**Conflict Management**

Woods and King (2010) describe conflict as "differences of opinion", which are natural (p. 224).  The causes of conflict listed by Woods and King (2010) can all be broken down to the root of disagreeing.  This doesn't mean that the disagreement is a negative, just that there is not an agreement.

**What is conflict?**

The implication is that conflict is not always negative.  Conflict can be beneficial for the organization as well. Since conflict can be both rewarding and harmful, proper conflict management is necessary to be able to recognize the type of conflict, conflict resolution, and uses of conflict. Managers and leader tend to shy away from conflict or seek to minimize conflict because of how it is generally defined and perceived, but conflict can enable innovation and problem solving strategies within an organization.  Conflict is thus a constant force and needs to be managed so that benefits are realized, not the harm.

**Types of conflict?**

If imagining a conflict scenario, we are most likely picturing two people arguing with each other about some topic.  Our recent experience at home or work could influence exactly what we picture, whether the actors involved or the actual topic.  Conflict is not always between two people.  Conflict can be internal, between two people, within a group, between groups, or on a large scale between organizations.

**Internal Conflict**

Easily recognizable when conflict exist between or among multiple entities, a type of conflict that affects our decision making and not always apparent to those we interact with is internal conflict.  This is the result of differences of opinion that an individual has about a topic or focus.  The conflict could arise from opposing values, such as comparing your own values to the values of the organization, or when presented with a choice. Recalling our look at Victor Vroom, Vroom laid the groundwork for what would become Cognitive Dissonance Theory, or the presumption that individuals will adapt their behavior or make choices that reduce the feelings of discomfort that result from holding two conflicting beliefs.

An example to provide context can be found when a part-time employee is deciding whether or not to accept a supervisory role within an organization. Opportunities for advancement are generally perceived to be a positive attribute, but the selected employee may not see advancement within the organization as an opportunity or as a beneficial decision.  The student seeking to work for income without being burdened by responsibility and a service employee that prefers the income and flexibility of their current role serve as examples of workers that may not be interested in advancement within the organization.  Not advancing within the organization is representative of their opinion or attitude that they may construct their employment experience upon.  This attitude is the basis for consistency between what the person knows and what the person does.  To participate in development programs within the organization will create inconsistency, thus dissonance.

Festinger (1962) hypothesized that “when dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance” (p. 3). The individual will first seek to avoid situations that create conflict [dissonance].  The person will also attempt to reduce dissonance to achieve consonance, or consistency, through changing cognition, such as adapting the behavior or changing the environment (Festinger, 1962).  The exploration of how positive or negative alternatives affect internal conflict [dissonance] and possible working to achieve agreement [consonance] is relevant to the decision point that the participant must make, thus considering alternatives and outcomes. “The greater the number of positive attributes…the less magnitude the dissonance” (Brehm& Cohen, 1962, p.24).  Using the examples of choosing to accept a promotion, positive attributes could include greater income, preferential treatment, and more control of work environment. Negative attributes will have the opposite effect, thus increase dissonance.  Examples of negative attributes could be more responsibility, less time for school or family responsibilities, or negative perception of increased commitment to profession (if profession not primary choice).

As with the organization or within the group, the implication is that even internal conflict can bring about innovation and positive results through developing a satisfactory solution that reconciles opposing perspectives or courses of action.  The individual accounts for known and possibly unknown elements to make what would be the best decision for them under the given circumstances.  They adapt to their environment based on their goals and desirable outcomes. The internal conflict can also be used to illustrate conflict between individuals or with the group as the basis remains two opposing viewpoints.  Just as the individuals working through the conflict can lead to positive results, so can conflict between individuals, between the individual and the group, or between groups.

**Sources of conflict?**

Conflict can be rooted in several sources.  Organizational conflict can arise from differences in goals, resource competition, communication failure, misinterpretation of information, disagreement over performance standards, and organizational structure incongruities (Montana &Charnov, 2008).

**Differences in Goals**

As we can see in the earlier example about the promoted part-time employee, goals can conflict when two opposing viewpoints meet.  The opposing viewpoints could relate to different course of action that are being considered or relate to the perspective being used, such as level of management. A service manager, for example, may have a different viewpoint of the best policy to respond to a given situation than an area director might. Montana and Charnov (2008) describe two main reasons that cause this type of conflict.

1. Individual managers have their own goals that clash with or influence the timing or achievement of organizational goals.
2. There are inherent differences in how goals are perceived at each level of management, such as time frames or measuring performance.

