MANAGING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS AT WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal conflicts at the workplace are very common and inevitable. Employees differ in terms of their personality, background, expectations from the job, attitude and behaviour. In today's time when people of different cultures belonging to different states or countries are working together, the chances of conflicts increases even more. The interpersonal conflicts among members creates anxiety and stress in the work environment, which if not addressed timely and properly, leads to many negative consequences. Absenteeism, lower productivity, increased wastages, non cooperation, unionization and litigations are some of the negative results of interpersonal conflicts at workplace. This paper is the study of the meaning types and sources of interpersonal conflict and the techniques of resolving interpersonal conflicts adopted by HR.

Key Words: Interpersonal conflict, Sources of interpersonal conflicts, Conflict management, Conflict resolution strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is inherent in all workplace and context. It occurs regularly in everyday situations and can vary in level and intensity. When people work together, there will inevitably be disagreements. Some of these disagreements are minor, but some of them can turn into major conflicts. If conflicts are not resolved they can lead to long term tensions and unhappiness amongst employees which considerably influences the organisational as well as individual performance.

It is estimated that 30% of a manager's time is spent dealing with conflict and litigations (By John Ford). Proper Conflict Management minimises the negative consequences of workplace conflicts and strengthens the interpersonal & organisational relationships.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper is a literature review to examine the following concepts:

● Meaning and Types of Interpersonal Conflicts
● Sources of Interpersonal Conflicts
● Conflict Management " Positive and Negative aspects"
● Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Strategies

MEANING AND TYPES:

The term conflict means different things to different persons. It may be regarded as disagreement or hostility between individuals or groups in the organisation. It generally connotes the clash between the ideas , goals & actions of the individuals.

Newstrom and Davis have defined conflict as

"Conflict is any situation in which two or more parties feel themselves in opposition. It is an interpersonal process that arises from disagreements over the goals or the methods to accomplish these goals "

Conflict occurs at various levels. It may occur within an individual, between individuals, within a group and between groups. Conflict between two or more persons is called interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflicts are found between individuals (Lamb 2008). As per Wood et el.,(2003) interpersonal conflict is a conflict that arises between two or more individuals working together in clusters or teams. Individual differences create interpersonal conflicts. Whenever two or more persons interact with each other there are chances that interpersonal conflict may arise because each person is different in terms of personality, perception, values & attitudes. Interpersonal conflict is stressor that affect organizational outcomes (Keenan & Newton,1985) along with organizational outcomes, interpersonal conflict can have negative effects on employees attitudes and behaviour (Forne,2000; Spector & Jex, 1998). Conflict has serious implications on effectiveness, behaviour and performance of the individuals or groups. Therefore it is very important for the managers to understand what exactly are the reasons for conflict and how it can be handled or resolved.

Type of Interpersonal Conflicts:

Most of the studies show that interpersonal conflict is the most common type of workplace conflict (Dana,2001).Following are some types of interpersonal conflicts which are usually found at the workplaces:

1. Vertical Conflict

This is mostly in the form of superior -subordinate relationships. Superior attempts to control the behaviour of the subordinates and subordinates resist such control resulting in vertical conflicts.

2. Horizontal Conflict

This is among the persons at the same hierarchical level in the same function or in different functions.

3. Substantive Conflict

It happens when one person fundamentally disagrees with another person or group in the course of doing business/job. This is a disagreement of opinion and thought.

4. Emotional Conflict

It intrudes into the feeling of a situation, such as anger, mistrust, dislike, fear, resentment and the like. This is commonly called as "Clash of personalities" (Schermerhorn, Hunt, Osborn, 2002, Pg 127). This type of conflict can sometimes be more draining, and distracts from the more important work that needs to be done. Usually this happens between co-workers who may not like one another, or with customers who are not dealt with properly.

SOURCES OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS

Conflict can arise from a variety of sources. They are mainly caused by individual dissimilarities including behaviour, personality, culture, approaches, values, opinions and others (Elsayed-Elkhouly,1996).Some of the important sources are discussed below.

1. Personality

Each individual is different in terms of his personality which again depends on many factors like upbringing, cultural and family traditions, socialisation process, education and values.

2. Information Deficiency

If wrong information or incomplete information is communicated it may create conflict among the related individuals. But it may be corrected easily by communicating the right message. Sometimes physical separation and language can create distortions in messages and in turn lead to conflict.

3. Role Ambiguity

Sometimes an individual performs more than one role in an organisation when expectations of the different roles clash with each other, the individual tends to be in a role conflict. Role conflict also arises due to the known specifications of role assigned to an individual in the organisation structure.

4. Environmental Stress

In case of scares or shrinking resources, downsizing or competitive pressures, individuals consider each other as their competitors or rivals. This clash of interest leads to conflicts.

Aspects of Conflicts

Conflict is inevitable in organisations. It affects the organisation in both ways positively and negatively. Viewed from these angles conflicts are characterised as functional and dysfunctional conflicts.

Functional Conflicts

Conflict is not always harmful. Conflicts that support the goal of the group and improve its performance are known as functional conflicts. A moderate degree of conflicts is a necessary condition for creativity or improvement. These are also called constructive conflicts.

