

## Organisational Conflict Literature: A Review

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### ABSTRACT

*The present research involves a review of organisational conflict literature in an integrated framework. In addition to exploring such basic issues related to organisational conflict as conceptual meaning and definitions of conflict, antecedent conditions or determinants of conflict, desirability of conflict, etc., the paper specifically focuses upon the internal dynamics of a conflict episode. More significantly, the paper highlights the fact that conflict can have either functional or pathological effects depending upon its management. The findings of various research studies analysed point to the fact that the levels of conflict as well as the styles of handling conflict can be suitably varied in different organisational situations with a view to enhancing organisational effectiveness.*

**Key Words:** Conflict, Dynamics, Antecedents, Effects, Management

### Introduction

Organisational conflict has been a fascinating subject of study for most researchers and practitioners. While most researchers agree on the inevitability of conflict in organisations as well as on the need to manage them constructively, the literature relevant to organisational conflict is somewhat segmented (Thomas, 1976) and is specialised according to organisational areas e.g. labour-

management relations (Stagner, 1956; Stagner & Rosen, 1965), line-staff controversies (Dalton, 1950; McGregor, 1957), superior-subordinate conflicts (Evan, 1965; Burke, 1970; Renwick, 1975), inter-departmental disputes (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), etc. At this point, it must be emphasised, however, that the dynamics underlying conflict behaviour in one area have immense

relevance to other areas as well. Moreover, a large volume of research undertaken outside the boundaries of organisations (e.g. experimental gaming, small group research, social conflict, international relations etc.) has yielded concepts and insights of great potential relevance to the study of conflict in organisational settings. The contribution of such outside research to available knowledge regarding industrial and organisational conflict cannot be lost sight of. In view of the aforesaid facts, an attempt has been made in the present paper to provide a more fundamental and generic treatment of conflict covering all organisational areas.

### **Conceptual Meaning of Conflict**

In the Behavioural Sciences, the term 'conflict' has no single, clear referent. According to the psychologists, the term often denotes incompatible response tendencies within an individual e.g. "approach-avoidance conflict" (Levinger, 1957), "role conflict" (Kahn *et.al.*, 1964), etc. In the sociological parlance, on the other hand, attention is focused on that type of conflict that occurs between social units i.e. between individuals, groups or organizations. These conflicts are known as inter-personal, inter-group or inter-departmental (Wall & Callister, 1995) or inter-organisational conflicts respectively.

There is no consensus among researchers even on a specific definition of conflict. It has been variously defined by different authors. In a review of conflict

literature, Fink (1968) found a large number of divergent usages, including 14 different criteria for simply distinguishing conflict from competition. Within the organisational conflict literature, Pondy (1967) noted a number of divergent definitions ranging over antecedent conditions, emotions, perceptions and conflictful behaviour. Rather than attempting to agree that one of these specific definitions was really conflict, Pondy (1967) recommended that conflict should be used in a generic sense to include all these phenomena.

In the absence of any consensus on the conceptual meaning of conflict, it is but quite natural that the term 'conflict' has been variously defined by different social scientists. Nevertheless, a few commonly given definitions of conflict which provide some indications as to the meaning of conflict may be presented here. According to Robbins (1974), Conflict is a process in which an effort is purposefully made by one person or unit to block another that results in frustrating the attainment of the other's goals or the furthering of his or her interests. Thomas (1976) views conflict as the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated or is about to frustrate some concern of his. Katz & Kahn (1978) view that two systems (persons, groups, organisations, nations) are in conflict when they interact directly in such a way that the actions of one tend to prevent or compel some outcome against the resistance of the other. According to Chung & Megginson (1981),

conflict refers to the struggle between incompatible or opposing needs, wishes, ideas, interests or people; it arises when individuals or groups encounter goals that both parties cannot obtain satisfactorily. Kabanoff (1986) opines that Conflict is the result of incongruent or incompatible relationships between members of a group or dyad. According to Roloff (1987), Organisational conflict occurs when members engage in activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network, members of other collectivities, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of the organisation. Hellreigel, Slocum, & Woodman (1992) define conflict as any situation in which incompatible goals, attitudes, emotions and behaviours lead to disagreement or opposition between two or more parties. Steers & Black (1994) define Conflict as the process by which individuals or groups react to other entities that have frustrated or are about to frustrate their plans, goals, beliefs or activities.

