

Workplace Conflict and Communication: A Review Study

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Abstract

Communication plays an important role in resolving workplace conflict. The aim of this study is to examine the association between workplace conflict and communication and to examine the role of communication in managing these conflicts. For this study related journals, textbooks and other online publications in Management, Organizational Behaviour, and other relevant fields were reviewed. This study includes a review of literature in which communication variables were studied along with other variables also in relation to workplace conflict. On the basis of the reviewed literature studied, it was found that effective communication can resolve workplace conflict and lack of communication or poor communication leads to conflict. So it is recommended that communication training programs should be arranged for the employers and employees. Managers should adopt strategy or strategies based on the nature and type of conflict.

Keywords: Workplace Conflict, Conflict Management, and Communication.

Introduction

Communication plays an important role in resolving workplace conflict. Poor communication is associated with the decreased productivity and morality of the employee. Poor communication is also one of the major causes of workplace conflict. At the workplace employees of various backgrounds with their different styles work together for the industry and for themselves. So at the workplace conflict is inevitable in the industry or organization. Researchers proved that conflict is closely related to communication. Hocker and Wilmot (1985) also stated that "Communication is the central element in all interpersonal conflict". According to Fleetwood (1987), communication and conflict are related in three ways: Communication behaviour often creates conflict. Communication behaviour reflects conflict. Communication is the vehicle for the productive or destructive management of conflict. Poor communication occurs due to misunderstandings among employees and can lead to long-lasting conflict. Communication and negotiation are keys to conflict management (Hudson et al., 2005).

Conflict refers to some form of friction, disagreement, or discord arising between individuals or within a group when the beliefs or actions of one or more members of the group are either resisted by or unacceptable to one or more members of another group. Conflict pertains to the opposing ideas and actions of different entities, thus resulting in an antagonistic state. (Tschannen-Moran, 2001) Conflict is an unavoidable component of human activity. (Brahnam et al., 2005)

The most important barriers to effective communication are Filtering, Selective Perception, Information Overload, Emotions Interpretation, Language, and Communication apprehension. Filtering is the act of manipulating information to make it appear more flattering and convincing to the receiver. Selective Perception is the situation built according to the needs and preferences of the receiver of the information. The receiver during the communication becomes selective to perceive and pay attention only to the part of communication that is of his concern. Information Overload is the situation in which an employee receives too much information and it would become impossible for the employee to retain it. This may result in loss of information which may lead to ineffective communication and conflict situations. Emotions Interpretation and understanding of the information are determined by how the person who receives the information feels at that time. Language as a law word carries different meanings to different people. This may be influenced by the age of the person, educational or cultural background. Communication apprehension involves employees who have communication problems due to nervousness or anxiety in any form whether oral or written or both. According to Stoner et al., (1998), Conflict management process also involves communication, power, and persuasion.

According to Vash (1980), the basis of power is shared through communication and communication is seen as the single largest problem in organizations. Although communication is extremely important in dealing with conflict, conflict is more than communication and its accompanying behavior.

Blake and Mouton (1984) stated that communication permits us to get at causes but the cause is not in communication. The causes that underlie interface conflict are more than simply telling people the rationale of decisions reached or how expensive it is for them not to cooperate or sitting them down in a room to work it out for themselves.

The key involves communication between the contending groups, but far more than just communication. Behind all of these influences may be historical behavior that has led to mutual disrespect, lack of confidence, and suspicion. Under these conditions, if people were to communicate, which is another way of saying "open up," they would communicate incendiary emotions at the risk of escalating, not diminishing, the conflict. They observed that "communication permits us to get at causes but the cause is not in communication" is substantiated by the fact that context plays an important part in the selection of conflict management styles and conflict management strategies.

Ajala (2012) conducted a study to see the effect of the workplace on the workers' welfare and productivity in Government Parastatals of Onda State in Nigeria. For this study, the descriptive survey research design of the ex-post facto type was used by the researcher. A total of 350 respondents participated in this survey. Results of this survey state that workplace features and good communication networks at the workplace have an effect on workers' welfare, health, efficiency, morale, and productivity. In this study, a researcher recommended that industrial social workers should consult with the management to create a conducive work environment and effective communication network that will attract, retain and motivate their employees for healthy living and improved productivity.

According to Iskander et al. (2014) job stress, motivation, and communication variables are regarded as the main factors for the performance of the employee. To examine the effect of these three variables they used the multiple regression method. In this study they found the determination coefficient test is 59.3%, stipulating that the performance of the employees is elucidated by motivation, job stress, and communication elements whereas the remainder 31.7% is related to other factors. This study also shows that job stress and motivation have impartial effects on employee performance and communication variables simultaneously partially impact the performance of the employees.

Pierre et al. (1976) wrote an article on 'Conflict in Organizations'. He discussed sources of conflict, the need to manage conflict, and the consequences of conflict and explored various ways to reduce the conflict in the organization. In this article researchers also stated the positive and negative effects of conflicts. The writer concluded that various conflict resolution strategies lead to greater understanding, fewer future conflicts, and better communication. It indicates that better communication helps to resolve conflict.

