, it may also emerge simply under the impact of emotions to demonstrate one's own hostility. Conducting systematic analysis of literature, it may be concluded that at the heart of the conflict there is a struggle or confrontation. Within any kind of conflict, a clash of incompatible interests or positions occurs. It is mentioned in the literature that bipolarity or social group polarization is the first sign of the conflict [2]. Philosophy of polarity held by a group or definite individuals implies that there is a certain controversy, distinction between right and left, good and bad. Controversy may not exist on its own without human involvement. The activity perceived as a struggle is the second sign of the conflict. For an action to occur, there should be a trigger, which in most cases comes from an aggressor or initiator of the conflict. Parties to a conflict are the third sign of the conflict. In other words, it is the acting party, conflict initiator, an individual who may be characterized by specific mentality mainly aimed at the conflict. Controversies may cause conflict situations only among the people characterized by conflict thinking.

Conflicts within a group or organization may cause far more serious consequences than interpersonal conflicts (e.g., among friends). The task of a manager is first to determine the type of conflict in order to implement the necessary measures to resolve

it. It should also be pointed out that conflicts may be constructive or destructive with regard to their impact on the work of an organization or group.

Destructive conflict, associated with confrontation among the parties, is characterized by the tendency to escalate. As a result, such conflict often becomes detached from its causes and may continue even after its causes have been resolved, devaluated or forgotten. Conflict escalation occurs along different lines: involvement of new participants; growth of expenses of the conflicting parties [16]. Getting involved in the conflict, it is very important for a manager of an organization or group to consider constructive and negative conflict outcomes, the scope of their influence, as well as internal and external environment of the organization (see Tab. 1).

Table 1
Signs of Constructive and Destructive Conflicts (based on [17])

Constructive conflict	Destructive conflict
Conflict may reinforce an organization. The quality of general management improves, shortcomings and controversies are eliminated.	Conflicts reduce organization work quality, may destroy organization as an entity.
Conflict actors get to know each other better. Conflict testing function.	Relationship and communication systems in an organization are undermined.
Stakeholders get rid of the negative emotions, let off steam, transform and maintain relationship.	Individuals' disposition worsens, adverse (negative) social-psychological climate is created in an organization and society.
Conflicts promote personal development; the value of humanism grows.	Organizational, corporate culture is deteriorated, value-focused unity is weakened.
Interpersonal relationships get optimized.	Conflict causes relationship breakdown, which may result in sicknesses or depression.
Managers become more sensitive towards the needs of their subordinates. A more friendly atmosphere is created, organization's culture becomes stronger.	Authoritative, bureaucratic tendencies in the management style become more prominent. "Sick organizations" emerge - oppressive, depressive, etc.
Social life within an organization becomes more active, problems get identified, changes are initiated.	Rise in protests, purely socio-political relationships get reinforced, rise in passivity.

Conflicts may be classified in a variety of ways, classification with regard to constructive or destructive impact is just one of them. Another classification allows grouping conflicts into the following types:

- task conflict (conflict related to the content of the job task);
- relationship conflict;
- process conflict (related to the methods and procedures used to complete the task).

Task or job conflicts and process conflicts are the main types of conflicts that organizations have to face. The first idea that may come to mind trying to explain these two notions is that job conflict is the conflict between the task and a subordinate employee, the employee may not understand the goals of the task and categorically resist completing it, or an enterprise disregards employee's spiritual wishes and needs. Process conflict is mainly associated with the conflict between an employee and some of the processes that should be implemented in the course of work, for example, information circulation process in an organization. Summarizing information presented in the literature, the job conflict [1;2;3;4]:

- emerges if two parties are not able to proceed with task completion due to differing needs, approaches and attitudes. It may be a conflict about organizational policies and procedures, distribution of resources or task completion methods or tools;
- often involves concrete questions related to employee job tasks, it may involve disagreement about distribution of resources, difference of opinion on policies and procedures, expectation management at work, as well as judgements and interpretation of facts;
- the so-called task-driven conflict emerges when employees are not in agreement on the goals and objectives. It is the disagreements between two people or groups concerning the decisions they should make.

In its turn, the process conflict in various sources is described as follows [1;3;5;7;9]:

- disagreement between the members of a team due to difference of opinion on how to complete the task is called process conflict;
- it is connected with the way to complete the task. Conflicts of this type focus around processes, procedures, activities and methods that are used to achieve the goal. One person may prefer planning many steps ahead whereas others may like diving in headfirst. These approaches or process differences may cause breaks in communication and, ultimately, conflicts. Healthy differences in approaches to the process will often improve task performance.

Summarizing the above-said, it may be concluded that the job conflict is mainly connected with incompatibility of internal values of an individual (employee) with the goals of the task and organizational values, task conflict occurs when two or more individuals receive a task that is not clearly formulated, or they hold different opinions on one and the same issue and as a result cannot collaborate. Process conflict is a conflict about the way used to complete the task. Each of the described types of conflict differs from the other.