Some authors also include the environment as a constituent element of the inter-relationship (Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2000; Coy & Woehrl, 2000; Demmers, 2006; Lederach, 2000). According to Mayer (2000) conflict is “a feeling, a disagreement, a real or perceived incompatibility of interests, inconsistent worldviews, or a set of behaviors.” Conflict has also been referred to as differences between individuals or groups relating to interests, beliefs, needs and values (De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999).

Rahim (2002) conceptualizes conflict as “an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e. individual, group, organisation, etc.)”. According to Rahim, conflict may occur when:

1. A party is required to engage in an activity that is incongruent with his or her needs or interests.
2. A party holds behavioural preferences, the satisfaction of which is incompatible with another person’s implementation of his or her preferences.
3. A party wants some mutually desirable resource that is in short supply, such that the wants of everyone may not be satisfied fully.
4. A party possesses attitudes, values, skills, and goals that are salient in directing his or her behaviour but are perceived to be exclusive of the attitudes, values, skills, and goals held by the other(s).
5. Two parties have partially exclusive behavioural preferences regarding their joint actions.
6. Two parties are interdependent in the performance of functions or activities.

Thus, on the whole, it can be concluded that a conflict situation is primarily the result of differences on account of issues related to a task or inter-personal relationships (Ongori, 2010). It is “the substantive issue in which the tension

is rooted” (De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999). Task conflicts result from disagreements within the group or among groups as to the content of the task or how it should be performed (procedure for accomplishing goals) whereas relationship conflicts are a result of interpersonal incompatibilities and manifest as tension, animosity among group members (Jehn, 1995).

### **The Dynamics of Conflict**

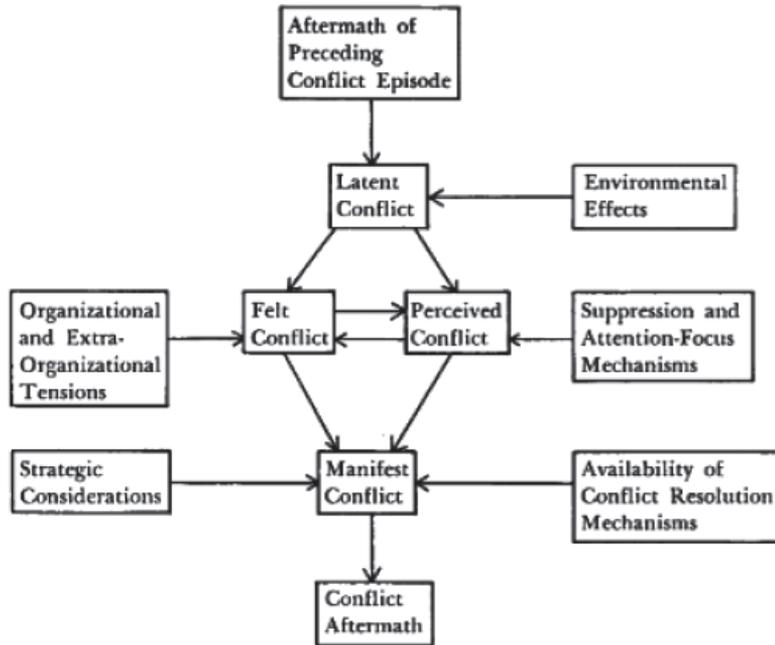
It was observed by Pondy (1967) and Walton and Dutton (1969) that conflict in a dyadic relationship tends to occur in cycles. In other words, a conflict relationship between two individuals or other social units can be analyzed as a sequence of conflict episodes. Each conflict episode is partially shaped by the results of previous episodes and in turn, leaves an aftermath that affects the course of succeeding episodes.

Five stages of a conflict episode were identified by Pondy (1967) as can be seen from Figure 1. These stages are (1) latent conflict (antecedent conditions), (2) perceived conflict (cognition), (3) felt conflict (affective stages e.g. stress, tension, anxiety, hostility, etc.), (4) manifest conflict (conflictful behaviour ranging from passive resistance to overt aggression), and (5) conflict aftermath (outcomes/consequences). Pondy (1967) concentrated on three basic types of latent conflict: (1) competition for scarce

resources (2) drives for autonomy and (3) divergence of sub-unit goals. The next important stage of a conflict episode involves the cognitive states of individuals i.e. their perception or awareness of conflictful situations. It may be noted that conflict may sometimes be perceived when no conditions of latent conflict exist, and latent conflict conditions may be present in a relationship without any of the participants perceiving the conflict. Felt conflict refers to the affective state of individuals involved in a conflict situation (e.g. stress, tension, hostility, anxiety, etc.). Manifest conflict results when an individual member of an organization consciously engages in behaviour that blocks another member’s goal achievement. Manifest conflict may mean any of several varieties of conflictful behaviour, ranging from passive resistance to overt aggression.

