Workplace/institutional conflict

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This essay will highlight the topic of conflict under the direction of the study guide by Lekgolo Phosa called “Strategic Public Human Resource Management IV” (2010:86-93). The essay will relate the topic of conflict to the working environment of an organisation. The points in this essay will cover the topic by defining conflict and the different types and kinds of conflicts. The causes of conflict will be discussed in conjunction with the definitions and explanations of conflict, especially throughout Part A and B of this essay. Identifying conflict on a daily basis, the myths about conflict, and the steps human resources managers can take to resolve conflict effectively will also be discussed. Ultimately, this essay will reflect in detail on conflict in the workplace and intend to elaborate through various examples the thoughts and ideas of conflict.

1. CONFLICT: DEFINITION

Lam Kin Yu (2004:24) notes that in the early 20th century, conflict was generally defined as “difference” only. He however explains that the definitions of conflict became more complicated when it came to the second half of the 20th century. Conflict in contemporary society can be considered as noted below:

- A type of behaviour which occurs when two or more parties are in opposition or in battle as a result of a perceived relative deprivation from the activities of or interacting with another person or group.

- As a situation where one social entity perceives or is made to perceive that he (1) holds behavioural preferences, the satisfaction of which are incompatible with another person’s implementation of his preference, (2) wants some mutually desirable resource which is in short supply, such that the wants of everyone may not be satisfied fully, or (3) possesses values or attitudes which are salient in directing his behaviour but which are perceived to be exclusive of the values or attitudes held by the other(s).

  (Yu, 2004: 24)

By the above definitions, Yu (2009:25) explains that the characteristics of conflict are that conflict has a dynamic or interactive nature rather than a static nature. Secondly, a conflict situation involves at least two parties. Finally, a conflict situation usually highlights the key elements of opposition and incompatibility of goals, values or activities.
Fleetwood (1987:3) lists a further definition of conflict in which she explains conflict as a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralise, injure, or eliminate the rivals. This view of conflict can be seen as one party being determined to disadvantage the other in its pursuit for selfish gain and self-gaining purposes.

It should be noted that no single definition of conflict can capture all the conflict scenarios. Therefore by incorporating the above definitions of conflict by Yu (2009) and Fleetwood (1987) one can assert that conflict is a felt struggle between two or more interdependent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals, or over differences in desires for esteem, control, and connectedness.

2. DIFFERENT TYPES, VIEWS AND CAUSES OF CONFLICT

In the study guide, Strategic Public Human Resource Management IV by Lekgolo Phosa (2010), Murphy and Halasz (1998:13) are mentioned as differentiating between two types of conflict. They refer to conflict as either being negative or positive. In Part B of this section two types of conflict (negative and positive) will be discussed in relation to the different views of conflict; namely the traditional view, the behavioural or contemporary view, and the interactionist view. Before discussing the different types of conflict, the below Part A will discuss the two major kinds of conflict: conflict over content issues (content conflicts relating to beliefs, values and goals) and conflict over relationship issues (relational conflicts) and will also explain how these conflicts are caused.

Part A

2.1. Content Conflicts

Northouse (2012:177) explains that content conflicts involve struggles between leaders and others who differ on issues such as policies and procedures. He furthermore explains that these disagreements are considered conflicts on the content level when they centre on differences in (1) beliefs and values or (2) goals and ways to reach those goals (Northouse, 2012:177).

2.1.1. Conflict regarding beliefs and values

A conflict in beliefs or values is likely to occur when we perceive what another person is communicating as incompatible with our own viewpoint (Northouse, 2012:178). It is common in
human nature for one to feel uncomforted when incompatible forces interact - this is because each of us has a unique system of beliefs and values that constitutes our basic philosophy of life. We have had different family situations as well as educational and work experiences. When we communicate with others, we become aware that others’ viewpoints are often very different from our own.

It is quite possible to assert that when conflict is created as a result of incompatible views the damage is far more reaching when extended to the scope of a big group/greater society, in comparison to the damage that can occur when the conflict exists between two individuals/a small group of people. One needs only to look at the many cases of homophobia in which homosexuals are constantly victimised by anti-gay activists because of the conflict that exists between the two groups due to their opposing views on homosexuality.