In the literature, conflict emergence process in most cases is divided into four stages. The first conflict stage is pre-conflict stage. At this stage, employees assess their resources and search for supporters. The second stage is conflict development, when people feel possible disagreement, irritation, anger, anxiety. The feeling of anxiety attests that the situation is perceived as conflictual. Threats are connected with the fact that the other party hinders achievement of the goals, blocks intentions and ways for their achievement. The parties are not sure whether they can trust each other. The third stage of conflict is characterized by manifestations of the parties to the conflict, their actions and reactions. This stage starts with clearly formulated challenge (threats) and finishes with the critical point of the conflict (peak, culmination). Conflict resolution occurs at the fourth stage. It is possible to get out of the conflict situation if the causes of conflict are eliminated (see Fig.1).

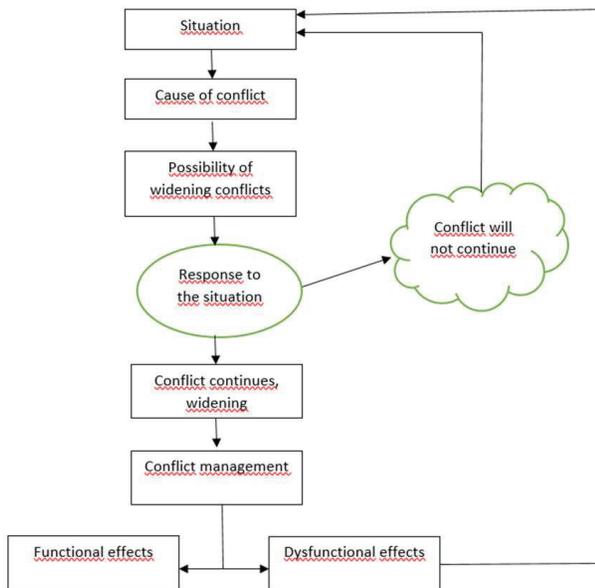


Figure 1. Stages of conflict (Conflict management)

The stages of conflict are visually presented in Fig. 1. Boxes colored violet designate the initial stage of conflict, or its first stage. Any conflict starts with a situation, when something leading to polarization of the group, resistance or incompatibility of the goals happens, which usually causes a conflict. The task of a manager at this stage is to comprehend whether the disposition of a group is destructive or constructive. The situation calls for a certain reaction and, if the correct conflict resolution strategy is applied, the conflict is going to be solved (colored blue). If the disposition of the group or individual(s) is destructive, the conflict may continue, escalate, and the situation may deteriorate. At this stage, it is necessary to implement preventive measures – conflict management. The conflict is resolved as a result of conflict management and preventive measures result in functional or, on the contrary, dysfunctional consequences. The impacts of these results on the organization are presented in Fig.1, thus, it may be noted that functional consequences appear as the result of the constructive conflict, whereas dysfunctional result leads to destructive consequences.

Task conflict

Literature defines the essence of task conflicts from similar perspectives, but with different emphasis and limitations. The most generally accepted definitions have been suggested by [4], “Task conflict is characterized by disagreement among group members regarding decisions, viewpoints, ideas and opinions” and [4], “Task conflicts are conflicts about the distribution of resources, procedures and policies, and judgements and interpretation”. These authors have established a widely accepted basis for understanding task conflicts.

Other sources expand on their perspective suggesting own interpretations:

Task related conflicts occur when group members argue over alternatives related to the group’s tasks. Task conflict is an intragroup, a conflict occurring among group members within a group. [3]

Task conflict pertains to employees’ awareness of differences in opinions and perspectives with respect to tasks, which results from employees’ divergent perceptions concerning distribution of resources, work procedures, and policies. [5]

Task conflict involves concrete issues related to employees’ work assignments and can include disputes about how to divide up resources, differences of opinion on procedures and policies, managing expectations at work, and judgments and interpretation of facts. (Shonk K., 2018)

All definitions end up defining task conflicts as intragroup conflicts, internal conflicts between the members of a group or team. So, the context of task conflict is found within the group. Task conflict is something that prevents a group from moving forward in solving the task. It is disagreement between group members; it occurs when group members argue over alternatives to fulfill the task or achieve a goal due to their viewpoints, opinions, perspectives and ideas. Group members tend to make interpretations and judgements based on their knowledge and background, thus, they find the means to solve problems on that basis. Individuals see the distribution of resources, work procedures, policies and desired outcomes differently. It is important to understand the difference between task conflict and relationship conflict, which is caused by interpersonal clashes within the group [3]. Even though task conflicts happen between human beings, they are related to matters, not personal characters and relationships.

Tools to Identify and Prevent Task Conflicts

Some authors have shown that there is no difference between task conflicts and relationship conflicts, since both lead to negative outcomes [8]. In certain situations, task conflicts can be beneficial, but generally they should be avoided by identifying and preventing them.