It may be reemphasized that each conflict episode is nothing but one of a sequence of such episodes that constitute the relationships among organization participants. If the conflict is genuinely resolved to the satisfaction of all participants, the basis for a more cooperative relationship may be laid. On the other hand, if the conflict is merely suppressed but not resolved, the latent conditions of conflict may be aggravated and explode in more serious form until they are rectified or until the relationship dissolves. This legacy of a conflict episode is here called “conflict aftermath”.

**Figure 1**  
The Dynamics of a Conflict Episode



Source: Pondy, L. R. (1967). Organisational Conflict: Concepts and models. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, (12), 296-320.

### Antecedents to Organizational Conflict

As it was pointed out at the beginning, the literature on organisational conflict has been somewhat compartmentalized, dealing mostly with certain specialized organisational arenas. So it is but quite natural that the organisation theorists have attempted to analyze the determinants of organisational conflict in the context of interest-group conflicts, inter-personal conflict, inter-departmental disputes, and so on. However, such isolated attempts made to deal with casual factors related only to a narrow segment of organisational conflict at one time have only stood in the

way of development of a comprehensive theory of conflict and conflict management.

Conflict situations in organizations may be triggered due to several factors. In the present section, an endeavour has been made to integrate the determinants of organisational conflict as emphasised by sociologists and other behavioural scientists. The various determinants or underlying sources of conflict discussed are: competition for scarce resources, mutual task dependence, organisational differentiation, identity concerns, performance criteria and rewards, barriers

to communication, ambiguities, personality attributes, hierarchical differences in prestige, power and knowledge, role dissatisfaction, drive for autonomy, and need for tension release.

### **Competition for Scarce Resources**

Conflict potential exists among interest groups where there is a discrepancy between aggregated demands of the competing parties and the available resources (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). There is often conflict between labour and management over their respective share of enterprise profits; departmental units often compete for scarce organisational resources such as physical space, equipment, manpower, capital funds and centralised services (e.g. typing, drafting etc.); and so on. Walton (1965) describes such conflicts as complex relationships which involve both integrative (cooperative) and distributive sub-processes. Each party to the conflict has an interest in making the total resource as large as possible, referred to as “*expanding the pie*” (Pruitt, 1981) or “*creating value*” (Lax & Sebenius, 1986; Olekalns, 1997) but also in securing as large a share of them as possible for itself – a process referred to as “*claiming value*” (Lax & Sebenius, 1986; Olekalns, 1997). Conflict due to scarce resources is also referred to as the Bargaining Model of conflict due to the dynamics involved (Pondy, 1967). The integrative sub-process is largely concerned with joint problem solving to maximize outcomes (Pruitt, 1981), and the distributive sub-

process with strategic bargaining.

### **Mutual Task Dependence**

Task dependence is the extent to which two functional units operating at the same hierarchical level depend upon each other for assistance, information, compliance or other coordinative acts in the performance of their respective tasks. Important types of interdependence matter are: (1) common usage of some service or facility, (2) sequence of work or information flow prescribed by task or hierarchy, and (3) rules of unanimity or consensus about joint activity. This type of conflict occurs mostly among groups or individuals engaged in a functional relationship and is also referred to as the Systems Model of conflict (Pondy, 1967). Dutton & Walton (1966) indicate that task-dependence not only provides an incentive for collaboration, but also presents an occasion for conflict and the means for bargaining over interdepartmental issues. As the sub-units often have different sets of active goals (Simon, 1964) or different preference orderings for the same sets of goals, ample scope for inter-unit conflict exists.

### **Organizational Differentiation**

It is commonly acknowledged that uniform tasks require a bureaucratic type of organization whereas non-uniform tasks require a human relations organization. In the present day society, most large-scale organizations have to deal with both uniform and non-uniform tasks, and most combine these contradictory forms of

social relations into a professional model. Litwak (1961) regards the inclusion of these contradictory forms as a source of organisational conflict.

