

## CONFLICT AND ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS

### Organizational Conflicts

#### Nature of Organizational Conflicts

**Conflict** refers to a situation that arises from incompatibilities and disagreements between two (2) parties over different areas such as achievement of goals, methods to be used on attaining goals, behavior differences, and even tone of voices. In cases where the conflicts originate from the attainment of goals and the methods used, the problem often lies with the uncertainties on roles, task interdependence, communication issues, unhealthy competition, and behavioral and personal issues (Newstrom, 2015; Medina, 2011).

#### Levels of Conflict

Conflict encompasses various levels (Newstrom, 2015; Medina, 2011):

- **Intrapersonal conflict.** This is a conflict that happens within an individual who is going through stress, personal frustrations, anxieties, and depressing situations. In some cases, there could be vague and overwhelming roles an individual is taking, causing him/her to get stressed on which role to prioritize.
- **Interpersonal conflict.** This conflict happens between two (2) or more individuals having disagreements on various areas. People have the natural inclination to protect their images. Hence, when there is an existing conflict, self-images, self-esteem, and reputation seem to be threatened. Several reasons may cause interpersonal conflict. It includes communication problems, incompatibilities of personalities, and perception differences.
- **Intergroup conflict.** This conflict involves various groups or departments in the organization. When this happens, communication, coordination, and integration of tasks become a challenge. Such conflict derives from different reasons such as opposing perceptions, loyalty to the group, and miscommunication.
- **Inter-organizational conflict.** This conflict happens between organizations. It is often pertained to rivalry and competition, specifically among organizations in the same industry as each organization wants to get ahead of the other.

#### Sources of Conflict

There are several sources of organizational conflict (Newstrom, 2015):

- **Organizational change.** It is a challenge to make all members of the organization accept changes. They might have varying perceptions on the decisions the organization will take and their corresponding possible outcomes, as well as the resources to utilize. This leads to conflict within the organization. As technology and economy develop, it is consequent that organization changes would also be constant.
- **Different sets of values.** Since people differ in personalities, background and experiences, they also have different sets of values. These affect their ways of making decisions possibly leading to conflicts. This might be difficult to resolve because values tend to make people become subjective rather than objective towards an issue.
- **Threat to status.** This becomes a problem when an individual who enjoys certain social status becomes threatened to maintain his/her self-image.
- **Opposing perceptions.** At times, people assume that they have the same perceptions as others. Frustrations and disappointments arise when the other party begins to express their contrasting perception, which then becomes a conflict.

- **Lack of trust.** Having trust on a colleague would mean having the capacity to rely on his/her words and actions. Conflicts arise when a person believes that the other person is not trustworthy.
- **Incivility.** Conflicts arise from acts of disrespect, unethical behavior, and lack of common courtesy derived from empathy, concern, and mutual respect. Incivility may be in various forms that range from rude greetings to selfishness.

### Stages of Conflict

Conflict has five (5) stages, which can be visualized in *Figure 1* (Robbins & Judge, 2018; Medina, 2011):

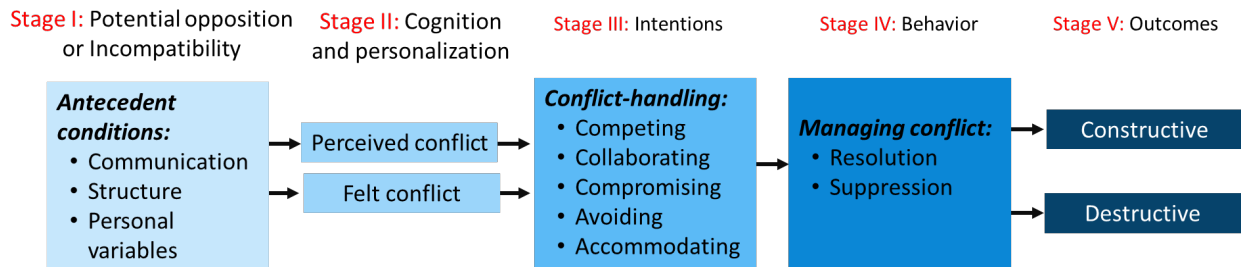


Figure 1. Stages of Conflict

Source: Essentials of Organizational Behavior (Global Edition), 201. p. 260

1. **Potential Opposition or Incompatibility.** *Antecedent conditions* refer to the sources of conflicts which could be rooted to problems on communication, organizational structure, and personal issues.
2. **Cognition and Personalization.** This is the stage where conflict is defined as either perceived or felt:
  - **Perceived conflict** – It refers to the recognition by one (1) or more parties of a situation that is potentially leading to the rise of conflict.
  - **Felt conflict** – This is the conflict wherein there is emotional involvement among the parties; as such, they experience tension, frustration, anxiety, or hostility.
3. **Intentions.** These refer to the “decisions to act in a given way” (Robbins & Judge, 2018). It is not always the case that the intentions would be manifested through the behavior. Consider these two (2) dimensions of intentions: *assertiveness*, or the degree of effort to satisfy one’s own cause or concerns, and *cooperativeness*, or the degree of effort to satisfy other’s cause or concerns.

