Collaborating as an Effective Strategy for Conflict Management in the Organization

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A b s t r a c t

Conflict is part of every organization, formal or informal. Conflict occurs when employees with different backgrounds and priorities work together. There are expressed in numerous ways such as insults, noncooperation, bullying, and anger. Its causes can range from personality clashes and misunderstood communication to organizational mismanagement. There are various styles of conflict management. This study aims to examine the concepts of conflict and conflict management strategies in the organization. The paper is descriptive and qualitative in nature. Data are obtained primarily through secondary sources and analyzed through content analysis. The study leverages Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann's (2015), model of conflict styles and identifies collaborating as one of the most effective strategies of conflict management in the organization.

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Background to the Study
Conflict is inherent in every human relationship. In both formal and informal organizations where humans work together, conflict is inevitable. Conflict is something natural which occurs within every organization. It is considered that conflict should be accepted, and if properly managed, the conflict eventually can lead to better work performance. Conflicts occur when individuals have varied interests, opinions, and thought processes and are just not willing to compromise with each other.

The disagreement which occurs when goals, interests, or values of various individuals or groups are incompatible and those people block each other's efforts for accomplishing goals is called organizational conflict. More so, conflict exists if a party is in disagreement with another (it could be internal or external) because one does not accept or agree with the other. Therefore, there is a level of interaction or point of contact for conflict to take its course. However, proper identification and management of conflict can lead to a series of positive effects like the stimulation of creativity and innovation within the company, stimulation of changes towards work quality improvement, reduction of incurred tensions, etc (Željko, Ivana, Davo and Strossmayer, 2008).

The process of conflict management, therefore, becomes a means of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of the conflict. One of the best ways to limit the negative aspects of conflict in the organization is through collaboration. According to Sampson (2019), "collaboration involves an attempt to work with the other people to find a win-win solution to the problem at hand - the one that most satisfies the concerns of both parties. The approach sees conflict resolution as an opportunity to come to a mutually beneficial result". The aim is to enhance learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness of performance in an organizational setting. This study seeks to examine the concepts of conflict and conflict management strategies in the organization. Assessing extant literature on the strategies, the study identifies collaborating as an effective strategy for conflict management in the organization. The study leverages Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann's (2015), model of conflict styles.

The concept of conflict and conflict management in the organization
Conflicts are classified in various ways. According to Robbins (1992), it is of high importance to distinguish between functional and dysfunctional conflicts. He explained that functional conflicts are the ones that tend to encourage accomplishing an organization's goals and improvement of work performance, whereas conflicts which aggravate accomplishing goals are destructive or dysfunctional. It is rather polemical how to estimate which conflicts are functional and which are dysfunctional.

A survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that four in 10 UK employees reported having experienced some form of interpersonal conflict at work in the last year. Most of that conflict is between an employee and his or her line manager. The survey also found that employees are more likely to report that they have experienced conflict with a staff member who is more senior to them (SHRM survey,

2021). According to an SHRM survey, compared to previous years, 44 percent of HR professionals report intensified political volatility at work in 2020. Experts offer several causes of workplace conflict, including:

1. Personality differences.
2. Workplace behaviors are regarded by some co-workers as irritating.
3. Unmet needs in the workplace.
4. Perceived inequities of resources.
5. Unclarified roles in the workplace.
6. Competing job duties or poor implementation of a job description—for example, placing a nonsupervisory employee in an unofficial position of "supervising" another employee.
7. A systemic circumstance such as a workforce slowdown, a merger or acquisition, or a reduction in force.
8. Mismanagement of organizational change and transition.
9. Poor communication, including misunderstood remarks and comments taken out of context.
10. Differences over work methods or goals or differences in perspectives are attributable to age, sex, or upbringing (SHRM survey, 2021).

The survey further reiterates that "employers can manage workplace conflict by creating an organizational culture designed to preclude conflict as much as possible and by dealing promptly and equitably with conflict that employees cannot resolve among themselves" (SHRM survey, 2021). To manage conflict, employers should consider the following:

1. Make certain that policies and communication are clear and consistent, and make the rationale for decisions transparent.
2. Ensure that all employees—not just managers—are accountable for resolving conflict.
3. Do not ignore conflict, and do not avoid taking steps to prevent it.
4. Seek to understand the underlying emotions of the employees in conflict.
5. Keep in mind that approaches to resolving conflict may depend on the circumstances of the conflict (SHRM survey, 2021).

