CONFLICT PERSPECTIVES IN ANALYZING AND UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

Complex organizations and highly structured organizational networks are part of the obvious features of contemporary life. Organizations, being universal and worldwide phenomenon are becoming increasingly crucial to our life; they often serve as a means for our social, economic and political development. In our contemporary life, organization have developed to be very complex and diverse entities, formed with very high structure of networks. As a result of these developments, theories have been developed in an attempt to have a better understanding of organizations and thus creating a more effective and efficient organizations. The rational model has been projected as a gigantic and fabulous instrument and way of thinking towards the contemporary organizations, whereby an organization is perceived and believed to be a stable entity, always integrated, consensus, ordering and well coordinated, only if the rules of the scientific management and bureaucratic model are being fully adopted. Nevertheless, in early 1970s, Western cultures have reached a discontinuity. The decade opened opportunities and led to a societal confusion that we now recognize as signaling the end of an era, the end of a millennia, the ends of the cold war and sovereign states. The changes were massive, they affected the meaning of power. They affected our values. As a result, theories were developed to explain the changes that happened in the recent decades or predict the events of coming decades. However, rationality models were increasingly recognized to be devoid of empirical content. Whilst, order and progress in organization had not happened all the time, cooperation was too fragile and fleeting, purposiveness was too elusive, conflict and coercion were too frequent, disintegration, differences, antagonism and divided loyalties were valid representations of contemporary organizational reality, which was demonstrated by a huge number of institutions in contemporary Western civilization. Thus, this article is an attempt to analyze conflict as a significant intellectual paradigm and approach in understanding organizational behavior.

Introduction

Any civilization only came into existence through coordinated effort by its society. Complex organization and highly structured organizational networks are one of the obvious features of modern life. This coordinated effort was made possible through organizations. Organizations in present society often serve as a means for one's social, economic and political lust. Thus any attempts to understand them are imperative to apprehend contemporary life, especially for those who work in organizations.

Organization is a universal and worldwide phenomenon with the notion that it was governed by some sets of rules that determined the survival of its existence. These lead the efforts to researching every bit and pieces of organizations as a significant entity within society. The

opening 'scientific' work on organizations was embedded in the writings of Frederick Winslow Taylor, which stimulated by the scientific curiosity to understand the causes and effects of organizations, its nature and its form (Tosi and Hammer, 1982). Later on, some works were directed towards projecting organizations as a stable and should be a stable entity, always integrated, consensus, order and well coordinated. Others, believed that organizations interfered with conflicts, changes, disintegration, coercion, differences, antagonism and divided loyalties. Of even greater optimism, some level of conflict is necessary for the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization.

Definition

Conflict occurs in countless variety of ways in organizations that denote its richness, complexity and full of endless and immeasurable meanings. For this reason, there is no generally accepted and comprehensive definition of conflict in the related literature. Thus, the definitions and concepts of conflict have been suggested and classified in several ways. Some definitions propose that conflict exists when there are perceived differences in interests, views, or goals. Others suggest that for a conflict to exist, one party must actually behave so as to interfere with the aims of another. Conflict is also sometimes defined to be due to the existence of inconsistent claims to resources.

Thomas views conflict as a process, where he defines conflict as a process that begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate (Thomas in Steers, 1984: 486). Huczynsky defines conflict as a state of mind, i.e. conflict as a cognitive phenomenon (Huczynsky and Buchanan, 1991: 547). Whereas, Dave defines conflict as opposition behavior between parties based on incompatible interests, i.e. he emphasizes conflict as an action (Dave in Bomers and Peterson, 1982: 61). This is also stressed by Mark and Simon, when they define conflict conceptually as a breakdown in the standard mechanism of decision-making (Mark and Simon in Tosi and Hammer, 1982: 365). In addition, Pondy has identified the concept of conflict in a more comprehensive way. He has identified four definitions for the term conflict, as it has been used, i.e. as an antecedent condition; affective states; cognitive states; and eventually as conflictual behavior (Pondy, 1967).

