



## Conflict Management Practices for Diverse Workplaces

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### Abstract

*The goal of this paper is to look into current conflict management practices, research their compliance with the diverse workplace environment and analyze the effectiveness of conflict management procedures in the modern society based on workplace diversity and gender differences. The article reviews the literature on conflict management, evolution of main principles in the society, and differences in attitudes of conflict management techniques based on gender characteristics. We dwell upon conflict structures, types, and challenges that may occur at a diverse workplace when managing conflicts and speak about the role of managers in the diverse working environment. Subsequently, the paper suggests conflict management strategies for managers and employees.*

**Keywords:** Conflict Management, Conflict, Thomas-Kilman, Diversity, Gender.

### Introduction

Globalization has led to a higher migration of people seeking personal development, better market opportunities and new challenges. Today's workplace is a melting pot of diverse cultures which cause new grievances to the managers and has increased the requirements for conflict management techniques.

For the last two decades the perception of conflict has changed dramatically. It turned from authoritative approach with ignorance towards other parties to cultural awareness, value creation and skills in advocacy, listening and negotiation.

In classical approach any conflict was about negotiable interests. According to this point an individual should be socialized to resolve the conflict and might as well be punished for the lack of socialization or negotiation on the problem. While using the above stated approach, people came to realize that basic human needs cannot be negotiated as they provide security, personal identity and physiological satisfaction which may depend on socio-economic, gender, nationality, and other such traits (Birkhoff, 1998, para. 4).

Studies in labor relations and conflict management by Baur expanded “after the federal government passed collective bargaining legislation” (Birkhoff, 1998, para. 6). That gave start to diverse educational researches in the area of conflict management at workplace and new professions like mediators, who deal with conflict from a professional stand point.

Just as business plans help drive the success of a firm, researchers dwell upon strategies focused on individuals, values that drive their actions and understanding of other cultures to provide healthier work environments (Cavico, Orta, Muffler and Mujtaba, 2014). According to Korkindale, there are “points of difficult cultures” working together with “different assumptions, different values and beliefs” which make the workplace atmosphere more grueling (Corkindale, 2007, para 7).

Major equal employment opportunity acts such as Equal Pay Act (1963), Civil Rights Act (1964), Age Discrimination in Employment Act (1967), and Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) try to eliminate discrimination at workplace to reduce conflicts and present everyone’s values, abilities, beliefs and assumptions as equally important to provide a healthier diverse workplace environment. Notwithstanding that the laws emitted to fight discrimination exist, a lot depends on managers for effective implementation.

### **Role of Managers in Diverse Workplace Environment**

“Organizations are collections of people who work together and coordinate their actions to achieve a wide variety of goals or desired future outcomes” (Jones & George, 2014, p.5). A good manager should provide possibilities for his/her employees to coordinate and cooperate within the organization. It means that they need to plan, organize, lead and control human and other resources to achieve organizational goals effectively and efficiently with the fewer conflicts, no impact of “glass ceilings” on minority workers, and other obstacles caused by stress and limited resources (Jones & George, 2014, p.5).

Linkedin CEO, Jeff Weiner, in his interview to *Wall Street Journal* calls his conflict management strategy “managing compassionately” and suggests that it begins with the understanding that people see things differently and might not be equipped with the same information about the situation or issue (Weiner, 2011). In his understanding, the move from the classic strategy to being trusted and transparent in conflicts is vital in achieving high organizational performance.

Today’s managers know that cultural awareness is a key component to effectively managing work tension and to increase the efficiency of human resources. The essential manager’s tasks should be well executed and appropriately conveyed to the team. In the stage of planning the manager should choose the strategy, the appropriate organizational goals and courses of action, while keeping in mind the diversity and different values of employees based on decisions that maximize value over time for all stakeholders (Pohlman and Gardiner, 2000).