The conflicting situations surrounding homosexuality will forever be apparent as long as government and religious organisations advocate against them. The labelling of homosexuality as a stigma is highly prevalent in African countries. In her article “Homophobia on the rise in Africa”, Alex Duvan (The Guardian, 20 December 2010: Online) explains that “in many African countries, anti-gay sentiment is rising, and the overall trend appears to be a hardening of legislation against lesbians, gay men, transgender people and bisexuals”. The illegalisation of homosexuality in African countries emphasises the conflict between homosexuals and anti-gay activists as the latter gains empowerment in their view against homosexuality, and furthermore strengthens a social block which ultimately entrenches the contentious view of ‘us’ against ‘them’.

Northouse (2012:178) also gives an example of when a conflict of beliefs can occur when he explains that teachers or nurses believe they have the right to strike because of unfair working conditions, while others feel that these kinds of employees should not be allowed to withhold services for any reason. In such an example conflict occurs because one individual feels that his or her beliefs are incompatible with the position taken by another individual on the issue. To further elaborate, in a case such as this it could be argued that opponents of strike action believe it unconstitutional to withhold basic human rights such as education and health, whereas supporters of strike action would consider it just to disadvantage those in need of these primary services.
2.1.2. Conflict regarding goals

Northouse (2012:179) notes that a second common type of content-related conflict occurs in situations where individuals have different goals. He goes on to say that researchers have identified two types of conflict that occur regarding group goals: (a) **procedural conflict** and (b) **substantive conflict** (Northouse, 2012:179).

(a) **Procedural conflict**

Northouse (2012:179) explains that procedural conflict refers to differences between individuals with regard to the approach they wish to take in attempting to reach a goal. In essence, it is conflict over the best means to an agreed-upon goal; it is not about what goal to achieve. It could thus be said that procedural conflict involves the action of decision-making; this is because the subject of conflict becomes the decision that needs to be taken. With that said, one can deduce that in organisations, procedural conflict is most likely to exist in the middle/top level of management, because it is at this level of management that decisions are made regarding the various factors of the organisation.

One can observe procedural conflict in many situations within the organisation such as determining how to best conduct job interviews, choose what and how policies are to be implemented within and outside the organisation, or what portion of the annual budget should be allocated to a department/unit. The latter situation will usually occur in an organisation which comprises of multiple departments such as communications, organisational development, human resources, Information Technology, etc. This is because each departmental manager or Executive Director believes his/her department requires more funds than the others due to the fact that they consider the role of their department as the most important in furthering the organisation.

The allocation of funds in an organisation’s annual budget can sensibly be seen as generally being time and motif orientated. The ranking of projects and allocation of financial resources in an appropriate manner is noted by Sullivan & Steven (2003) as a key factor in capital budgeting – the primary goal of capital budgeting being the pursuit of increasing the share value of the organisation to the shareholders (Sullivan & Steven, 2003:375). In cases where conflict occurs between Executive Directors as a result of budget allocation, it would be prudent for higher management such as the CEO/CFO to explain the particular goals and missions of the organisation for that year or
duration in order to put at ease the frustrations of Executive Directors if his/her department do not attain the funds he/she had hoped for.

(b) Substantive conflict

Substantive conflict occurs when individuals differ with regard to the substance of the goal itself, or what the goal should be (Northouse, 2012:179). For example, two board members of a non-profit human service agency may have very different views regarding the strategies and scope of a fund-raising campaign. Similarly, two owners of a small business may strongly disagree about whether or not to offer their part-time employees health care benefits.

2.2. Relational conflict

Northouse (2012:180) explains that relational conflict refers to the differences we feel between ourselves and others concerning how we relate to each other. He goes on to state that the phrase personality clash is another way of describing a conflict on the relational level. This happens as sometimes we do not get along with another person, not because of what we are talking about (as with conflict over content issues) but because of how we are talking about it. Northouse (2012:180) states that relational conflict is usually related to incompatible differences between individuals over issues of (1) esteem, (2) control, and (3) affiliation.

2.2.1. Relational Conflict and Issues of Esteem

The need for esteem and recognition is identified in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and is noted as being one of the major needs in the hierarchy of human needs. Each of us has needs for esteem—we want to feel significant, useful, and worthwhile. We desire to have an effect on our surroundings and to be perceived by others as worthy of their respect. We attempt to satisfy our esteem needs through what we do and how we act, particularly in how we behave in our relationships with our co-workers.

