

Conflict Management and Emotional Intelligence in Organizations

Introduction

Conflict is generally present within many organizations. Most organizations use “conflict management” as a tool to deal with conflict. According to Suliman and Fuad (2007), they note that it is imperative to understand conflict and the function associated in influencing employee behavior and work outcomes; which can often be barred by the resistance of change within an organization. Suliman et. al. (2007) feel in order to gain a competitive advantage in organizations, they must be adaptable to change. It is noted by Krishnaveni and Deepa (2011) that employees react differently to change.

In this paper, I will:

1. Explain the definition of emotional intelligence (EI) and several theories associated with it.
2. Review the definitions of emotional competencies.
3. Define conflict and explain the evolution conflict and its theories.
4. Explain the integration of conflict and EI and how it affects the workplace.

This section will further explain the importance of emotional intelligence. Most individuals in society are familiar with IQ, or physical intelligence. The first individual to introduce a theory based on multiple intelligences was Gardner (1983). According to Morrison (2008), it was suggested by Rafaeli and Sutton (1989) that emotional expression was important to organizational behavior; after the theorists had analyzed the work of Hochschild (1983) and his concepts of *emotional labor* and *emotional work*. Emotional Intelligence (EI), as noted by Ashkanasy and Dasborough (2003), has always been present in the workplace. The first theorists to further analyze emotional intelligence were Salovey and Mayer (1990). These theorists explained EI as “the ability a person possesses in order to read the emotions of others and to act accordingly” (Morrison, 2008, 976). According to Morrison (2008), three primary theories present in emotional intelligence are:

- Bar-On theory
- Mayer and Salovey theory
- Goleman theory

The first of the three theories of EI was the Bar-On (1988) theory. According to Morrison (2008), this theory suggests various traits and abilities to influence how a person copes with the demands of the environment. According to Bar-On (1988), EI is the ability to deal effectively with others and have a positive control over emotions.

The data of the Bar-On model includes (1988):

- The awareness and understanding of oneself.
- The awareness of, understanding of, and relationships with others.
- Controlling one's impulses and strong emotions.
- Adapting to change as well as being able to solve personal and social problems.

After conducting further research, Bar-On (1997), concluded five categories exist within their model. These categorized are noted below:

- Intrapersonal Skills
- Adaptability
- Interpersonal Skills
- Stress Management
- General Mood

Research by Bar-On also suggested that people of an advanced age score higher on his scale of EI, due to their ability to learn EI through life experiences (Bar-On, 2000).

Mayer and Salovey (1997), the theorists of the second primary theory, assumed that traditional measures of intelligence did not assess a person's ability to perceive, process, and manage emotions and their information following it.

According to Morrison (2008), Mayer and Salovey introduced four components of EI:

- Perceiving emotions
- Integrating emotions into thought processes
- Understanding emotions
- Regulating and managing emotions to stimulate emotional and intellectual growth

These theorists also believed that in order for EI to be eligible as an “actual intelligence,” several pieces of criterion must be met (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, 2000):

- EI must describe a set of abilities that differ from already established intelligence and should develop with age.
- EI must not reflect preferred behavioral patterns but actual mental performance.

The third primary theory, is the most recent to evolve, according to Morrison (2008).

Goleman (1995) was intrigued as to why some individuals with high IQs struggled in the workplace, compared to individuals with moderate IQs, who had no problems. Goleman (1995) felt this issue was as a result of the EI of the individual. According to Morrison (2008), Goleman depicts EI as self-control, persistence, and motivation. His theory also portrays EI as a opportunity for developing the skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Morrison, 2008). Goleman (1998) feels that those abilities can be taught to children at a young age, in order to balance their genetic IQ and EI.