On the organizational stage, the manager ought to establish good relationships that allow people to work together without causing any tension or conflicts. It includes the next task of leading, motivating and coordinating team members to work together and understand each other.

The fourth stage is controlling function, which includes measuring and monitoring systems that help the manager to recognize any issues, conflicts, and evaluate performance (Jones & George, 2014).

Each stage of the above tasks requires attention and devotion of the manager to his/her organization and team to be able to achieve high efficiency and effectiveness and recognize conflict at its early stage.

## **Conflict Types**

A lot of people consider conflict as fighting, although it is important to realize that there are other sides of conflict. A conflict is often seen as a condition in which people experience a clash of opposing wishes, wants or even needs (Oxford Dictionary, 2010).

Conflict consists of several components. Number one is disagreement or differences in the position of the parties participating in the conflict. For the issue to emerge, a misunderstanding or discrepancy in opinions or needs should take place. A vivid example of disagreement can be points of view on job responsibilities from employees and supervisors. Sometimes managers can ask for additional tasks to be done as a part of organizational team performance which might be considered as inappropriate or out of line (Behrman, 2012, para. 2).

For the disagreement to arise parties of the conflict should be identified. They take different sides according to their beliefs, values and needs. Parties are the second component of any conflict, be it at a workplace or in social settings. Some managers might overlook the point that some parties of the conflict might be unaware that they participate, however it is important to recognize all of the parties to successfully solve issues.

Third constituent of any conflict is needs, beliefs, interests and concerns of the parties (Behrman, 2012). According to Maslow's pyramid of needs each human being possesses basic or physiological needs such as breathing, eating and sleeping, which determine his or her actions in life. The basic needs are accompanied by safety, love or belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943, pp. 81-86) which are required to be met for a human being to feel integrity and safety.

There are two types of values: terminal and instrumental. Terminal values are "lifelong goals and objectives that an individual seeks to achieve" (Jones & George, 2014, p. 73). They are comfortable life, a world at peace, family security, pleasure, self-respect, wisdom, social recognition, and others. Instrumental values are "a mode of conduct that an individual seeks to value" (Jones & George, 2014, p. 74). Examples of these values can be ambitions, capability, cleanliness, forgiveness, honesty, independence, and more. If parties of the conflict have opposite or different values, it will result in dissimilar sides and attitudes. "The more the employees' values are congruent with the organizational values, the more successful the individual will be and the more successful the organization will be" (Mujtaba, 2014, p. 3).

Organizational citizenship behavior can also be a reason for a conflict as an example of collapse of values and beliefs in the organization. Although they "are the behaviors that are not required of organizational members, but that contribute to and are necessary for organizational efficiency, effectiveness and competitive advantage" (Jones & George, 2014, p. 78), most employees try to follow the unwritten rules. If a single mother is not able to put longer hours or come to work at weekends to help her coworkers, she might be perceived in an unsatisfactory

way by her colleagues and cause an interpersonal conflict due to the differences between her and organizational beliefs and values.

Often employees feel underappreciated and underpaid which results in job dissatisfaction and conflict at their workplace or nationwide. When McDonalds' employees demanded 15 dollars per hour instead of 7.50 the whole US chain of the fast food restaurants faced a problem of workers and managers having a conflict.

Fourth component is the perceived threat which determines people's actions and their position in the conflict. In reality, perceived threat might not be the same as the real threat they confront, thus people's behavior could be modified inappropriately (Behrman, 2012).

Low emotional intelligence which is "the ability to understand and manage one's own moods and emotions and the moods and emotions of other people" (Jones & George, 2014, p. 82) might worsen the conflict as people could express some thoughts they never wished to be revealed or act "in a fit of temper" by, as in our example, threatening to walk away from jobs.