Lawrence & Lorsch (1967) emphasized the effects of differentiation on organisational conflict. Where each of the functional units (such as production, sales or research) performs a different type of task and copes with a different segment of the environment, the units will develop significant internal differences among themselves with respect to their: (a) degree of structure; (b) interpersonal orientation; (c) time orientation; and (d) goal orientation. Lawrence & Lorsch believe that this four-fold differentiation is largely a response to the degree of uncertainty in the relevant environments of different departments. They found that such differentiation between organisational units posed an obstacle to integration or coordinative processes, thus yielding ample scope for inter-unit conflict.

### **Identity Concerns**

Identity concerns (Mayer & Louw, 2009) of individuals in terms of their self concepts such as feelings of being knowledgeable, confident, experienced, etc. have a profound influence on organisational conflicts. In his conceptual analysis of inter-organisational decision making, Walton (1972) views that the identity concerns of organizations are of crucial significance in the choice of strategies (to be made for making joint decisions) as well as their potential

consequences. If the identity needs of two parties are compatible (i.e. identity reinforcement), the parties are more likely to resort to problem-solving and exploit their integrative potential with a view to maximizing the joint gains available to them. However, when the preferred identities are in conflict (i.e. identity conflict), the parties are more likely to engage in bargaining behaviors and obtain sub optimal decisions.

### **Performance Criteria and Rewards**

Inter-departmental conflict arises when each of the interdependent units has responsibility for only one side of a dilemma embedded in organisational tasks. Dutton and Walton (1966) noted that the preference of production units for long, economical runs conflicted with the preference of sales units for quick delivery to good customers. Dalton (1959) observed that staff units valued change because that was one way they could prove their worth, whereas line units valued stability because change reflected unfavorably upon them. While such dilemmas underlying inter-departmental differences are inherent in the total task, the reward system (Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000) designed by management may either increase or dissipate their divisive effects. The more the reward system emphasizes the separate performance of each department rather than their combined performance, the greater is the likelihood of conflict to occur.

## Barriers to Communication

Research findings have indicated that semantic differentials can impede communication essential for cooperation. This challenge is especially heightened in the current globalized economic environment with diverse interacting cultures (Mayer & Louw, 2009). Straus (1964) observed that differences in the training of purchasing agents and engineers contributed to their conflicts. March & Simon (1958) stated that organisational channeling of information introduced bias. In an empirical investigation of the causes of inter-departmental conflicts, Walton and Dutton (1969) used three measures of conflict, typically characteristic of the bargaining type of decision processes (a) distrust; (b) overstatement of departmental needs; and (c) lack of consideration of another department's needs. It was postulated that reducing the levels of the above three conflict variables would promote problem-solving behaviors. The results of the study revealed that communication-inhibiting factors were most significantly related to the composite measure of the conflict variables.

## Ambiguities

Ambiguity contributes to inter-departmental conflict in many different ways. Difficulty in assigning credit or blame between two departments increases the likelihood of conflict between units. Dalton (1959) attributed part of the line-staff conflict he observed to the fact that although improvements required

collaboration between line and staff units, it was later difficult to assess the contribution of each unit. Similarly, Dutton and Walton (1966) found that conflicts arose between production and sales units when it could not be determined as to which department made a mistake. Low routinisation and uncertainty of means to goals increase the potential for inter-unit conflict. This proposition is supported by Zald (1962) in his study of inter-unit conflict in five correctional institutions. Ambiguity in the criteria used to evaluate the performance of a unit may also create tensions, frustration, and conflict (Kahn *et al.*, 1964).

## Personality Attributes

A review of experimental studies led Walton & McKersie (1965) to observe that certain personality attributes such as high authoritarianism, high dogmatism, and low self-esteem increase conflict behaviour. Kahn *et al.* (1964) found that in objective role conflict, persons who scored lower on neurotic anxiety scales tended to depart more from "cordial, congenial, trusting, respecting and understanding relations". A person with a narrow range of behavioral skills is less likely to exploit the integrative potential fully in an inter-unit relationship. He may either engage in bargaining to the exclusion of collaborative problem-solving, or withdraw or become passive (Walton & McKersie, 1966). Dalton (1959) and Thompson (1960) found that personal dissimilarities such as education, social patterns, values, background, age, etc.

lowered the probability of inter-personal rapport between departmental representatives, and in turn, decreased the amount of collaboration between their respective units.

