Bachelor of Commerce Programme

Organizational Behaviour

Group Behaviour

Conflict Process
LESSON – 19

CONFLICT PROCESS

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19.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

19.1 INTRODUCTION
The manner in which organizations view and treat inter-group conflict has changed measurably during the last three decades. There are two different views – traditional and contemporary views of inter-group conflict to deal with the conflicting situations. The old line, traditional approach views inter-group conflict is dysfunctional to the organization and should be avoided. This view emphasizes that conflict is caused by personality differences and a failure of leadership. Further, it reiterates that conflict is resolved by physical separation or the intervention by higher management levels. The contemporary approach views inter-group conflict as an inevitable consequence of organizational interactions, caused by primarily by the complexities of our organizational systems. Through such mechanisms, the solutions of conflict may help to bring about positive organizational change.

19.2 CONFLICT PROCESS
The conflict process can be categorized into five stages. They are as follows:

Stage I: Potential opposition or incompatibility:
This covers the present condition that creates opportunity for conflicts to arise. This may be one of the conditions responsible for the occurrence of conflict. The major sources of conflict can be further categorized as communication, structure and personal variables.
Communication: It is reported that word connotations, jargon, insufficient exchange of information and noise in the communication channel are all barriers to communication and potential antecedent conditions to conflict.
Structure: It is reported that the size and specialization act as forces to stimulate conflict. The larger the group size and the more specialized its activities, the greater the likihood
of conflict. The potential for conflict tend to be greatest when group members are younger and when turnover is high.

Personal variables: The evidence indicates that certain personality types such as highly authoritarian and dogmatic people who demonstrate low self-esteem lead to potential conflicts.

Stage II: Cognition and personalization:
Perception or sense making plays a major role in the resolving conflict. Conflict may either be perceived or felt in nature. Perceived conflict is defined as awareness by one or more parties of the existence of conditions that create opportunities for conflict to arise. Felt conflict is defined as emotional involvement in a conflict creating anxiety, tenseness, frustrations or hostility. Negative emotions have been found to produce over simplification of issues, reductions in trust, and negative interpretations of the other party’s behavior.

Stage III: Intentions:
Using two dimensions – cooperativeness (the degree to which one party attempts to satisfy the other party’s concerns) and assertiveness (the degree to which one party attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns) – five conflict handling intentions can be identified. There are as follows: i) competing (assertive and uncooperative), ii) collaborating (assertive and cooperative), iii) avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative), iv) accommodating (unassertive and cooperative) and v) compromising (mid-range on both assertiveness and cooperativeness).

Stage IV: Behavior:
All conflicts manifest in behavior somewhere along with continuum ranging from no conflict or minor conflict such as minor disagreements or misunderstanding, overt questioning or challenging of others, to annihilatory conflict such as threats and ultimatum, aggressive physical attacks or overt efforts to destroy the other party.

Stage V: Outcomes.
The outcomes of conflict may be functional or dysfunctional. Conflict is constructive when it improves the quality of decision, stimulates creativity and innovation, encourages interest and curiosity among group members, provides the medium through which problems can be aired and tensions released and fosters an environment of self-evaluation and change. The evidence suggest that conflict can improve the quality of decision making allowing all points particularly the ones that are unusual or held by a minority people. The dysfunctional consequences of conflict on a group or organization’s performance are generally well known. Among the more undesirable consequences are retarding of communication, reduction in group cohesiveness and subordination of group goals to the primacy of infighting between members. At the extreme, conflict can bring group functioning to a halt and potentially threaten the group’s survival.
19.3 TYPES OF CONFLICT
In organizations, conflicts can be interpersonal, intra-group, inter-group or intra-organizational in nature. Intra-organizational conflict encompasses vertical, horizontal, line-staff and role conflict.

Vertical Conflict:
It refers to conflicts that occur between individuals at different levels. Conflict between the superior and subordinate is an example of vertical conflict. Such conflicts could happen because of perceived transgression of psychological contract, inadequate or ineffective communication, selective perception, misperception, incongruence in goals, values, cognition, affect and behavior etc.

Horizontal Conflict:
It refers to tensions between employees or groups at the same hierarchical level. Horizontal conflict occurs because of interdependence among the parties concerned in the work situation or the common pooled resources shared. For example, sharing personal computers among the various departments is likely to produce tensions among the departments. Incompatibility of goal and time orientations often results in horizontal conflicts. Conflicts will take place between the units due to the misunderstanding and frustration experienced by both parties. Horizontal conflict increases as: i) functional interdependence increases among people or groups at the same level ii) more units depend on common resources that have to be shared raw materials and iii) the fewer the buffers or inventories for the resources shared.