### **Organizational Conflict**

Organizational conflict is "the discord that arises when the goals, interests or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible and those individuals or groups block or thwart one another's attempts to achieve their objectives" (Jones & George, 2014, p. 532). The interference of another subjective opinion can cause diverse conflicts which are allocated into several types according to a place and number of participants:

1. Interpersonal conflict can easily degenerate into dysfunctional and lead to a disintegration of the team (Eisenhardt, 1997, para. 3).
2. Intragroup conflict arises within a group, team or department (Jones & George, 2014, p. 533).
3. Intergroup conflict with the allocation between groups, teams or departments with a possibility to grow into inter-organizational conflict.

### **Diverse Workplace Challenges**

The evolution of management theories from scientific by Frederick W. Taylor where employees were seen as objects of production, theory of bureaucracy by Max Webber with its systems, tasks and hierarchy to behavioral by Mary Parker Follet and value driven management theories, where people are considered to have needs and values that should be satisfied, lead to the realization that all people are different and have complex behaviors that require more sufficient management tactics (Jones & George, 2014, pp. 38-59).

We can define diversity as "acknowledging, understanding, accepting, valuing, and celebrating differences among people with respect to age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, and public assistance status" (Green, López, Wysocki, and Kepner, 2002, para. 4).

Workplace diversity implies focusing on the dissimilarities of people at a workplace. If well managed and organized, a diverse workplace can be a good force and provide an organization with productive partnership, creativity, wider possibility for recruitment and increased productivity. "Diversity is often interpreted to include dimensions which influence the identities and perspectives that people bring, such as profession, education, parental status and geographic location" (Woods & Borman, 2010, para. 1). Some team members can be focused on their children's education; others draw more attention to their cultural site, thus managers should motivate and organize their teams accordingly.

Like an organization, personal communication within or between teams should also be addressed with some informal education on cultural values, beliefs and sign language. As an example, the cultural difference in body language can lead to a misunderstanding among co-workers. Roy Chua, of Harvard Business School points out that making people of diverse cultures work together is extremely difficult as it can cause friction and collision of cultures (Scrupeter's notebook about Chua's paper, 2014, para. 5). On the other hand, Lundrigan, Tangsuvanich, Yu, Wu and Mujtaba state that "well mitigated differences can actually strengthen team cohesion" (Lundrigan, Tangsuvanich, Yu, Wu and Mujtaba, 2012, para. 3).

Well resolved conflict can give the organization benefits that were not expected. The example of this statement can be increased understanding among colleagues due to the discussion needed to resolve the conflict. The discussion could expand people's awareness on how to achieve goals and understanding without "undermining those of other people" (Mankletow & Carlson, 2005, para. 5). Another outcome of effective conflict resolution is increased group cohesion with mutual respect and "renewed faith in their ability to work together" (Mankletow & Carlson, 2005, para. 6) as well as improved self-knowledge and understanding their own values.

The supervisors' and managers' personal characteristics play an important role in the group cohesion and understanding. Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) framework "explains how personalities may influence organizational culture" as managers or founders "hire employees...whose personalities are similar to their own" (Jones & George, 2014, p. 85) which forms a special team cohesion and shared values and may cause to outcast the employees who are different in age, gender, origin or socio-economic factors.

## **Managing Diversity**

Managing diversity involves effective decision making. The work by March and Simon provided background for research to develop a step-by-step model of decision making (Jones & George, 2014, p. 204). According to the model managers need to recognize the need for decision, in our case, it is the possibility of existing or coming conflict, generate alternatives or choose a strategy for conflict management, assess the alternatives to recognize the advantages and disadvantages of each of them and choose the best alternative to deal with the situation. After implementing the alternative it is always important to collect feedback to evaluate the outcomes of chosen alternatives (Jones & George, 2014).

Thomas Roosevelt, a diversity consultant from Harvard University, once stated that "managing diversity is a comprehensive process for creating a work environment that includes everyone" (Geen, López, Wysocki, and Kepner, 2002, para. 12), thus managers should work on diversity awareness every day and encourage a change in employees' understanding of this concept.