### **Hierarchical Differences in Prestige, Power and Knowledge**

Inter-unit conflict is produced by differences in the way units are ranked along various dimensions of organisational status such as direction of initiation of action, prestige, power and knowledge. As reported by Seiler (1963), when the sequential pattern of initiation and influence followed the status ordering among departments, it was acceptable to all. However, where a lower-status unit needed to direct a higher-status unit, the result was break-down in inter-unit relationships. In his study of correctional institutions, Zald (1962) offered an explanation of the effects of relative power. With mutual task dependence and divergent values among the three units studied, conflict occurred as expected between units that are unable to control the situation and those perceived as being in control. Inconsistency between the distribution of knowledge among departments and the lateral influence patterns are also a source of conflict. Lawrence & Lorsch (1967) observed that the more the influence of each unit is consistent with key competitive factors, the more effectively will the inter-unit issues be resolved.

### **Role Dissatisfaction**

Role dissatisfaction stemming from a variety of sources can be a source of conflict. Dalton (1959) found that blocking status aspirations in staff members led to conflict with other units. In these cases, the professionals felt that they lacked recognition and opportunities for advancements. Similarly, where one unit internally reports on the activities of another unit, resentment can occur, as with staff units reporting to management on production irregularities (Dalton, 1959). Argyris (1964) and Dalton (1959) both have argued that role dissatisfaction and conflict would follow where one unit with the same or less status set standards for another.

### **Drive for Autonomy**

Superior-subordinate conflicts in an organization usually arise because superiors attempt to control the behaviour of subordinates, and subordinates resist such control. The subordinate is likely to perceive conflict when the superior attempts to exercise control over activities outside the "zone of indifference" (i.e. over activities perceived to be outside the latter's jurisdiction), and the superior perceives conflict when his attempts at control are thwarted. A typical bureaucratic reaction to subordinate resistance is the substitution of impersonal rules for personal control. Such imposition of rules defines the authority relation more clearly and robs the subordinate of the autonomy provided by ambiguity. The

subordinate, therefore, perceives himself to be threatened by and in conflict with his superiors, who are attempting to decrease his autonomy.

### **Need for Tension Release**

Another important underlying source of organisational conflict is the human need for tension release (Coser, 1967; Pondy, 1967). It has been observed in organizations that the inconsistent demands of efficient organisational and individual growth often create anxieties within the individual (Argyris, 1957). Anxiety may also result from identity crisis from extra-organisational pressures. Individuals need to ventilate these anxieties in order to maintain internal equilibrium. In fact, latent conflicts of various types provide defensible excuses to individuals for displaying their anxieties against suitable targets.

### **Effects of Conflict**

The traditional view of conflict assumed that conflict is essentially negative in character and is detrimental to the attainment of organisational objectives. However, the contemporary management thinkers conceive of conflict as a multidimensional concept, i.e. both negative and positive in character (Tjosvold & Chia, 1989). Van de Vliert and colleagues (1999) stated that “conflict can be handled in either a constructive or destructive way”. Despite this recent conceptualisation of conflict, few studies are available in which the researchers have tried to distinguish between constructive

conflict and destructive conflict as well as their respective effects on organisational outcomes. Research studies have shown a negative association between “disharmony” and the quality of employee relationships and between “disharmony” and new product success in terms of innovation performance. Conversely, harmonious or cooperative relationships have been found to be associated with improved performance. Dyer and Song (1998) specifically modeled constructive conflict and found that it leads to innovation success. Menon and colleagues (1996) found indirect linkages between dysfunctional (destructive) conflict and market performance for new product introductions. Song, Dyer, & Thieme (2006) found a strong positive association between constructive conflict and innovation performance and a strong negative association between destructive conflict and innovation performance.

Guetzkow and Gyr (1954) suggested two dimensions of conflict in the organisational context – one consisting of disagreements relating to task issues and the other consisting of emotional or interpersonal issues which lead to conflict. These two dimensions of conflict have been given a variety of labels – e.g. substantive and affective conflicts (Guetzkow & Gyr, 1954), task and relationship conflicts (Pinkley, 1990; Jehn, 1997), cognitive and affective conflicts (Amason, 1996), and task and emotional conflicts (Ross, 1989). In recent years, several researchers have empirically

investigated these two dimensions of conflict. They suggest that the distinction between these two types of conflict is valid and that they have differential effects at the workplace.