Each of these definitions is not conflicting with each other; nevertheless, they complement the concept itself. However, the problem of conflict definition is not regarded as a crucial issue in studying conflict in organization. The most important question is whether conflict is good or bad for an organization, or whether it is functional or dysfunctional to an organization.

Forms of Conflict

According to Pondy, conflict is a dynamic process of several stages (Pondy in Wieland and Ullrich, 1976: 268-269). The dynamic processes begin with latent conflict, followed by perceived conflict, developed into manifest conflict, and finally reached conflict aftermath, i.e. the stage whether the initial conflict is genuinely resolved or unresolved depending upon how conflict was perceived and entertained by every party involved.

Conflict can take place inherently between the individuals or groups with their situation or environment, i.e. between individuals, groups, and departments in an organization. It can also occur vertically, as existed between workers and management, or between different levels of

management itself. Besides that, conflict can occur horizontally, as happened between assembly lines, different branches or departments.

Incidents of conflict came about collectively or individually, or as an organized conflict or unorganized conflict. Collective or organized conflict involves large numbers of people that engage in actions based on a rational plan to achieve the intended objective. This type of action needs a high level of group solidarity and cohesiveness. Normally, collective conflict which take form as a collection expresses their dissatisfaction or disagreement through institutionalized negotiating procedures, before turning into strikes, work-to-rules, go-slows and others if the earlier consultation fail to meet the desired result. Individual or unorganized conflict is spontaneous response of individuals when perceived deprivation is experienced. If the employer or top management level failed in apprehending the problem, this will lead the individuals to express his or her grievances through absenteeism, poor time-keeping, industrial pilfering or theft, sabotage and ultimately moving to another place of work.

Theoretical Perspectives on Conflict

The period of stability, which characterized the corporate world in the 1950s and 1960s, were no longer exist. Global competition, technological innovation, limited resources, deregulation, privatization of public sector are constant phenomena of the post-modernity world. Lash and Urry interpreted these changes as a move in to an era of disorganized capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987). Consequently, organizations have to identify the right things to do in the future, that is, the right products and services to offer, the appropriate technologies to adopt, the best procedures and structures to practice, as well as to find, recruit and retain people with appropriate and flexible skills and management practices (Mueller in Hartley and Stephenson, 1992).

In a rapid changing world, organizations must change in order to survive and prosper. They must struggle continually to adapt themselves better to their external environment, which eventually will affect their internal structure. However, the process of organizational change involves many people, groups, and political constituencies. Whilst, they have always been interdependent upon each other, they also have their own internal boundaries. Therefore, any changes that occur in an organization will create some level of intergroup competition, sub optimization of goals between groups, bring power imbalances between them and create role ambiguity, which sooner or later will generate some form of conflict in that particular organization (Harvey and Brown, 1988). Nevertheless, change is unavoidable in the management of contemporary organizations. Managing change in an unstable modern world, is actually managing uncertainty. This notion of uncertainty in organizational change, at the end of the day will generate some form of conflict.

Considerations of conflict in organization and empirical study of the phenomenon are not new. Organizational conflict studies examine a variety of intraorganizational conflict situations ranging from superior-subordinate, interdepartmental, and labor-management disputes to interpersonal differences of opinion (Pondy, 1969). Since the Hawthorne Studies, where Elton Mayo formulated theory on conflict avoidance especially from a management point of view, increasing attention has been devoted to the roles of conflict in organizations.

There are two major approaches in the study of conflict in organization, i.e., the traditional approach and contemporary approach. The traditional approach views conflict as something to be avoided that can only possibly be resolved through physically separating the conflictual

parties. Conflict, according to this perspective, is considered as a major threat to an organization and all effort should focus on eliminating it either through changes in organizational structure or individuals, that is, a more egalitarian approach. Even though organization is constructed by divergent features and characteristics, but from the view point of earlier studies suggested that organization should portrait common objectives transient from trouble-makers, non-problematic, legitimate authority, well coordinated and always in compromise that eventually will lead to stability, order, and progress. This has been the idea projected by F.W. Taylor (1911), Elton Mayo (1933), and Max Weber (1947), where it is believed that an organization's function will improve if the prineiples of scientific management or bureaucratic organization were implemented (Rahim, 1986). These principles involved the development of standards and procedures fitting the workmen to their respective tasks, the development of managerial functions, such as planning, organizing, command, coordination, and control. These prescribed mechanistic organizational structures and devices are demonstrated by clear lines of authority, hierarchical structures, and division of labor will eventually establish harmony and cooperation and at the sametime will suppress or eliminate conflict among members.