There are various stages of conflict in the organization. Robert (1992) identified four stages as shown below,

1. The latent stage is a stage in which certain characteristics, like communication, structure, and personal variables, can lead to conflict.
2. The cognition and personalization stage represents the outcome of the impact of first phase factors.
3. Conflict manifestation stage. There is hostile behavior among participants in the conflict and we say there comes to the so-called open disagreement.
4. Conflict outcome stage, deals with further relationship development of the participants in the conflict and the consequences of conflict.

Conflict management is the practice of being able to identify and handle conflicts sensibly, fairly, and efficiently. Also, conflict management involves a process by which disputes are resolved, where negative results are minimized and positive results are prioritized. The management of conflict in the organization involves usi=ng different tactics depending on the situation, negotiation, and creative thinking. With properly managed conflict, an organization can minimize interpersonal issues, enhance client satisfaction, and produce better outcomes.

According to Steve (2022), "conflict management is the approach and strategies geared towards achieving a positive outcome and resolution amongst the parties involved in matters relating to conflicts. These strategies and approaches are dependent on the type of conflict that exist, organizations or institutions involved". He added, "It could be a systematic or unordered method that is task-specific, research-oriented, and requires proper attention" (Steve, 2022). Conflict management plays a very important role at workplaces as it prevents unnecessary fights and makes offices a better place to work. Some of the advantages are as follows:

a) Conflict management goes a long way in strengthening the bond among the employees and half of the problems automatically disappear

b) Conflict management helps to find a middle way, an alternative to any problem, and successful implementation of the idea.

c) Conflict management is very important because it is always wise to prevent a fight in the first place rather than facing its negative consequences. Stress disappears, people feel motivated, happy and the world becomes a much better place to stay as a result of conflict management.

d) Conflict management reduces tensions and employees feel motivated to give their level best to the organizations.

Approaches and Styles of Conflict Management
There are various approaches to conflict management. This means that management can take a variety of actions depending on the situations, parties to conflicts, issues to conflicts, and the organizational resources available. The techniques and ideas used depends on the type of conflict that needs managing – researchers differentiate between affective (relational) and substantive (performance, process, or task-specific) conflict, as well as inter-organizational conflict (between two or more businesses) and Intra organizational (conflict within organizations) (Khun and Poole, 2000; Rahim, 2002; Khushboom, 2021).

Khushboo (2021), identified two approaches for managing organizational conflict:
(i) **Preventive measures**
He explained that some preventive measures that management can take to manage organizational conflicts include defining the common goal of the organization, reducing interdependence among employees, reduction in shared scarce resources, and rather adopting a means of increasing the resources so that each unit is independent in using them. Other measures are promoting effective work coordination and communication, and developing effective employee relationships in the organization.

(ii) **Curative measures**
The curative measures include the resolution of conflicts when they take place and become dysfunctional in the organization; what are the different conflict resolution modes? And how can the manager know which type of conflict resolution style should be adopted under what kinds of circumstances?

In addressing these concerns, Thomas (1995), offered a contingency approach to resolving conflicts in the organization. Khushboo (2021), presented an example as captured by Thomas (1995). "If two groups or parties X and Y experience conflict, each could be more concerned about themselves or they could experience more concern for the other. When concern for the self is very low, they could be very unassertive and if concern for the self is high, they could be very assertive. If their concern for the other is low they would tend to be uncooperative, and if it is high, they would be very cooperative". This approach deals with human behavior in the organization.

Khun and Poole (2000), classified approaches as either distributive or integrative, the former focused on distributing a fixed number of positive outcomes between warring parties, and the latter focused on integrating the opposing needs of the parties to create the best outcome for all involved. Rahim (2002), identified, among the literature, five common management approaches to conflict resolution: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising.

There are five common styles of handling conflicts. These styles can be mapped onto a grid that shows the varying degree of cooperation and assertiveness each style entails. Let us look at each in turn. Here are five conflict styles that a manager will follow according to Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann (2015):

Fig. 1
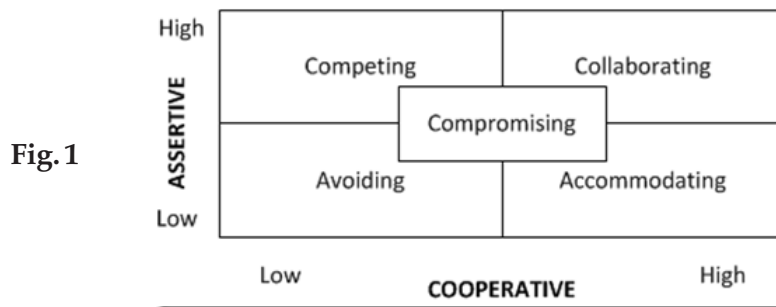
Source: Adapted directly from the works of Thomas and Kilmann (2015)

The styles are briefly explained thus:
1. Competing is assertive and uncooperative: an individual pursues his concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode in which you use whatever power seems appropriate to win your position—your ability to argue, your rank, or economic sanctions. Competing means "standing up for your rights," defending a position that you believe is correct, or simply trying to win.