**Resource Competition**

Competing for limited resources is also a common cause of conflict within an organization.  Every department or role within an organization is likely able to reasonably justify their claim on resources to do their job, but allocation falls to leadership to decide who gets what. The result is that competition is created to attain resources and conflict arises when those that did not receive resources feel they have been hindered or cheated out of what they need.

**Communication Failure and Misinterpretation of Information**

Conflict also arises from limited information or incomplete understanding of available information.  Whether referring to individuals or groups, entities involved in the conflict will have different perspectives and likely have different information that that they are basing their perspective on. Different departments in a resort can serve as an example of this source of conflict as guest services, entertainment, housekeeping, and maintenance will all view levels of occupancy, how to affect occupancy, and proposed projects differently based on how their departments are affected and based on the information they have related to the work they do.

**Disagreement over Performance Standards**

Similar to the example of the information causing conflict through how information is perceived or communicated, the same type of conflict can exist in relation to discontinuity in performance standards.  Performance standards or expectations that do not align, whether comparing departments within an organization or when assessing behavior, will create conflict through anxiety and stress as those involved either seek to create alignment or clash. Using a restaurant as an example, conflict is likely to be experienced if the waitstaff is assessed by how quickly their tables are eating the meal, meaning food is delivered within 20 minutes for example, but the kitchen staff is not held to the same standard of producing the meal in a time-frame enabling that performance standard.

**Organizational Structure Incongruities**

The last source of conflict goes back to our review of perceptions of power within an organization as well as the previous two sources above. Those with earned power may experience conflict with those having assigned power when making decisions or developing strategy as one may not fully acknowledge the other or followers align more with the one than the other.  Woods and King (2010) describe similar conditions as status struggles resulting from perceived inequities.  Determining who has control and the inability to relinquish control also affect this type of conflict.

**Root Cause?**

Knowing possible sources of conflict is only one step.  The general sources could be experienced in a variety of ways, so another step in accounting for and managing conflict is being able to determine the specific root cause of the conflict.  This step is often an opportunity for mangers and leaders in resolving conflict.  I am sure that we all or most have heard the comparison to the path of water. Water flows through the path of least resistance. The comparison illustrates that conflict management will at times flow the same way. Not only will it be easier to avoid the problem or simply say “because I said so”, but it is also easier to latch on to the first condition presented that *could* be the source of the problem. In this case, a symptom of the root cause is addressed, but the actual problem is not. Like any doctor will tell you, if you treat the symptoms, you can manage the care, but you will not cure the disease. I can keep cutting the weeds in my lawn, but they will grow back until I get to the roots.

An example could be two different employees that work in different roles required to interact with one another to complete a common task.  Because of their arguing, task completion is compromised because of slowed productivity as well as lowered integrity of the results.  Their supervisor has had enough and decides that the employee with higher seniority and better performance evaluations will remain in the role and the other will either be transferred or terminated.  The conflict is the constant arguing and the solution is removing one part of the problem from the environment.  After several weeks, the replacement employee and the senior employee shows signs of conflict and begin down the same path as before.  The assumption then is that the senior employee was causing the problems so they are reassigned.  With newer employees in both roles, the knowledge of the senior employee is removed and they quickly spiral into conflict.  After weeks of trying to resolve the problem, nothing has changed. Two new people are doing exactly what the previous two were.  The implication is that the conflict between the roles is only a symptom of a different issue.  The supervisor would need to explore all aspects of how those roles work together and the specific tasks to identify discrepancies that are affecting the interaction.  The starting point would be to know exactly what the argument is about.

As a rule, I challenge myself to ask “why” at least three times. If I have two employees that cannot agree, Why? They disagree over who should be doing what task, Why? They did not understand the plan and their roles, Why? There was not an effective check of understanding after the instructions were given. My resolution for this problem would be to assure that they have heard the instructions, understand the instructions, and check that their supervisor, or whoever assigned the tasks, knew to confirm understanding (more effectively). Naturally, this is an assumed path, but it demonstrates that what would be originally assumed to be a disagreement over performance standards or organizational structure was actually a failure of communication. If I had simply moved them or changed their duties to separate them, the problem is likely to persist and even more likely to spread as the issue of communication was never addressed.