It may be noted that affective conflict refers to inconsistency in interpersonal relationships which occurs when organisational members become aware that their feelings and emotions regarding some of the issues are incompatible. "Summarily stated, relationship conflicts interfere with task-related effort because members focus on reducing threats, increasing power, and attempting to build cohesion rather than working on task... The conflict causes members to be negative, irritable, suspicious, and resentful" (Jehn, 1997).

Research evidence has shown that affective conflict impedes group performance by limiting information – processing ability and cognitive functioning of group members and antagonistic attributions of group members' behaviour (Amason, 1996; Baron, 1997; Jehn, 1995; Jehn *et. al.*, 1999; Wall and Nolan, 1986). Affective conflicts are detrimental to the performance of the team as decisions are unlikely to be based on the merits of the case and backed by solid commitment for implementation (DeChurch, Hamilton, and Haas, 2007). Such conflicts could result in dysfunctional teams, and reduced performance and cohesion (Jehn and Chatman, 2000; Sullivan and Feltz, 2001; Wheaton, 1974). Affective conflicts

diminish group loyalty, workgroup commitment, intent to stay in the present organisation, and job satisfaction (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995, 1997; Jehn *et. al.*, 1999). These result from higher levels of stress and anxiety and conflict escalation.

Substantive conflict occurs when two or more organisational members disagree on their task or content issues. Substantive conflict is very similar to issue conflict which occurs when two or more social entities disagree on the recognition of and solution to a task problem. A study conducted by Jehn (1995) revealed that a moderate level of substantial conflict is beneficial as it stimulates discussion and debate which helps groups to attain higher levels of performance. As observed by Jehn (1997), "Groups with an absence of task conflict may miss new ways to enhance their performance while very high levels of task conflict may interfere with task completion".

Evidence indicates that substantive conflict is positively associated with beneficial outcomes in organisations. Groups that report substantive conflict are able to make better decisions than those that do not (Amason, 1996; Cosier & Rose, 1977; Fiol, 1994; Putnam, 1994, Schweiger, Sandberg, & Raga, 1986). Substantial conflict encourages greater understanding of the issues, which leads to better decisions. Such conflict promotes frank and open discussions potentially leading to innovative solutions, and also

reduces possibilities of complacency, status quo and tendency towards “group think” (Gero, 1985; Turner & Pratkanis, 1997). In addition, it has been noted that groups that report substantive conflict generally have higher performance levels. Substantial conflict can improve group performance through better understanding of various viewpoints and alternative solutions (Bourgeois, 1985; Eisenhardt & Schoonhoven, 1990; Jehn, 1995, 1997; Jehn *et. al.*, 1999). It should be noted, however, that the beneficial effects of substantial conflict on performance have been found only in groups performing non-routine tasks, but not in groups performing standardized or routine tasks.

### **Desirability of Conflict**

The human relations movement, with its emphasis upon the personal and organization costs of conflict, implied that conflict was to be avoided or eliminated (Kelly, 1970; Litterer, 1966). This traditional notion of conflict essentially resulted from the misconception that conflict is inherently distasteful, destructive and pathological to organisational objectives. Although Kahn *et.al.* (1964) considered some conflict as essential for the continued development of mature and competent human beings; they stated that “common reactions to conflict and its associated tensions are often dysfunctional for the organization as an ongoing social system and self-defeating for the person in the long run. Similarly, Boulding (1962) recognizes that some optimum level of

conflict and associated personal stress and tension are necessary for progress and productivity but he portrays conflict primarily as a personal and social cost. Even the more dispassionate theory of organization proposed by March & Simon (1958) defines conflict conceptually as a “breakdown in the standard mechanism of decision-making”, i.e. as a malfunction of the system.

Attitudes towards conflict appear to have changed over the years. A more balanced view of conflict has emerged in the literature, which recognizes its costs and benefits, its dangers and promises. More and more social scientists are coming to realize and to demonstrate that conflict by itself is no evil, but rather a phenomenon which can have constructive or destructive effects, depending upon its management. As stated by Thomas (1976), “with the recognition that conflict can be both useful and destructive, the emphasis has shifted from the elimination of conflict to the management of conflict”. Now there is a more general recognition that inter-personal and inter-group conflict, if managed properly, serves many useful functions in the organization (Coser, 1956; Blake & Mouton, 1964; Deutsch, 1971; Hoffman, Harburg, & Maier, 1962; Pondy, 1967, Thompson, 1960). These useful functions of conflict have been described by Thomas (1976) in a succinct manner, as given hereunder.