2. Accommodating is unassertive and cooperative: the complete opposite of competing. When accommodating, the individual neglects his concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

3. Avoiding is unassertive and uncooperative: the person neither pursues his concerns nor those of the other individual. Thus, he does not deal with the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

4. Collaborating is both assertive and cooperative: the complete opposite of avoiding. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns. It means digging into an issue to pinpoint the underlying needs and wants of the two individuals (Abraham, 2004). Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights or trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

5. Compromising is moderate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness: the objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. It falls intermediate between competing and accommodating. Compromising gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding it but does not explore it in as much depth as collaborating. In some situations, compromising might mean splitting the difference between the two positions, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground solution (Sampson, 2019).

The work of Thomas and Kilmann (2015), has been adopted by several scholars and practitioners in explaining conflict management in an organization. However, the model has been criticized to illustrate general intentions and not necessarily specific behaviors that may enact in a conflict situation. For example, using the Avoiding conflict-handling mode, you may avoid a situation by physically evading the individual in question. Another option might include having verbal contact with the individual and stating that the conversation should be postponed until a later date. Notwithstanding, Thomas and Kilmann's (2015), model provides this study with a direction to develop a strategic framework in modern-day management, especially in addressing the challenges of conflict management.

Collaborating as an effective strategy for conflict management in the organization
The framework for conflict management in the organization is built on the collaborative style, one of the key elements of the Thomas and Kilmann (2015) model. Specifically, Thomas (2015) noted that the following benefits can be utilized in handling conflicts in the organization.

a. High-Quality Decisions: Leads to seeking inventive solutions that are better than each person's initial positions.
b. Learning and Communication: Aids communication and discovery through an open exchange of information.
c. Resolution and Commitment: This leads to both people working toward meeting all concerns, translating into both parties being committed to the decision.
d. Strengthening Relationships: Builds trust and respect by resolving problems in a relationship (Thomas, 2015).

He further added that collaborating solutions are often highly desirable but are only really feasible when a situation meets very specific criteria. More than any other mode it requires ample time, participants to have strong interpersonal skills and trust for each other while being open to new ideas and the issue itself needs to have integrative possibilities. If one or more of these factors is missing, then collaboration is not likely to be a likely pathway for one to take effectively (Thomas, 2015). Thomas recommends utilizing "we" language to help create a collaborative environment once the timing is figured out as it helps avoid blaming the other person. It puts the focus on solving a joint problem that can be solved together. One of the ways to put yourself in a mode to use "we" language is to picture the other person's positive concerns. It also helps to focus on spelling out the positive outcomes that you can both achieve by solving the current problem while emphasizing the specific concerns you think the other person has (Thomas, 2015) (Sampson, 2019).

The second and most important step in collaborating is identifying other individuals' underlying concerns. To do this successfully it is important to learn how to effectively focus on each person's concerns as opposed to their positions. The concerns in a conflict are what each person cares about and is inherently threatened by the conflict. Positions are the actions you propose to settle the specific conflict. If you jump to positions prematurely it can lead to a win-lose scenario based on disagreements over different positions where only one individual can win. By clarifying and sharing your underlying concern and then helping to clarify the other person's underlying concerns it can lead to a much better mutual understanding's situations. This, in turn, is much more likely to lead to a collaborative resolution (Thomas, 2015) (Sampson, 2019).

The study identifies collaborating conflict management as a "win-win" strategy, and perhaps most effective in restoring peace in the organization (Gray, 1989). In collaborating, there is compromise. Since conflict involves two or more persons, in which each wants something different, the key, therefore, is to determine the extent to which each party in the conflict is willing to compromise. To achieve a compromise, collaborating conflict management stresses the need for a mediator to listen to the wants, needs, fears, and concerns of all sides. This interaction and reasoning make all parties involved in the dispute feel valued and understood. The strategy fosters understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. More so, it sets the tone for future conflict resolutions, and it gives those involved the shared responsibility to resolve the problem.

Conclusion

The study sought to assess the concepts of conflict and conflict management strategies in the organization. It identified the meaning and various causes of conflict and approaches to conflict management in the organization. Using Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann's (2015) conflict style, collaborating is explained as one of the most effective strategies of conflict management in the organization. As an advantage to conflict management, collaborating is seen as a process that fosters interaction and reasoning among the conflicting parties. This brings about understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.

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