**Resolution strategies**

Once the root cause of the conflict has been identified, the next step is how to resolve or properly manage it.  As stated previously, the natural reaction to resolve the conflict is to follow the easiest path, but that only works with if the leadership is able to ignore the conflict and the resolution of the conflict is not a vital to the organization.  This approach would be deemed avoidance, which can range from not giving any attention to the conflict to limited separation of conflicting parties to full separation, which these latter two approaches can be seen in the example exploring determining the root cause.  Woods and King (2010) show avoidance as having low assertiveness and low cooperativeness.  The approach could be used to provide a buffer in conflict and deciding a more suitable resolution, but will not address the root cause.

Another approach to conflict management is referred to as smoothing by Montana and Charnov (2008).  Smoothing, or creating peace through “smoothing over”, moves past merely avoiding the conflict and into recognizing a problem exists and needs to be addressed.  An issue is that smoothing is also more of a band aid that promotes healing on the surface, but will be ineffective for more internal issues.  Accommodating conflicting parties, for example, can allow the parties to work together, but the true nature of the conflict will continue to persist and runs the risk of reappearing or worsening.  Smoothing is a short term remedy.

A more aggressive form of resolution is power intervention, meaning a senior manager or leaders simply imposes their will and mandates the conflict ends.  This is the quickest method to resolve conflict and also reinforces the organizational power structure (Montana &Charnov, 2008), but it works like the previous two approaches in that it will likely not address the root cause and leave the conflict simmering, only temporarily resolved until conditions bring it back.   Anytime the conflict is merely placed on pause, the risk is that it will return and be more harmful.

Woods and King describe the next approach, compromise, as the best in many situations (2010). Compromise helps to sustain an ongoing relationship among the parties.  The approach attempts to satisfy everyone involved through addressing some element of their position.  A concern with using compromise is that only addressing a part of the issue favorably for involved parties leaves no party as fully satisfied.  They made a gain, but did not realize their full want or need.

The final approach for this lesson is confrontation.  Unlike the previous approaches, confrontation will address the root cause of the conflict when it used properly. Though it does address the root cause, it is also the most difficult to facilitate because all parties must be willing to accept confronting their issues and willing to listen to the others involved.  The result is that the approach will involve more emotion as conflicting parties are working through the process.  The key aspect of using the confrontation method is that organizational goals are used to frame the resolution.  The remedy and process of resolution is based on how well it correlates to organizational goals and not the goals of those involved.

**Strategy outline**(Montana &Charnov, 2008):

1. Avoidance
   1. Managers wish to avoid having to deal with the problem, sometimes in the belief that a problem avoided will simply “go away”
   2. Enables managers to avoid spending a lot of time on problems that may solve themselves
   3. Does not deal with underlying causes; allows managers to ignore issues vital to the organization.
2. Smoothing
   1. Managers wish to promote harmony in the organization
   2. Shows harmony in relations, surface peace between workers
   3. Does not deal with underlying causes; often creates the illusion of solving the problem
3. Dominance or Power Intervention
   1. Managers wish to resolve conflict quickly and maintain existing power structure
   2. Conflict is resolved in the quickest manner
   3. Does not deal with underlying causes; conflict is not actually resolved; creates tension related to dominance or interference.
4. Compromise
   1. Managers wish to satisfy at least part of each party’s position
   2. Each party receives something, creates a “win-win” dynamic
   3. Does not deal with underlying causes; “win-win” is not complete and leaves parties unsatisfied.
5. Confrontation
   1. Managers wish to address the root cause of the conflict
   2. Management deals with the causes of the conflict and arrives at a workable solution that forces involved parties to reconcile their demands
   3. Has to be properly managed; managers can get caught up in addressing the root cause and ignore symptoms or repercussions.

**Conclusion**

Understandably, the term “conflict” invokes feelings of uneasiness and dread. The term is defined as “to come into collision or disagreement; be contradictory, at variance, or in opposition; clash” (Conflict, 2015), which gives good cause to want to avoid.  On the surface, conflict would seem to be counterproductive for the organization.  In some situations and conditions, it would be.  An argument between co-workers for example, will impede productivity and possibly affect the customer or the product depending on the environment and conditions of the argument.  However, a difference of opinion about a process or policy could lead to innovation, which would imply that conflict can be useful or positive for the organization.

Innovation and development is sustained by conflict. A group that has no conflict will stagnate, whether or not they can recognize it. For some of you military types, you may recognize the use of conflict for development from within training, particularly in initial entry. Conflict is used to develop the group and the group leaders through internal conflict and through enabling group cohesion through combined effort to overcome a problem.

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