As it was noted above, management commitment is important in tracing any conflicts or discrimination on diversity. "Top managers need to develop ethical values and performance or business oriented attitudes" to make the best use of their human resources (Jones & George, 2014, p. 153).

Accuracy of perception and diversity awareness give individuals opportunity to modify behaviors and attitudes which lead to increase diversity skills, better interaction and healthier work environment.

Fourth step is encouraging flexibility in "approaches and ways of doing things" (Jones & George, 2014, p. 155). Often we might hear encouragement to find better ways of performing

work which might mean that managers and colleagues are open to innovation and any creative ideas on styles of job organization.

Additionally managers should pay closer attention to the ways workers are evaluated based on objective performance indicators, and 360-degree appraisals (and sometimes subjective appraisals), although they might be inaccurate (Jones & George, 2014, p. 386) and represented on different positions within a company. It can provide sufficient information on the time and attention devoted to employees' evaluations and potential problems connected with minorities and women taking top level positions.

Besides the job training on diversity and mentoring diverse employees, managers need to take a step of empowering employees to challenge discriminatory behaviors and reward them for effectively managing diversity (Jones & George, 2014; Mujtaba, 2015). In reality, these steps might help leaders in the creation of a non-stop diversity management, even when the managers themselves cannot participate directly.

Value Based Management implies that values are the basis for employees' thoughts and behaviors (Mujtaba, 2014, p. 4). Managers should "recognize differences" in values of different culture representatives and understand their impact onto the norms of conduct in departments. Neglecting the existence of cultural diversity could cause disaster in the workplace; however learning values and cultures and their influence on the "expression of business structures, systems, and priorities" can benefit the organization (Mujtaba, 2014, p. 5).

Strategies and models of actions require special skills and personal characteristics from the managers implementing them. From creativity, intuition, hunger for success and desire to lead people, good managers should also have sufficient deductive skills.

According to Koonce (as cited by Geen, López, Wysocki, and Kepner, 2002), there are several skills that a manager should possess to create a successful diverse workplace. First of all, a manager should be aware of any kind of discrimination, its meaning and consequences to be able to prevent or recognize it. Secondly, managers must recognize their own cultural biases and prejudices to be able to stay discrimination free.

Finally, managers must be willing to change the organization if necessary (Geen, López, Wysocki, and Kepner, 2002, para. 12).

### **Conflict Management Strategies**

Historically, conflict management strategies have ranged from a basic face-negotiation theory by Ting-Toomey (1988) and competing theory among team members to manage intergroup conflict by Cohen and Ledford (1994) to the often-cited Thomas and Killman 5 model strategy (1974).

Thomas and Kilmann defined five modes for responding to conflict situations and which are used by managers in decision making process (Mujtaba and McCartney, 2010):

1. *Competing* is when an individual pursues his/her own concerns at the other person's expense (Kilmann, 2007, para. 5). This mode can be described as forcing and using a formal authority or power one possesses to satisfy his/her wishes and desires. A party should act in a very assertive way without any cooperation which might be necessary for emergency or time sensitive situations. Ethical dilemma is likely to occur in this type of conflict strategy as one of the parties could find it difficult to act in a way that helps the organization or others as it goes against his or her principles and interests (Jones & George, 2014, p. 101).

2. *Accommodating* is neglecting of an individual's concerns in favor of some other person. This type of conflict solving technique appears when parties cooperate very well and one of the

members is an expert in the given situation, thus is able to provide a better solution even if it works against somebody else's goals and desired outcomes.

3. *Avoiding* is when a person neither pursues his/her own concerns nor those of the other individuals (Kilman, 2007). This type of situation takes place when one of the parties does not want to participate in the conflict and pays no attention to it. It might happen when one of the parties has no interest in the conflict, does not wish to win the argument or is emotionally unwilling to create any tension, and hoping that the situation would pass by.

