**Conflict management**

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It was an interesting experience to deliver a few sessions on conflict management to the district level leadership of an organisation where everyone was convinced that conflicts are a real hindrance in progress but most of them were a little inflexible to modify their existing organisational culture. It is a proven fact that conflicts significantly cost organisations, both in terms of financial losses and excessive engagements of leadership for the resolution of conflicts. According to studies, the cost of conflicts for the US has been estimated at 350 billion US dollars, for the UK around 66 billion US dollars and 232 billion US dollars for Japan. In terms of time spent for conflict resolution, studies suggest that managers spent almost one quarter of their official time in resolving and mitigating conflicts while senior management may spend up to 80 percent of their time in addressing conflicts. Besides the monetary cost, conflict leads to several workplace issues such as loss of productivity, absenteeism, withdrawal of people, arbitration and healthcare.
Probably the most important element in conflict management is awareness about the causes of conflict. There are an array of reasons, from misunderstandings to conflicting goals which result in conflicts in an organisation. We can all conveniently comprehend misinterpretations, miscalculations and personal differences. The lack of role clarification and jurisdictional ambiguities are technical aspects which need specific interventions from the management to avoid day-to-day conflicts in organisations. Threats to status and status inconsistencies are psychodynamic in nature, and thus vary from one individual to another. Communication problems have to be addressed by the individual through continuous focus on different modes and means of the modern-day communication landscape. Lack of performance standards and conflicting goals indicate organisational inability to mobilise available resources and channelise human potential to achieve organisational objectives. It is a proven fact that any organisation without SMART objectives cannot realise success. Only measurable and time bound attainable objectives can facilitate organisational members to direct their efforts towards the destination. An ambiguous objective will allow people to remain in their comfort zone, which is quite natural; therefore organisations need to spend reasonable time to crystalise their objectives for convenient comprehension of all organisational members and appropriate performance appraisals along with historical analysis: otherwise people will conveniently hide behind their purposely articulated paradigms.
There are numerous myths surrounding conflicts in organisational settings e.g. ‘harmony is normal while conflict is abnormal’, but in reality conflict is an inevitable and normal part of enduring human relationships. Probably it is the conflict which exposes the inner feelings of people about their environment and people surrounding them, which can result in building new bonds and strengthening existing connections, if managed appropriately. Another myth about conflict is that ‘conflict should never be escalated’, but in reality, sometimes productive management requires that the conflict be made larger so it can be fully addressed. That managing a conflict should be orderly and polite is also a myth, in reality overly nice communication during conflicts can result in an insincere exchange. Productive conflict management is often disorderly, chaotic, and confusing because during conflict, usually uncertainty prevails and often situations demand wholehearted endeavours to cope with any emerging condition.
Potential opposition or incompatibility is the first step in the conflict process in the presence of some conditions that create opportunities for conflict to develop, such as, communication gap, work design (content), work structure (groups of co-workers, their qualifications & abilities etc.) and personal variables e.g. authoritarianism & dogmatism etc. Cognition and personalisation is the second stage in the evolution of conflict, which is considered as the felt level when individuals become emotionally involved and parties experience anxiety, tension or hostility, here parties decide what the conflict is about and emotions play a major role in shaping perceptions. Stage three in the evolution of conflict is analysing intentions. Intentions are decisions to act in each way, intentions intervene between people’s perception and emotions and their explicit behaviour. These intentions lead to a future course of actions after perceiving and personalising the conflict. Behaviour forms stage four in conflict evolution when conflict is visibly evident. Specific behaviour towards the conflict is exhibited, statements are made, actions are taken, and reactions are recorded to register personal opinion about the conflict. These behaviours at this stage are usually open attempts to implement each party’s intentions.
There is always an outcome of a conflict either positive or negative. In case of functional outcome there is an improvement in the performance while dysfunctional outcome hinders group’s performance. Conflict is constructive when it improves the quality of decisions, stimulates creativity & innovations, and encourages interest & curiosity among group members. Conflict is dysfunctional when it breeds dissatisfaction, and can potentially lead to the destruction of the group.
We join organisations by our own choice irrespective of formal sector employment, informal sector engagement, development sector commitment, voluntary sector initiative or political binding. No one teams under coercion, but still we witness harsh behaviours, daily frictions, and individual incompatibilities, because we live in a human society and it is just normal to have prejudices, perceptions, offences, beliefs, and political, cultural & economic backgrounds which actually trigger conflicts. There are different approaches to handle conflicts in both personal and professional lives. Probably the most challenging approach is termed as ‘competing’ (I win, you lose) or sometimes referred as ‘forcing’ is an approach when conflict has vital implications for organisational operations, then leaders/managers take decisive actions in a swift manner to save interest of entire organisation including those who are part of a conflict. However, in any case, it certainly seems imposing and may be considered an unpopular measure. In my opinion, all other approaches certainly have a potential to inculcate cohesiveness in organisations if implemented prudently. Conflicts do arise among people when everyone is determined to lead his/her organisation to achieve set objectives but through different arrangements. In such situations ‘collaborating’ (I win, you win) or ‘problem solving’ approach can serve the best. An avoidance (no winners, no losers) on minor deviations to accommodate human errors is probably a good approach. Accommodating (I lose, you win) others during the conflict is essentially a daunting task when apparently one is an intruding side. Still there are examples of selflessness and accommodating faults of others in the workplace, but such instances are quite rare. When collective objectives take precedence, then conflicting parties do give up something for combined benefit, it is called ‘compromising’ (you bend, I bend) or ‘resolution’, it is probably the most suitable approach for the long-term benefit of conflicting parties and their organisations.