Line and Staff Conflict:
It refers to the conflicts that arise between those who assist or act in an advisory capacity (staff) and those who have direct authority to create the products, process, and services of the organizing (line). Staff managers and line managers usually have different personality predispositions and goals and come from different backgrounds. Staff managers have specialized skills and expertise acquired through training and education and have greater technical knowledge which is intended to help the line manager who are basically money maker for the organization. Staff people serve as advisor for the line people in as much as they have the expertise to streamline methods and help in cost-cutting mechanisms. Line managers may feel that the staff people are unnecessarily interfering in their work by always telling them how to do their job and thrusting their ideas and methods. Staff people often get frustrated that the line people do not consider all the ideas put forth by them and thereby fail to benefit.

Role Conflict:
It arises because different people in the organization are expected to perform different task and pressures build up when the expectation of the members clash in several ways. There are two types of conflict.

i) Inter-sender role conflict: This occurs when different role senders (bosses) expect the individual to perform different things and these expectations and the messages conflict with each other
ii) Inter-role conflict: This occurs when role requirements associated with members in one group conflicts with role requirements stemming from members in another group.

**SOURCES OF INTER-GROUP CONFLICT:**

There are three basic sources of inter-group conflict: i) goal incompatibility, ii) decision-making requirements and iii) performance expectations.

**Goal incompatibility:**
It is defined as the lack of agreement concerning the direction of group activity and the criteria for evaluating task accomplishment, is the most frequently identified source for inter-group conflict. Two critical elements which contribute to goal incompatibility are: i) time and goal orientation and ii) barriers to goal accomplishment. Different time (short versus long term) and goal (techno-economic, market and scientific) orientation create a state of differentiation between two or more interacting groups. When two widely differing groups, such as manufacturing (short-term and techno-economic orientation) and research (long-term and scientific orientation) interacts, this state of time and goals orientation differentiating can act as a source of conflict. If goal attainment by one group is seen as preventing other groups from achieving their goals, barriers to goal accomplishment arise.

**Decision-making requirements:**
This concerns the particular requirements for decision-making used by each of the interacting groups. Two aspects that are related to decision-making requirements are i) degree of task uncertainty and ii) the availability of resources. Degree of task uncertainty: It refers to one of the basic characteristics of inter-group behavior. The nature of the particular task being performed by each of the interacting groups may require different amounts of information flow before a decision can be reached. The greater the task uncertainty inherent in each task, the greater the need for additional information. Availability of Resources: This causes conflict when there is a struggle between interacting groups for limited resources needed to accomplish their goals. An organization must divide limited financial, equipment and manpower resources among different groups in what they believe is the most efficient and equitable manner. This conflict situation can result in such negative consequences as withholding information, disruptive behavior, and similar dysfunctional activities that can adversely affect the organization's overall performance.

**Performance Expectations:**
The third source of inter-group conflict concerns the situation in which the activities or performance of one group affects the subsequent performance of other groups. For example, in hospitals, surgeons perform their function after the anesthesiologists have successfully performed their role; on assembly lines, tires are placed on automobiles after workers have installed the brakes etc.
Performance expectations in inter-group behavior are directly related to the type of interdependence existing between groups. The nature of the three types of interdependence are pooled, sequential, reciprocal pose a respectively potential for conflict between interacting groups. That is, as inter-group relations progress from pooled to reciprocal interdependence, there is an increasing dependence of one group on another to perform their particular task. When one group acts improperly or fails to meet the performance expectation of the other group, a potential conflict situation can arise. The potential for conflict is greatest with reciprocal interdependence due to the intensity of the interactions between groups.

19.4 CONFLICT MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

The various strategies for minimizing and resolving conflicts can be classified into five categories: i) Avoidance, ii) Accommodating, iii) Compromise, iv) Competition and v) Collaboration.

Avoidance:
This strategy involves a general disregard for the causes of the conflict and the person might diplomatically sidestep a conflicting issue, postpone addressing it till later, or withdraw physically or psychologically from a threatening situation. Avoiding mode is used when the individual is both unassertive and uncooperative – that is, the person has a very low concern for his own and his opponent’s needs. The individual follows the following three methods

i) Non-attention: The manager totally avoids or ignores the dysfunctional situation. Individuals tend to “look the other way” or disregard hostile action in hopes that the situation will resolve itself in time

ii) Physical separation: It involves moving conflicting groups physically apart from each other. The rationale is that if the groups cannot interact, conflict will diminish.

iii) Limited interaction: Groups are allowed to interact only on formal situations.