4. *Collaborating* implies working together to find a solution that satisfies all parties. The definition of collaboration in many dictionaries can be summed up as cooperation with the other party to express and hear concerns in the effort to find a mutually satisfactory outcome. It is also called a "win-win" scenario which is possible when one takes into consideration the wishes of all parties, broadens the frames of usual solutions and analyzes all of the ideas to create absolutely new and fresh outcome.

5. *Compromising* resolves the conflict with partial satisfaction of both parties. Sadly, it resolves the issue temporary.

These conflict tactics can also be classified into three general groups: integration or working with people, distributive or working against people, and avoidance or working away from other people (Cupach and Canary, 1997). The ultimate goals of any conflict managing technique are to create a positive and conflict free atmosphere at the workplace, find a better solution to a problem and provide long life for the organization and their teams.

### **Gender Roles in Conflict**

Gender roles, which represent learned patterns of behavior, are theoretical constructs that typically involve a set of norms that, within a culture, are considered to be socially appropriate for a specific gender (Roy, 2014).

The interest to the diverse strategies used by men and women in conflict resolution has increased due to a growing number of women in the US labor force, which was over 46% in 2001 (Mujtaba, 2014, p. 196; Mujtaba 2015).

Patricia Gwartney-Gibbs studied the ways in which gender affects conflicts at workplace, their origins, processes and outcomes (Birkhof, 2001, para. 5). Women seem to be more sensitive to conflicts and tend to report more interpersonal types of them while facing disputes based on the assumption of the society on gender stereotypes and work responsibilities.

Comparative studies about men's and women's experiences at workplace conflict disputes and community mediation by Terrell Northrup and Marshall Segall showed that women feel more vulnerable in day-to-day relations, which contributes to women choosing to avoid conflicts as it may cause aggression and violence (Birkhoff, 2001, para. 12).

A number of studies conducted by Holt and Devore (2005) were on gender differences in conflict management styles. They analyzed self-reported data on conflict styles of organization members and came across the conclusion that males in individualistic cultures are more competing, while females are compromising. Sone and Cardona also found that women tend to be more accommodating, compromising or avoiding (Sone, 1981; Cardona, 1995; Thomas and Thomas, 2008, p. 10).

According to the authors' personal observations, men are more fearless and aggressive in conflicts, thus are able to push their way through to top positions and negotiate a higher salary. Based on the report of Institute for Women's Policy Research in 2012, female full-time workers made only 77 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gender wage gap of 23 percent (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2014).

Gregory Bateson introduced a concept of “double bind” in the understanding of women’s position in conflict situations at workplace. The concept includes two parties, the leader and the “victim”. The leader sends a contradictory message to the “victim” which puts the party in the position of being subjected to “catch 22” repeatedly with no possibility to escape (Carter, 2011, para.3). It is suggested that women are more likely to be in the position of “double bind” due to stereotypes and judgments. An example would be the situation of women leaders who according to their position should act in a strong way, “be confident and assertive”, although the perception in society of these women is “uncaring, self-promoting, and aggressive” (Carter, 2011, para. 13).

Furthermore, organizations that promote job opportunities for women demonstrate that this type of “double bind” thinking is not applicable to men, thus should not negatively affect their position, perception, promotion and salary (Catalyst, 2007, p.15).

### **Summary**

Notwithstanding 21<sup>st</sup> century society advances and huge number of different researches on conflict management and legal codes that promote healthy work environment at diverse workplaces, our society still faces significant challenges in managing diverse societies and work environments, especially in the conflict situations.

Conflict is a multilevel and complex phenomenon that most of the time cannot be satisfied with only one strategy but requires a compound set of steps and components. It also challenges managers to incorporate all of the techniques and strategies successfully to find a better solution for the conflicts of their employees and organizations.

Diversity education, conflict management training and the development of creative thinking and an open mind can benefit modern companies in their fierce competition in the market and can be a crucial step in creating advanced firms with strong human resources component.

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