When our needs for esteem are not being fulfilled in our relationships, we experience relational conflict because others do not see us in the way we wish to be seen. For example, an administrative assistant can have repeated conflicts with an administrator if the assistant perceives that the administrator fails to recognise his or her unique contributions to the overall goals of the
organisation. Similarly, older employees may be upset if newer co-workers do not give them respect for the wisdom that comes with their years of experience. So, too, younger employees may want recognition for their innovative approaches to problems but fail to get it from co-workers with more longevity at the organisation. In cases such as these conflicts will result because of differing views regarding hierarchical levels and units.

It is generally the case that we as human beings want our own esteem needs satisfied, and at the same time others want their esteem needs satisfied as well. If the supply of respect we can give each other seems limited (or scarce), then our needs for esteem will clash. We will see the other person’s needs for esteem as competing with our own or taking that limited resource away from us. To illustrate, consider a staff meeting in which two employees are actively contributing insightful ideas and suggestions. If one of the employees is given recognition for her input but the other is not, conflict may result. As this conflict escalates, the effectiveness of their working relationship and the quality of their communication may diminish.

2.2.2. Relational Conflict and Issues of Control

Struggles over issues of control are very common in interpersonal conflict (Northouse, 2010:25). At some point, each one of us desires to have an impact on others and the situations that surround us. Having control, in effect, increases our feelings of potency about our actions and minimises our feelings of helplessness. Control allows us to feel competent about ourselves. However, when we see others as hindering us, or limiting our control, interpersonal conflict often ensues.

Interpersonal conflict occurs when a person’s needs for control are incompatible with another’s needs for control. In a given situation, each of us seeks different levels of control. Some people like to have a great deal, while others are satisfied (and sometimes even more content) with only a little. In addition, our needs for control may vary from one time to another. For example, there are times when a person’s need to control others or events is very high; at other times, this same person may prefer that others take charge.

2.2.3. Relational Conflict and Issues of Affiliation

In addition to wanting relational control, each of us has a need to feel included in our relationships, to be liked, and to receive affection (Northouse, 2010:182). If our needs for closeness are not satisfied in our relationships, we feel frustrated and experience feelings of conflict. Of course, some
people like to be very involved and very close in their relationships, while others prefer less involvement and more distance. In any case, when others behave in ways that are incompatible with our own desires for warmth and affection, feelings of conflict emerge.

Relational conflicts—whether they are over esteem, control, or affiliation—are seldom overt. Due to the subtle nature of these conflicts, they are often not easy to recognise or address. Even when they are recognised, relational conflicts are often ignored because it is difficult for many individuals to openly communicate that they want more recognition, control, or affiliation.

As mentioned, relational conflicts are complex and not easily resolved. However, when relational conflicts are expressed and confronted, it can significantly enhance the overall resolution process. It goes without saying that communication remains central to managing different kinds of conflict in organisations. Leaders who are able to keep channels of communication open with others will have a greater chance of understanding others’ beliefs, values, and needs for esteem, control, and affiliation. With increased understanding, many of these common kinds of conflict will seem less difficult to resolve and more open to negotiation.

3. DIFFERENT VIEWS OF CONFLICT IN RELATION TO POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CONFLICT

As mentioned in the previous section, this section will discuss the two types of conflict (negative and positive) as it is noted in the study guide, Strategic Public Human Resource Management IV by Lekgolo Phosa (2010). The two types of conflict will be discussed in relation to the different views of conflict; namely the traditional view, the behavioural or contemporary view, and the interactionist view.

3.1. Traditional view of conflict

Vijay Verma (1998:1) explains that the traditional view (dominant from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1940s) assumes that conflict is bad, always has a negative impact, and leads to declines in performance as the level of conflict increases. In this sense, one can surely assume that conflict must always be avoided. This view of conflict can be argued as being closely associated with such terms as violence, destruction, and irrationality and thus falls part of a negative type of conflict. Verma (1998:1) notes that during this era of viewing conflict in a completely negative way, the detrimental effects of violent and disruption confrontations between workers and management
led to the development of labour unions. It could thus be said that one of the main reasons labour unions came into existence was to ensure the protection of its members.