Avoidance style can be very beneficial under the following conditions:
- When the issue involved in the conflict is trivial,
- When more pressing issues are to be handled by the individual with a limited time frame.
- When one’s power is very low and there is no chance of satisfying one’s concern
- When more information is needed to make a good decision
- When someone else can resolve the conflict more effectively
- When you require time to regain more strength and look into different perspective

Accommodation:
Accommodation is a negotiation style where one party is willing to oblige or adapt to meet the needs of the other party. That party that accommodates loses and the other party
Accommodation is useful for negotiation on minor matters. The negotiation parties may not look for creative, new solutions. Accommodation might take the form of selfless generosity, or obeying another’s order rather unwillingly or giving in to another person’s point of view. In all these cases, the individual neglects his or her own concern to satisfy the concerns of their other party. There is an element of self-sacrifice.

Accommodating is useful in the following situations:
- Where the individual realizes that he or she is wrong
- By yielding, the person indicates to the other conflicting person that he is reasonable
- When an issue is much more important to the other person than to the individual
- By being accommodating, the person maintains good will and a cooperative relationship and also build social credits so that the other person gives in when a later issue becomes important to this individual.
- When preserving harmony and avoiding disruption are especially more important
- When continued competition would only damage one’s cause because one is outmatched and is losing.

**Competition:**
Competition occurs when one party negotiates to maximize its results at the expense of the other party’s needs. Competition leads to one party gaining the advantage over the other. One party wins while the other party loses. Although it is quick and can be used as counter against another person, this option usually produces a win-lose result. Competing is a power oriented mode of resolving tensions and one uses whatever power one has or can muster such skills, knowledge, abilities, rank being well-connected etc to win.

Competing is useful in the following situations:
- When the resources are limited and the system has to be pruned
- When quick and decisive action has to be taken during emergencies
- When one has to take unpopular decision such as enforcing discipline, unpopular rules, cost cutting measures
- When issues are vital to the survival of the company where one is aware of the right solutions.

Thus, while competing mode is useful in certain situations, people have to be careful not to surround themselves with yes-men and not to foster ignorance and duplicity in the system. People low on this mode can learn to use their power more and enhance their own as well as their organization’s effectiveness.

**Compromising:**
Compromise is the settlement of differences through concessions of one or both parties. In compromising, the party tries to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solutions with partially satisfies both parties, though neither is fully satisfied. A compromising stance addresses the issue without avoiding it, but does not explore the alternative in a way that would be completely satisfying to both parties as in the case of collaboration.
Compromising involves “splitting the difference”, exchanging concessions and seeking quick middle-ground solutions.

Compromising is a useful mode in the following situations:
- When the goals pursued are important, but not so important that it is worth potential disruptions by taking very assertive or unyielding positions.
- When two parties with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals such as in labor-management bargaining situations.
- When interim solutions are required till a more thorough and permanent solutions to the problem can be found.
- When solutions have to be arrived at under extreme time pressures.
- When both collaboration and competition fail to work effectively in resolving conflicts.

Thus, compromise as a conflict resolution mode might offer an easy way out, but is also likely to produce adverse overall effects for the organization if that is the main or only approach to conflict resolutions taken by managers in the organization.

**Collaboration:**
Collaboration occurs when people cooperate to produce a solution satisfactory to both. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with the other person to find solutions that would be satisfying to both parties. Here, the underlying concerns of both parties are explored in depth, the disagreements examine in detail and resolutions arrived at by combining the insights of both the parties. 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.

Collaboration is useful in the following situations:
- When two goals of the two parties are both too important to be compromised.
- When the commitment of both parties is essential for important projects to succeed.
- When the objectives of the parties are i) to learn ii) to merge insights that different people bring to a problem because of their backgrounds, training, discipline or orientations iii) to work through hard feelings which are interfering with a desired interpersonal relationship.

Thus, in collaborating, the intention of the parties is to solve the problem by clarifying differences rather than by accommodating various points of view. Examples include attempting to find win-win solutions that allow both parties’ goal to be completely achieved and seeking a conclusion that incorporates the valid insights of both parties.

### 19.5 Let Us Sum Up
In this unit, we have discussed about the conflict process and the five stages of conflict process. We have also learnt about the types of conflict.

### 19.6 Lesson-end Activities
1. State the different types of conflict.
2. Explain the strategies for resolving conflicts.