First, a moderate degree of conflict may not necessarily be viewed as a cost

by the parties involved. It is increasingly recognized that too little stimulation or tension may be as unpleasant to a person as an excess of it. Under conditions of low tension, people may welcome or seek out the novelty of divergent opinions, the challenge of competition, and at times, even the excitement of open hostilities. Deutsch (1971) mentions that conflicts stimulate interest and curiosity, and that "conflict is part of the process of testing and assessing oneself and as such, may be highly enjoyable as one experiences the full and active use of one's capacities".

Second, the confrontation of divergent views often produces ideas of superior quality (Pelz, 1956; Hoffman, 1959; Hoffman & Maier, 1961; Hall, 1971). Divergent views must be based upon different considerations, different insights and different frames of reference. Disagreements may thus lead an individual to take cognizance of factors which he had previously ignored, and help him to arrive at a more comprehensive and balanced view of things.

Third, aggressive behaviour in conflict situations is not necessarily irrational or destructive. Indeed, the aggressive pursuit of apparently conflicting goals by two parties may well lead to constructive outcomes. March & Simon (1958) and Litterer (1966) state that such conflict tends to initiate a search for ways of reducing the conflict. Since one party's gains are not necessarily another party's losses, the parties may succeed in finding

new arrangements which benefit them both (Follett, 1941) as well as the organization.

A few other useful side effects of conflict have also been noted by the social scientists. Litterer (1966) noted that conflict within an organization may call attention to systemic problems which require change. Hostility between groups also tends to foster internal cohesiveness and unity of purpose within groups (Coser, 1956; Blake & Mouton, 1961). Finally, power struggles often provide the mechanism for determining the balance of power, and thus adjusting the terms of a relationship according to these realities (Coser, 1956).

### **Management of Conflict**

It has been widely recongised that conflict by itself should not be regarded as a negative phenomenon within organisations. Rather, there is ample research evidence to show that conflict can have positive or negative effects within organisations depending upon its management. Here, it would be significant to note that studies on the management of organisational conflict have generally moved in two directions. Some researchers have attempted to measure the amount or intensity of conflict at various organisational levels in terms of stress, anxiety, hostility, tension, competition, etc., and also explore the sources of such conflict. The underlying implication of these studies is that a moderate amount of conflict may be maintained for enhancing organisational effectiveness by altering the

sources of conflict. As Brown (1983) has suggested, “conflict management can require intervention to reduce conflict if there is too much, or intervention to promote conflict if there is too little”. However, it should be pointed out that the relationship suggested by Brown as mentioned above, seems to be appropriate only for substantive, but not for affective conflict. As discussed previously, Guetzkow & Gyr (1954) have differentiated between substantive and affective conflict, and have suggested that substantial conflict consisting of disagreements relating to tasks, policies and other organisational issues is positively associated with beneficial outcomes in organisations. On the other hand, affective conflict consists of emotional or interpersonal issues, and it has been found to impede group performance as well as other measures of organisational effectiveness. Thus, while substantial conflict is to be maintained at an appropriate level within organisations, affective conflict should be discouraged as much as possible on account of its dysfunctional effects. The instrument developed by Jehn (1994) can be used to measure affective and substantive conflicts at the group level as well as at the interpersonal and intergroup levels.

The second approach to the management of conflicts has been used by researchers to relate various styles of handling interpersonal conflict and their effects on organisational objectives. In fact, a number of research studies have

been conducted on the relationship between styles of handling conflict and different dimensions or aspects of individual, interpersonal, interdepartmental or organisational effectiveness. At a conceptual level, Blake and Mouton (1964) suggested that individuals or organisations placing greater emphasis on confrontation or problem – solving behaviour would have effective interpersonal relations. In an empirical study, Lawrence & Lorsch (1967) examined the use of confrontation, forcing and smoothing in six organisations. Their research findings indicated that while confrontation or problem – solving behaviour seemed to be clearly related to organisational effectiveness, it was also noted that the absence of smoothing and the presence of forcing as a back – up mode (to confrontation) were related to effective organisational functioning. Another study conducted by Burke (1969) involved examining the five methods of resolving conflicts (as proposed by Blake and Mouton) in the context of superior – subordinate relations.