Max Weber (1947), a German sociologist, believed his bureaucracy as a pertinent model for modern capitalist organization to be the best form of organization that puts emphasis on rules and work procedures, rights and duties of position incumbents, division of labor, hierarchical structure of authority and impersonality, and technical competence of organization members. In other words, Weber has left no room for conflicts or disputes to emerge in his model of bureaucracy. Vast majorities of us have been influenced by this traditional philosophical orientation that taught us conflict of any type was bad and should be eliminated and avoided at all cost as its presence will provide discomfort to us.

Whilst, early managerial theories of organizations, in their rush to find optimal strategies to prescribed the best ways of designing and structuring organizations to maximize efficiency tended to ignore conflict in organizations, the contemporary approach views conflict as an inevitable consequence of organizational activities that is functional for the development of an organization. If conflicts were managed appropriately and effectively, they can contribute to innovations in organizational development or may help to bring about positive organizational changes. Contemporary approaches can be divided into three perspectives, known as behavioral perspective, interactionist perspective, and radical perspective (Huczynsky and Buchanan, 1991).

The behavioral perspective view conflict as a natural phenomenon that is embedded in almost all organizations, which cannot be avoided and eliminated. Moreover, conflicts at some level contribute to organizational change and organizational performance. In other words, conflict acts as a safety valve, and keeps organizations responsive to internal and external changes. This theme can be found in the works, such as by Coser (1956) and Pondy (1957). Coser believed that conflict can have a positive function in organizational life, a notion that went against the predominant theoretical inclinations of the day (Parsonion functionalism, which saw conflict as purely disruptive and non-beneficial). In Coser's (1956) words "conflict is a form of socialization". This means essentially that, no group can be entirely harmonious, for it would then be devoid of process and structure. Groups require disharmony as well as harmony, dissociation as well as association and conflict within them are by no means altogether disruptive factors. In other words, conflict as well as cooperation has social functions. Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in organization formation and persistence of organization life.

Coser (1956) has proposed several propositions to illustrate the positive functions of conflict: conflict serves to establish and maintain the identity and boundary lines of members and groups in organization; conflict is not always dysfunctional for the relationship within which it occurs – often conflict is necessary to maintain a relationship because its provide for specific social system which serve to drain off hostile and aggressive sentiments; each social system (organization) contains sources of realistic conflict insofar as people raise conflicting claims to scarce status, power and resources, and adhere to conflicting values; aggressive and hostile impulses do not suffice to account for social conflict, that is, realistic conflict need not be accompanied by hostility and aggressiveness; antagonism is usually involved as an element in intimate relationships; conflict may serve to remove dissociating elements in a relationship and to re-establish unity; the absence of conflict cannot be taken as an index of the strength and stability of a relationship; conflict with another group leads to the mobilization of energies of group members and hence to increased cohesion of the group; and struggle may bring together otherwise unrelated persons and groups.

The interactionist perspective is in favor of treating conflict as an effective aid to the process of decision-making in an organization. An organization is considered to be naive and destructive to changes if it is always in a peaceful, harmonious, and cooperative state. This is the idea brought by Robbins (1983), Irving Janis (1982), Argyris (1970), and others. They view conflict as an opportunity for learning and building cohesiveness in organization. Parties in organizations can use conflict to discover new ways of meeting their needs. Argyris argues for the recognition that organizational goals and personal goals of the employees are in conflict. In a bureaucratic and mechanistic organization, employees are expected to be passive and subordinate, to accept little control over their work, to have short-term outlook, and are expected to produce under conditions leading to psychological failure. According to Argyris, these characteristics are incongruent to the ones that healthy beings are postulated to desire. He argued for less structured forms of organization that enabled people to express themselves within company, not just to conform to it.