3.2. Behavioural view of conflict

Vijay Verma (1998:1) explains that the behavioural or contemporary view, also known as the human relations view, emerged in the late 1940s. It argues that conflict is natural and inevitable in all organizations and that it may have either a positive or a negative effect, depending on how the conflict is handled. Performance may increase with conflict, but only up to a certain level, and then decline if conflict is allowed to increase further or is left unresolved (Verma, 1998:1). This approach advocates acceptance of conflict and rationalises its existence. Because of the potential benefits from conflict, project managers should focus on managing it effectively rather than suppressing or eliminating it.

3.3. The Interactionist view of conflict

The interactionist view assumes that conflict is necessary to increase performance (Verma, 1998:1). While the behavioural approach accepts conflict, the interactionist view encourages conflict based on the belief that a harmonious, peaceful, tranquil, too-cooperative project organisation is likely to become static, apathetic, stagnant, and unable to respond to change and innovation. This approach encourages managers to maintain an appropriate level of conflict – enough to keep projects self-critical, viable, creative, and innovative. In this view, conflict can be seen as invigorating employees to perform better, subject to the conflict being managed correctly.

4. IDENTIFYING CONFLICT ON A DAILY BASIS

In the study guide, Strategic Public Human Resource Management IV by Lekgolo Phosa (2010), five means to identify conflict on a daily basis are listed, namely being visionary, giving feedback, getting feedback, defining expectations and reviewing performance regularly. Of these, this essay contends that being a strategic leader with visionary capabilities is the best means. This section will therefore discuss how being a strategically visionary leader can increase the means of identifying conflict on a daily basis.
As it has been mentioned above, if conflict is directed appropriately it can yield positive results. On the other hand, if managed incorrectly or simply left unattended it can create an atmosphere that is not conducive to sustaining a healthy organisation or relationship. It is therefore imperative that leaders should be able to identify conflicting situations in order to attend to it. Rowe & Nejad (2009: Online) explains that a strategic leader with great visionary characteristics is able to grasp changes within the organisation and manage it correctly. Therefore, it would be such a leader that is able to identify when conflict is present in the workplace by noticing changes in employees’ behaviour, attitude and relations with each other.

In displaying visionary leadership, a leader combines two classical management theories: the task orientated leadership and the people orientated leadership (IABMP, 2009: Online). A leader should therefore ensure that conflict is always identified in order to secure that tasks and organisational processes continue efficiently, as well as to ensure that human relations within the workplace are kept satisfactory. An excellent way to ensure that conflict is identifiable on a daily basis is by promoting communication to an extent that employees feel comfortable to raise any conflicting issues. This should be done in an informal manner whereby employees are simply able to approach the leader at any time, in anyway, to point out the conflict.

The above particular view is shared by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2008), which published the “Managing conflict at work” guide highlighting the fact that it is vital for line managers to have regular informal one-to-one conversations and catch-ups with the people they manage so that all kinds of issues can be aired naturally where possible. Managers must also be prepared to be proactive and initiate informal discussions if they think a problem is brewing (CIPD, 2008:6). By following such processes managers are able to incorporate a level of trust between employees which will increase the chances of employees reporting conflicting situations. Ultimately, a framework for conceptualising conflict within the workplace will evolve – giving managers a strategic edge in identifying, resolving and managing conflict within the workplace.

5. MYTHS ABOUT CONFLICT

Phosa (2010:90) notes the fact that “the presence of conflict is a sign of poor management”. One that has studied the various facets of conflict within an organisation would note that conflict is a natural occurrence between all species within any domain. Professor of Leadership and Organisational Development, George Kohlrieser, explains in his article “Six Essential Skills for
Managing Conflict” (2007) that People create conflict as a direct result of the human bonding cycle, in which bonds are broken, resulting in loss, disappointment, frustration, pain and even grief – real or anticipated (Kohlrieser, 2007:2). Therefore the fact that Phosa (2010:90) regards the presence of conflict as a sign of poor management to be a myth is highly plausible. Managers cannot be held entirely responsible for conflict because interactions between co-workers will always exist, reeling a possibility for conflict to occur.

Phosa (2010:91) also regards the fact that “conflict must be resolved” as being a myth. He does however disagree with the ‘myth’ as he explains that the resolution of conflict, as a must, stifles creativity, causing the manager to become solution-orientated. This view is however more geared towards another myth, also noted by Phosa (2010:91), that “if left alone, conflict will take care of itself”. It could be argued that the fact that “conflict must be resolved” is actually not a myth at all, but rather an actual fact. Conflict that is not resolved in an active process will be susceptible to escalating much more than dissipating.