There are several ways and methods to identify underlying task conflicts [6;9;10]:

- Find out whether people are working towards different goals;
- Spot unhealthy competition. Create an easy way for all members to raise problems to everyone’s awareness;
- Evaluate the clarity of roles. Create clear organizational structures and responsibilities;
- Monitor the deviations in the work flow;
- Communication does not seem to work and data is siloed. Open and active communication;
- Foster team spirit and individuals’ involvement;
- Clarify priorities and goals.

Identifying a task problem is definitely not easy. Things tend to get personal before the underlying task problem is identified. Team members might feel that their point of view is not understood long before the conflict emerges. The manager, the leader of the team or in best case all group members should actively monitor these most common sources and embodiments of task conflicts. In such a way, the existing problems can be easily identified.

Process Conflicts

Business Processes

Before investigating different definitions of the process conflict, we should define what processes are in the business context. One simple definition which embodies the previously discussed concept of ‘tasks’ can be as follows:

Business processes describe the production of goods or services as a set of local tasks and inter-organization exchanges [7].

Nowadays, business processes are generally modelled in the form of workflows via the usage of notations, such as BPMN 2.0, UML Activity Diagrams, and Event-driven Process Chains. In practice, an initial business process model is usually defined, its elements change and evolve over time depending on the changes within the organization [7]. This approach to modelling business

processes is of interest for identifying the causes of process conflicts.

3 DEFINITIONS OF PROCESS CONFLICTS AND COMPARISON WITH TASK CONFLICTS

Contradictory to our initial expectations, our initial queries for finding relevant literature did not result in anything useful to report our findings. Thus, we have read the parts of the related papers dedicated to theoretical foundation of the current research, and backtracked the older publications mainly written by [11].

We have discovered that [11] from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania has pioneered the research in this field. She suggests the following definition of process conflicts: It [Process Conflict] is defined as an awareness of controversies about aspects of how task accomplishment will proceed. More specifically, process conflict pertains to issues of duty and resource delegation such as who should do what or how much should one get. For example, when group members disagree about whose responsibility it is to complete a specific duty, they are experiencing process conflict [11;12].

It is interesting how this definition overlaps with the definition of task conflict by [7]. To make their point clear, [12] draw the line between these two concepts:

- disagreements about task content are considered as task conflicts, and
- disagreements about task process are process conflicts.

Some research also features some repetitive definitions:

Process Conflict refers to over how work gets done. Low level of process conflict is one of the functional conflicts that are constructive and support the goals of the work group and improve group performance [12].

A limited number of definitions we could find about process conflicts generally view them as the conflict within a group. We do not fully agree that process conflicts are limited to intra-group conflicts only, since our practical experience demonstrates that process conflicts at organizations occur not only in cross-functional teams, but also between company's functional departments

Models of Conflict Management

Conflict management models may be considered from various perspectives. They have been actively discussed from the management point of view since the 1950's. The following researchers may be mentioned among the most frequently quoted authors: Blake and Mouton (1964), Thomas (1976) and Pruitt (1983), Khun and Poole (2000), DeChurch and Marks (2001), Rahim (2002), Renner (2007) and many other. Normally conflict management models are classified into two major groups: early conflict management models (also including preventive measures) and conflict management models. Since any conflict involves people, in most cases three conflict situations (three orientations to conflict) are considered: lose-lose, win-lose, and win-win. The Conflict Resolution Model developed by the Australian psychologists is referred to in the literature most frequently, however, conflict prevention is the best strategy.

[12] illustrate one of the major causes reflecting on informational diversity. For example, a group member with an engineering background will probably want to proceed in a given situation differently (in terms of how to identify potential courses of action and choosing among them) than a group member with a marketing or accounting background. In their research paper, [12] analyze diversity inside workgroups considering personal backgrounds of the individuals.

As far as the general flow of processes within a company across its departments is concerned, one of the ways to identify and

prevent process conflict is by diagnosing flaws in the existing process chains through re-mapping of the Business Process Modeling and Notation (BPMN) tools by business process designers. For example, [7] in their research paper present a web-based application (VBPMN) that allows checking the evolution of business processes and receiving informative feedback in case of errors.

Contrary to our previous statement, we also experienced that process conflicts occur when the department or a person responsible for processes and standards tries to interfere and promote the functioning of the workflows by setting up redundant formalities. Even though the goal in such cases is to enable transparency and facilitate the workflows, for the departments and functions working under high level of uncertainty, complexity, and tight deadlines, a more general definition of processes and deadlines is likely to enable more flexibility, shorter reaction time and consequently, higher productivity [7].

4. CONCLUSIONS

It is absolutely clear that conflict management is one of the most important managerial functions, but so far it has not been analyzed in sufficient detail with regard to conflict prevention measures. There is a range different models that have been developed for conflict management at organizations, however, they are mainly concerned with conflict resolution. At the same time, the author wants to emphasize that in order to improve business processes it is necessary to develop mechanisms/tools and techniques for precautionary conflict identification and prevention.

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