Following are some of the positive or functional aspects of conflicts

- Conflict leads to new ideas, creativity and innovation

- It creates healthy competition among the individuals

- In case of intergroup conflicts it brings group cohesiveness

- It provides more challenging work environment

- It promotes change

- It leads to high quality decisions

Dysfunctional Conflicts

The destructive forms of conflicts that hinder group performance are called dysfunctional conflicts. Following consequences may arise due to dysfunctional conflicts.

- High tensions among employees

- Discontentment in employees

- Mistrust

- Goal Displacement

- Resignation of Personnel

- Lockouts & Strikes

- Resistance to Change

- Disobedience

All these factors play a negative role in the growth and environment of the organisation.

Recent Example of Conflict: Violence at Maruti Suzuki Manesar Plant

Maruti Udyog Limited was established as a joint venture between Indian Government and Suzuki Motors Corporation, a Japanese company in 1981. The company has an excellent success story, but recently an unfortunate incident happened in its new plant at Manesar

June 2011 : 13 Days strike by the workers

Workers went on 13 days strike citing the following reasons

- Formation of a new workers union

- Bad working conditions

- Heavy work pressures

- Maximum workers on contract basis

- Physical and Verbal abuse

- Poor wage hikes

July 2012 : Violence at Manesar Plant

The yearlong industrial conflict resulted in a clash between workers and the management resulting in one dead and forty injured (as /newspapers). This incident was a result of negligence to resolve the long pending issues which was triggered by heated argument between a permanent worker and his supervisor. The demonstrating workers were demanding the reinstatement of Jiya Lal, a permanent worker after an argument with his floor supervisor. Lal is a Dalit and alleged that he had reacted when the supervisor made a derogatory castiest remark against him. The workers were protesting that the management had been unfair suspending Lal from service while nearly sending the supervisor home on leave for a few days.

*This is an Example of **Interpersonal Conflict** not resolved timely and properly and which was actually a warning sign for more serious consequences resulting in a loss of reputation and finance for the company.*

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT:

To avoid such incidents as happened in Maruti Suzuki Plant, and to get the maximum efficiency the management has to develop such ways which ensures the minimisation of negative aspects.

If proper conflict management system is followed it :

▪ Saves function and time resources of the organisation.

▪ Enhances reputation of the business.

▪ Enhances protection of Investment.

▪ Harmonisation of business and social relations.

Studies have shown that the use of effective conflict management programmes prevents almost 99% of all disputes from escalating into time consuming and costly litigation.

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

Recognizing the sources of conflict in any organization is the main step in the development of conflict resolution mechanisms (Robbins and Judge, 2008; Rahim, 2002, Elmagri, M.I. and Eaton, D., 2011). Conflict happens in every organisation and each organisation handles it differently depending upon various factors. There are mainly five ways or styles to manage conflicts

1) Avoiding

In certain situations it may be appropriate to avoid a conflict. It is a deliberate   decision to side step a conflicting issue, postpone addressing it till later or withdraw from a conflicting situation. However researches show that overuse of this style results in negative evaluation from others in the workplace.

2) Accommodating

In this style one party is willing to self sacrifice in the interest of the other party. Over reliance on accommodating has its dangers. If managers constantly defer to others, others may lose respect for him. In addition such managers may become frustrated as their own needs are never met.

3) Forcing

This style is characterised by high assertion and low cooperation. In this style one tries to meet one's goals at another party's expanse.

4) Compromising

It is intermediate on both the assertive and cooperative side. Each party tries to give up something to reach a solution to the conflict. A typical "give and take" policy dominates the behaviour of the conflicting parties. It becomes an effective style when efforts towards collaboration have failed.

5) Collaborating

It involves the attempts to satisfy the needs of both the parties. This is based on "win-win" style. In this style a creative solution usually emerges because of the joint efforts of both the parties who are keen on both gaining from the situation without hurting the other.

SOME GUIDELINES

Some simple guidelines may be used by the managers to effectively deal with the destructive workplace disputes

● Analyse the situation

● Choose a management style that fits the situation

● Identify the source of conflict

● Think strategically about conflict rather than react blindly to it.

● Take control of conflicts rather than be controlled by them

● Negotiate, solution to conflicts, rather than fight

● Focus on the task and not on the personalities.

● Express yourself without accusation, sarcasm or hostility.

● Address conflict in a timely way.

● Listen to both sides of arguments empathically.

● Predict a problem situation long before it reaches the crisis stage.

● Change organisational culture to make healthy communication the norm, rather than commonplace dysfunctional "crazy making" behaviour.

● Modal the attitude and behaviour, you want your employees to immolate.

CONCLUSION

Conflicts can occur at any organisation where people of varied personalities and backgrounds work together. With the emergence of diverse workplaces, increased use of technology , change in methods and organizational structures and cultures, the possibility of interpersonal conflicts is increasing manifold .However as per many experts not all types of conflicts are harmful. Moderate level of functional conflicts are good for the organizational effectiveness as they bring in creativity and improvement in procedures and operations. But dysfunctional conflicts are not viewed in good sense due to their negative and disastrous consequences. Unresolved conflicts can create emotional and physical stress for the workers as well as managers. They may escalate into larger issues causing damage to the reputation of the organisation. Whereas manageable and within limits interpersonal conflicts leads to improvement in employees performance, keeps them motivated , makes them loyal, reduces workers' compensation claims and litigation costs. This highlights the importance of developing and implementing good and effective interpersonal conflicts resolution strategies. The HR should develop such mechanisms that small workplace tensions among the staff members may be detected early before they turn into bigger problems.

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