Thomas and Schmidt (1976) carried out a survey on Managerial Interests with respect to Conflict. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 258 subjects. One-week update programs conducted by American Management Association were implemented on the 258 subjects. Descriptive statistics and ANOVA were used for the data analysis. On the basis of results, they concluded that the variables such as personality clashes, value differences, misunderstanding, and communication failure were found to be high contributors to generating work conflict.

Henry, O. (2009) conducted research on Organizational Conflict and its effect on Organizational Performance. Total 130 managers from government departments and private sector companies of Botswana participated in this study. A well-structured questionnaire was used for the data collection. Results of this study explained that the major sources of conflict were competition for limited resources, poor planning, limited resources followed by task interdependence, performance criteria, and lack of communication. In the end, they revealed conflict resolving mechanism i.e. compromising as a major impact factor (26%), followed by open communication (18%), mediation (16%), confrontation (12%), collaboration (11%), avoidance (9%) and withdrawal strategy (8%) with their respective percentages.

Hetepe et al. (2010) carried out an empirical study to examine the effect of conflict on organizational performance in Nigeria. In this study, the researcher found the major causes of organizational conflict were lack of resources followed by communication problems, lack of cooperation, different expectations, competition issues, salary comparison, etc. Further, the inter-personal conflict ranked the highest types of conflict experienced by the participants than inter-group conflict. Organizational innovativeness and productivity, individual development, and improving quality skills were the positive effects of conflicts, and interference with organization operations, lack of cooperation, wasting of resources, no productivity, and no cohesion were the negative aspects of the conflict. The bargaining conflict management technique was rated highest (29.2%) by the participants in this study. Researchers of this study suggested that managers should have the training to resolve or deal with the conflict more effectively, reward for the outstanding performance and managers should emphasize proper communication and interaction procedures to resolve the conflicts.

Pathak, M. (2010) stated in her research article "Managing Organizational Conflict" that organizations should focus upon various causes, theories, approaches, and strategies to handle and resolve conflict in the organizations. This study explored the positive effects of conflict as the team improves decision

quality, strategic planning, financial performance, and organizational growth. The research of this study focused on psychological aspects of stress and conflict and explained work overload, pressures on duty, and demanding superior were the various factors considered for arousing stress. These stressful factors arise from task demands, role demands, goal conflicts, unrealistic expectations, interpersonal disagreements, organizational structure, organizational life stage, and organizational leadership. The further researcher described collaborating, integrating, avoiding, competing, dominating, accommodating, and obliging styles as useful in order to handle conflict more effectively in the organizations.

Bhat, A.B. et al. (2011) collected data from 30 manufacturing organizations to examine the conflict management styles and leadership styles of executives in some selected Indian Organizations. In their study, they used the organization conflict management scale, multifactor leadership questionnaire, and organizational learning diagnostics to formulate the questionnaire under the survey method. For the statistical analysis descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis had been employed. Results of this study show that transformational leadership style was found the most appropriate style of leadership preferred among the executives of organizations. Conflict management had been found as a significant predictor of organizational learning instead of leadership style. Researchers of this study suggest developing some specific training programmes to help employees to adopt the style of task, inspiration and communication-oriented in order to reduce the conflicts in the organisation.

Hasani et al. (2014), studied organizational conflict framework with respect to the demographic variables such as gender, age, experience and education level. Title of their research was "Identity of Organizational Conflict framework: Evaluating Model Factors Based on Demographic characteristics in Iran". Reliability statistics, independent sample t-test, and analysis of variance were used in this study for analysing the collected data. This study reveals no significant difference in the overall conflict framework on the basis of gender, but the other demographic variables taken under study such as age, educational qualification, working experience have been found significant in results towards the overall framework of conflict. Further, this study explored 10 broad factors which were responsible for generating conflict. These factors were accordingly Incompatible goals, Different values and beliefs, Ambiguity and role conflict, Problems of communications, Ambiguous rules, Authority Conflict, Inconsistent evaluation and reward system, Job stresses, Task conflict, and Deficient in the information system.

Awan, A.G. and Saeed, S. (2015), carried out a study entitled "Conflict Management and Organisational Performance: A Case Study of Askari Bank Ltd". In this study, they find out the major causes of conflict and conflict management strategies prevalent in the bank under study. The results of this study demonstrate that the conflict management strategies differ significantly with respect to the age, educational qualification of the respondents under study. No significant difference has been found between the opinion of males and females respondents with respect to various conflict management strategies adopted by the bank management. Further, lack of cordial relationship between management and staff, perceptual differences, behavioral issues, and lack of effective communication had emerged as major sources of conflict among the banking staff. Afterward, the various dysfunctional impacts had been explored with the help of high mean scores i.e. Communication breakdown, Low morale, Less productivity, Lack of direction, and Lack of innovation. Researchers of this study recommended bank management to concern the free flow of communication, constant dialogue between management and the employees to exchange ideas and clarify on various issues wherever required.

Conclusion

On the basis of the reviewed literature, it is clear that effective communication can resolve workplace conflict. Along with communication variables, other psychological variables like ambiguous rules, authority conflict, and personality clashes affect workplace conflict. Effective communication is viewed as one of the conflict resolving mechanisms.

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