Even though Phosa (2010:91) notes that “it is true that some conflicts will take care of themselves...” he does not state which type/kind of conflicts will take care of themselves. By referring to the discussion above regarding the types and kinds of conflict it is plausible to suggest that any conflicting situation requires attention. It is thus fallible to believe that if left alone, conflict will take of itself. Advocates of this view fail to realise that conflict can seem to have dissipated without intervention, but is in fact suppressed - prone to spontaneous eruption. If conflict is identified by a manager it should be dealt with immediately. This will decrease the chances of the conflict escalating, allowing for work processes to function optimally.

**6. STEPS HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGERS CAN TAKE TO RESOLVE CONFLICT EFFECTIVELY**

Murphy and Halasz (1998:47-61) is noted by Phosa (2010:91-93) as explaining the five steps human resource managers can take to resolve conflict effectively, as discussed below.

**6.1. Step one: Take responsibility for dealing with conflict**

Phosa (2010:91) explains that managers sometimes stick their “heads in the sand” when they identify conflict among colleagues or team members. This is a natural reaction in trying to avoid conflict but it should not be forgotten that there is a great possibility that if conflict is left
unchecked, it can escalate as easily as it can dissipate. As also argued above, it is usually the case that conflict will remain in existence even if suppressed by one or both parties. Therefore it is important for managers to take responsibility for dealing with conflict when identified.

6.2. **Step two: Uncover, define and discuss the real problem**

This step is noted as starting a dialogue between the conflicting parties. Phosa (2010:92) explains that the best way to figure out the source of a problem is to bring together all the people involved for an open and frank discussion. When dealing with a matter of conflict a lot of personal details may be revealed so it would be best to have the meeting in a controlled environment to ensure privacy and respect. The parties would be discussing the details of their conflict in a controlled manner as well.

6.3. **Step three: Ask questions and listen**

In order for the manager to handle the conflicting situation effectively they would require a sound understanding of the matter and therefore should ask questions of substance and listen to responses attentively. Phosa (2010:92) correctly states that the quality of your output depends on the quality of your input. It could thus be said that for managers to resolve conflict in an effective manner, it is imperative that they handle the conflict resolution process in a professional manner.

6.4. **Step four: Set goals and create an action plan**

Once the conflict has been understood by all, the next step involves thinking of the way forward. At this point suggestions of solutions should be made and be mutually agreed upon at the end of the session. All parties should understand their role in ensuring that the conflict is mutually resolved and does not repeat.

6.5. **Step five: Follow up**

The last step that is noted by Phosa (2010:93) is arranging follow-up meetings, thanking attendees, summarising the action plan in writing, and including arrangements for follow-up meetings. Following up and ensuring that the conflict is resolved is an example of good managerial behaviour and any resolution agreement should be followed up with a full consultation with each individual (CIPD, 2008:5). It would be best for managers to have private follow-up chats with the individuals involved to hear from them, respectively, how matters are going. This should be a prerequisite in
the conflict resolution process. It is vital that managers take heed to this step in order to ensure that the same (or any) sort of conflict does not happen between the parties again.

The above mentioned steps can be viewed as a competency framework for managers to deal with conflict in the workplace. It is a process that is important to ensure that conflict between employees do not affect the organisation negatively. It should therefore be every manager’s duty to ensure that some sort of conflict policy exists within the workplace to make employees aware of the steps and processes to follow when experiencing conflicts. This relates with the fact that communication is key in all matters concerning conflict and should therefore be used in preventing conflict and effectively resolving it.

7. CONCLUSION

Conflict is something that will always exist in any type of environment. Its existence is increased in cases where people are more prone to interacting with each other, such as in an organisation. This is because, as mentioned above, conflict is a natural occurrence between humans simply because it comes into existence when the ties that binds humans breaks. It is therefore imperative that managers fully understand the topic of conflict in order to ensure successful and efficient work and personal relations.

Conflict management should be part of the strategic planning of any manager simply because of the far-reaching damaging effects conflict within the workplace can create. A manager experienced in conflict management will certainly be able to relate to and manage a diverse workforce.
8. BIBLIOGRAPHY