It was found that confrontation or problem – solving emerged as the most effective method of conflict resolution, and it was followed by smoothing behaviours. In addition, it was noted that withdrawing and forcing behaviours were negatively related to interpersonal effectiveness while compromising was not at all related to effectiveness. In the context of interdepartmental relations, Thomas (1971) found that managers’ satisfaction

with interdepartmental negotiations varied positively with confrontation and smoothing behaviour by their counterparts in other departments, and negatively with forcing and withdrawing. Another study conducted by Aram *et. al.* (1971) within research and development teams indicated that team collaboration was positively related to several measures of member self-actualization and well-being. By contrast, Dutton and Walton (1966) observed that managers involved in competitive inter-departmental relations experienced considerable frustration and anxiety.

It must be pointed out that the studies available on the relationship between conflict management strategies and organisational or individual effectiveness have been mostly conducted in American industrial settings, which may not be so pertinent to Indian industrial situations. In the Indian context, a case study conducted by Sharma and Samantara (1994) on the relative effectiveness of conflict resolution methods in terms of their effects on organisational effectiveness aspects (i.e. productivity, adaptability and flexibility) of a computer-manufacturing organisation revealed that confrontation or problem-solving was the most effective method of conflict resolution, and it was followed by smoothing behaviour. Although the compromising and withdrawing models were somewhat positively related to effectiveness, their effects seemed to be relatively insignificant. It was also noted that the forcing mode of resolving conflicts emerged as the ineffective one.

## Concluding Observations

In the preceding analysis, the contributions of leading theoreticians as well as researchers on the subject of organisational conflict have been put together in an integrated framework. In fact, the present research has been immensely revealing in that it focuses on certain fundamental issues related to organisational conflict such as its internal dynamics, its antecedent conditions, and the changing view of conflict and conflict management in recent times. It is hoped that the ideas and insights gained from this analysis will help the practicing managers to take a more pragmatic view of conflicts existing at various organisational levels and also seek to realize their potential benefits to the organization in terms of individual as well as group development, organisational innovation and creativity, higher performance levels, etc., through better management practices.

On the basis of our analysis of research studies conducted on the relationship between conflict management strategies and several aspects of organisational effectiveness, we can conclude that the problem-solving strategy or behaviour may be viewed as the most effective way of managing conflicts in organisations, and it may be supplemented by the use of smoothing behaviour. Thus, there is a need to encourage managers to enhance their utilization of these two conflict management strategies or methods, especially in the context of the emerging

scenario of increasing education, skills and horizon of understanding of industrial employees. However, the research findings have also amply demonstrated that forcing behaviours are rather counter-productive in the management of organisational conflicts. In view of the emergence of industrial democracy, the present-day managers can no longer afford to ignore the needs and aspirations of their subordinates, or ignore the latter's suggestions and viewpoints on a variety of organisational issues. In fact, the subordinate employees do have the necessary ability to understand and analyse the intricacies related to the work situation, and also get involved in organisational decision-making. Thus, the managers should make a reduction in their utilization of forcing behaviours in resolving or managing conflicts with their subordinates.

In the end, it must be pointed out that the above suggestions made regarding the relative efficacy or effectiveness of conflict management strategies may have immense practical relevance to industrial situations and conditions. However, still there is a paramount need to conduct comprehensive research studies across industries, especially in the Indian context, with a view to obtaining research findings that would have greater validity as well as general applicability to the Indian industrial environment. In addition, we should not be oblivious of the fact that there are also several situational variables such as employees' education and skills, their economic conditions, organisational

climate, social norms, etc. which do play a significant role in the choice of conflict management strategies as well as their attendant consequences on different aspects of organisational effectiveness. Therefore, the managers must try to understand and analyse the situational variables before choosing the appropriate style of conflict management to be used in a given situation. Although different notable contingency approaches to conflict management (Thomas, 1972, 1976; Derr, 1978; Pareek, 1982; Rahim, 1985; Rahim *et al.*, 2001; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979) have analysed different sets of situational variables affecting the choice of conflict management strategies as well as their potential outcomes or effects, there is a specific need to conduct empirical research studies regarding the efficacy or effectiveness of conflict management strategies in the context of various organisational as well as psycho-social variables.

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