The radical perspective was primarily and strongly influenced by Karl Marx paradigm on conflict approach or class struggle. This Marxist approach suggested that conflict in organization is inevitable because it resulted from the struggle between those who possessed and control the means of production and those who not. Eventually, the conflict will change the organizational condition into a better situation for further survival stage. Marxism analyzes conflicts in organization in terms of power struggle between the working class and the class of owners of the means of production. The system of oppression by the class of owners (capitalist / shareholder) will lead to a universal participation by class-conscious members of organization as a guaranteed win for the oppressed. This 'consciousness' will force the oppressors either to accept the need to negotiate for the voluntary cooperation of the formerly oppressed or to resort to time-consuming or energy-consuming violent coercion at every turn. In other words, Marxism viewed the structure of organization in relation to its major classes, and the conflict between them served as the engine of change in the organization. Classes in organizations are naturally antagonistic by virtue of their interests. Thus, conflict was not deviational within organization's structure. Moreover, structural changes in organizations are a consequences of conflict between classes.

In short, there are at least three significant basic managerial attitudes toward conflict, i.e. traditionalist and contemporary approach. The traditionalist, following our social teaching believes that all conflicts are destructive and management role is to get them out of the organization. The traditionalist, therefore, believes that conflict should be eliminated. The

behavioralist seeks to rationalize the existence of conflict and at accurately perceives conflict as inevitable in complex organizations or relationships. Thus, the behavioralist accepts it. The interactionist views conflict as absolute necessary, encourages opposition, defines management of conflict to include stimulation as well as resolution and considers the management of conflict as a major responsibility of all administrators. The interactionist view is accepted and encouraged conflict.

Managing Conflict

Conflict within organization is viewed as inevitable and in eradicable feature of everyday life. The organization is seen as a web of crosscutting conflicts between individuals or interest groups, which enlightened its life. Hence, the role of organization is to treat conflict in an appropriate approach to mutate it as a constructive change process. A range of theories, approaches, and strategies has been suggested in an attempt to understand and resolve conflict in organization.

There are at least two levels of analysis of conflict in organization; the macro level, and the micro or individual level or dispute approach. The macro level of analysis is more towards sociological approach that concentrates conflict at the institutional level, for examples works done by Marx 1906, Engels 1948, Coser 1956, Commons 1957, March and Simon 1958, Dunlop 1958, Dahrendorf 1959, Cyert and March 1963, Katz and Kahn's 1966, Lawrence and Lorsch 1967, Pondy 1967, Walton's 1969, Thomas 1976, Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, Strauss 1978, Kochan, Katz and McKersie 1986 (Sheppard, 1992). Their units of analysis for understanding conflict dynamics in organization focused on groups, departments, division and even entire organization. On examining each social unit, their research addresses the structures of an organization, its rules and regulations, organizational interdependencies and norms that exist in and between social systems of an organization. Thus, macro approach defined their conflict analysis by a set of actors as well as a set of rules, or processes or understandings over many actors.

Micro level of analysis or dispute model is a psychological approach that focuses their attention on conflict within and among human beings as individuals, with great emphasis on interpersonal, intrapersonal, and small group behavior variables that affect conflict causes, dynamics and outcomes. Dispute approach involves analysis of the resolution or management of a single conflict that arises in the context of a relationship, existing in a social system. The notion of 'disputing' implies a complex interaction of issues, players, context, and dispute processes as the nexus of understanding how conflict are understood and managed in different settings (Kolb and Putnam, 1992). Thus, the dispute problem is defined by an episode or event of disagreement. Discourse on conflict from dispute or micro level of analysis can be found in the works of Nash 1953, Robbins 1974, Thomas 1976 and 1992, Putnam and Poole 1987, and Kolb and Bartunek, 1992 (Sheppard, 1992).

In macro approach or institutional level of analysis, conflict in an organization is regarded as rational, formal, planned and explicit incidents within structured parties in that organization. For this reason to overcome institutional and structural conflicts, its has to be treated scientifically, officially, as well as normative and prescriptive in nature. There are several models being suggested, such as models of negotiation and bargaining, and models of third party process. In the process of negotiation or bargaining, the results will end up in one of the following situations as suggested by Filley; win-lose situation, lose-lose situation, and win-win situation. Win-win situation is the resolution of conflict by turning it into a positive force

for organizational change, that puts more emphasis on participative techniques (Filley in Cummings and Durham, 1980: 76-79).