Through these dimensions, five (5) conflict-handling intentions are identified:

- **Competing** – Assertive and uncooperative; the person is more concerned about his/her causes and disregarding the other party’s concerns.
  - **Collaborating** – Assertive and cooperative; it is when all involved parties desire to satisfy all concerns. They cooperate on a task that would lead to mutual benefits.
  - **Avoiding** – Unassertive and uncooperative; the person refuses to get involved with the conflict.
  - **Accommodating** – Unassertive and cooperative; the person is willing to prioritize satisfying the other party’s concerns.
  - **Compromising** – Mid-range of being both assertive and cooperative; the person is willing to meet halfway. Hence, both parties are not fully satisfied with the resolution.
4. **Behavior.** This stage is a dynamic process of interaction among parties involved. The behavior of one party would cause the other party to react. Ideally, intentions would be manifested through certain behaviors. When destructive conflicts arise, it is when techniques for conflict management are used.

There are two (2) ways by which conflict can be managed: conflict resolution or conflict suppression. Conflict resolution involves the following (Medina, 2011):

- **Problem-solving** – This is the identification of problems and solutions through open discussions among involved parties via a face-to-face meeting.
- **Superordinate goals** – In this technique, the organization creates a shared goal by which both involving parties would be required to cooperate in order to achieve it.
- **Expansion of resources** – The organization may expand its resources when there is an existing conflict among members because of scarcity.
- **Smoothing** – This involves downplaying on differences and focusing on commonalities among the involved parties.
- **Compromise** – This technique involves meeting halfway in the situation by having both parties give up a part of their demands to come up with a mutually beneficial resolution.
- **Alteration of structural variables** – It pertains to the restructuring of an organization to address the conflicting roles within the organization. This may involve the redesigning of organizational structure, job transfer, and creation of new positions.

Suppression is not the ideal way of managing conflict as it is only temporary. As conflict is suppressed, it eventually causes conflict for the same issues in the future. Conflict suppression may be in the following forms:

- **Avoidance** – This is the technique on which the parties ignore the existence of conflict and consequently refuse the ways of addressing and resolving it. It may also happen when the leaders refuse to take sides between conflicting parties.
- **Authoritative command** – This technique refers to the use of the leader's formal authority forces to implement his/her desired resolution in addressing the conflict within the organization regardless of the intentions of both parties.

5. **Outcomes.** The conflict can either be constructive or destructive depending on its outcomes (Medina, 2011):

- **Constructive conflict.** Also called *functional conflict*, this pertains to a healthy and beneficial disagreement between two (2) parties involved. The benefits for both parties also have positive effects on the organization. Constructive conflict can be beneficial in the following ways:
  - New ideas and learning sprout on the involved parties.
  - Self-awareness and sensitivity about others are developed.
  - Working relationships and morale are improved as disagreements are resolved.
  - Changes and innovation of procedures and processes are catalyzed.
  - The productivity of employees is increased.
- **Destructive conflict.** Also called *dysfunctional conflict*, this refers to the unhealthy and unhelpful disagreement between at least two (2) parties. Conflict is destructive if it causes a decrease in productivity and job satisfaction. When job dissatisfaction continues, it may lead to turnover, absenteeism and tardiness, theft, and even violence.

## Organizational Politics

**Organizational politics** pertains to “intentional behaviors that are used to enhance or protect a person's influence and self-interest while also inspiring confidence and trust by others (Newstrom, 2015, p.302).” People tend to engage in organizational politics when rewards, both in forms of money and promotion, become scarce. For instance, an organization tends to be highly political when there is a rumor of employee layoffs (Neck, Houghton, & Murray, 2017).

**Political skill** is the capacity to influence other people to promote one's own interests and goals. It is composed of four (4) key dimensions (Newstrom, 2015; Colquitt, Lepine, & Wesson, 2017):

1. **Social astuteness** – It is the discernment and perception of social interactions and other people's behavior in one's situation and environment.
2. **Interpersonal influence** – This refers to the adaptation of certain behaviors of people with the motive of obtaining information and desired response.
3. **Networking ability** – It pertains to the development of personal contacts or connections who are potential allies and supporters in the future.
4. **Apparent sincerity** – It is the expression of honest and genuine intentions towards others to earn trust.

When these dimensions are utilized in the organization, one can potentially earn a promotion, succeed in proposals, or become more visible in the company among other employees. Although organizational politics result in positive outcomes, it continues to have negative connotations due to mostly self-serving motives. A highly political organization often causes its employees to stress about the ambiguity of people's intentions and behaviors. Because of this, the members of the organization tend to have low job satisfaction, low productivity, high turnovers, and low organizational commitment. "A lack of employee participation in decision making has also been found to increase perception of organizational politics" (Colquitt et al., 2017, p. 423).

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