In micro approach or dispute model, conflict in an organization is characterized by multifaceted, hidden, unplanned and informal, often surfaces in location quite remote from its place of origin or displaced and enacted elsewhere, situational, and depend on interpretive process that underlie the emergence of disputes. Therefore, conflict handling in disputing perspective enable us to identify a wider variety of conflict processes in organizations, understand the conflict management by emphasizing interpretive processes that underlie and surround the emergence of dispute and the ways these processes are articulated at different times and places, go behind the public scene and observe both rational and non-rational processes, and treat conflict as unfinished agenda that are rarely resolved completely, instead they continue to surface again in different ways (Kolb and Putnam, 1992). Therefore, disputing perspective is trying to bridge public and formal conflict and private domains of conflict, examining the links between bipolar opposites of conflict in organization.

Conflict undoubtedly can cause disharmony, lead to a longer time to achieve determined organizational goals and definitely leads to waste of time, energy and resources, but if managed with splendor will bring to organizational prosperity. Therefore, the task of management is to realized that conflicts in organization are public-private, formal-informal, and rational-non-rational phenomenon. In order to managed effectively, we have to adopt both approaches accordingly in comply with time, place, nature and forms of the conflicts, differences can be solved through either formal conflict handling or sometimes through private, informal and non-rational conflict handling. As acknowledged by Garves (1978) that managerial skill in handling conflict was a major predictor of managerial success and effectiveness (Garves in Steers, 1984: 485).

Conclusion

Organizations are dynamic entities continually interacting with their internal and external environments, changing and adapting to develop congruence between people, process and structure. Conflict is part of the continuous interacting, changing, and adapting process. Having earlier discussed contemporary perspectives on conflict has enlighten us that conflict is a persistent fact of organizational life. It is not an exaggeration to perceive conflict as a pervasive fact of interaction and becomes the essence of organizational vitality.

As discussed earlier, understanding conflict as a factual phenomenon will lead us to better understanding about organizations. A conflict always gives insight to scholars and researchers to understand more about culture, power, change, development and other significant phenomenon in organization. These phenomenon will only be relevant to our understanding of organizational behavior and analysis if there is a conflict. This is because conflict is dynamic which emphasizes on meanings, processes, and variety of procedures and relationships.

A fight may result in the participants seeing something in a new light. Productive conflict may clarify goals, mobilize energies, illuminate alternatives, promote vigorous analysis, and encourage creative solutions to complex problems. Conflict can function as a safety valve to organizations. Conflict as a 'natural law' embedded in organizational life and setting will emerge if any behavior exists in an organization incompatible with its principles. When conflicts become apparent, they will challenge the 'rationality' of 'organizational man', thus

giving a sense of significance to the concept of rationality as the only method in understanding and analyzing organizational behavior.

Conflict itself is neutral, it is no evil, but rather a phenomenon which can have constructive or destructive effects depending upon its management. Conflicts tend to be dysfunctional when there is insufficient toleration among its members and rigidity of organizational structure which permit hostilities to accumulate. When changes failure and flounder during confronting crisis it is because the employers or employees ignore the importance of readiness to change. What threatens the organization is not conflict as such, but ignorant, intolerant, rigidity and vested interests. Hence, organizational conflict must not necessarily be reduced or eliminated, but managed to enhance individuals, groups, and organizational effectiveness.

Moreover, development and emphasize more systematic education in Human Relations, Human Resource Management or Development, and Industrial Relations, explicitly or implicitly, are a recognition to the importance of managing and understanding conflict in organizations. In addition, institutionalization of trade unionism or collective bargaining, and industrial court is also a type of acknowledgment of how significant is conflict in organizations. Thus, conflict must not be removed, ignored or left at the periphery of organizational life, but has to be institutionalized so that it can find expression and work itself through without prejudice to the survival of the system as a whole. This is because conflict leads to change, change leads to adaptation, and adaptation leads to survival.

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