Goleman, Boyatzis, and Mckee (2002) also suggest two emotional competencies: *personal competencies* and *social competencies*. Goleman et. al. (2002) state that personal

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competencies involve self-awareness, which according to Morrison (2008), is the “understanding of one’s preferences, resources, internal states, and intuitions (978)”; as well as self-management, which is known as “managing one’s internal states, impulses, and resources” (978). These theorists also state that social competencies involve social awareness and relationship management. According to Morrison (2008), social awareness is described as “being aware of other’s needs and handling relationships” (978); while relationship management is known as “the skill of obtaining desirable responses in others” (978).

Conflict

Van Slyke (1999) notes conflict as the “competition between interdependent parties who perceive that they have incompatible needs, goals, desires, or ideas (5).” Modaff, Butler, and Dewine (2012) define “interdependent parties” as “two parts of a system (people, teams or departments) that have some connection to each other and each party is dependent on each other to accomplish task (79).” It was noted that if the parties were fully independent, no conflict would have developed as the teams have no connect to each other (2012).

It is noted by Modaff et. al. (2012) that conflict can be *substantive* or *affective*. *Substantive conflict* is noted to occur “when organizational members disagree on task or content issues (79);” however, *affective conflict* is noted to deal with the irregularities that exist within interpersonal relationships, according to Modaff et. al. (2012).

According to Rahim (2001), three types of conflict can occur within an organization:

- Interpersonal
- Intragroup
- Intergroup

Modaff et. al. (2012) notes interpersonal conflict as “a conflict that occurs between two or more people that may or may not have have to do with organizational tasks or task-related feelings (80).” Intragroup (Intradepartmental) conflict, according to Modaff et. al. (2012) occurs between members of a group that have a dependency on goals, tasks, or procedures. Intergroup (Interdepartmental) conflict, as noted by Modaff et. al. (2012), occurs when two or more groups disagree on a specific task or behavior (80).

Rahim (2001) also notes four factors that may contribute to conflict within organizations:

- Conflict is known to arise when individuals are required to take on a behavior that is contradictory of their needs or interests.
- Conflict may arise when individuals compete for scarce resources that they desire personally or need in order to do their job to the fullest extent.
- When an individual has attitudes, values, skills, or goals that are often exclusive to another party, conflict can arise.

- Organizational conflict levels can be increased when interdependent parties have partial or full behaviors associated with joint activities that are often exclusive to individual parties.

According to Morrison (2008), early organizational theorists such as Weber (1947), Marx (1967), and Taylor (1911) figured conflict to be of a negative nature. These theorists believed conflict should be avoided within organizations, as they believed organizations were closed systems (Morrison, 2008). According to Modaff et. al. (2012), a closed system is composed of several factors. These factors are listed below (2012):

- Closed systems are not rooted in a relevant environment.
- Closed systems are overly focused on the internal functions and behavior.
- Closed systems generally prefer only a single process to accomplish a task versus multiple processes.

Additional factors such as a reflection of unachieved goals and limited resources were believed by these early theorists to influence an organization's efficiency (2008). A couple theorists known as Follett (1924) and Deutsch (1973) reformed the perception of conflict within the workplace (Morrison, 2008); and viewed conflict as useful and constructive. These theorists felt it should not be categorized as a weakness, but as an opportunity to enhance productivity, as long as conflict is handled appropriately. Morrison (2008) states the concept of organizational conflict management was not well-known until the 1970's and later. According

to Mathur and Sayeed (1983), conflict was essential in order to achieve organizational goals and cohesiveness of employees.

One of the first theorists to analyze the styles of handling interpersonal conflict in organizations in a systematic approach was known as Follett (1924). This theorist suggested domination, compromise, and integration as three primary ways of handling conflict, and to use avoidance and suppression as a secondary plan if the primary tactics are not reliable (Morrison, 2008). Blake and Mouton (1964) were one of the first theorists to introduce differentiations of conflict styles. These differentiations were classified into two different dimensions known as: *concern for production* and *concern for people*; which were developed into a managerial grid (1964). These dimensions were categorized as (Blake and Mouton, 1964):

- *Forcing*-Low concern for people; Low concern for production.
- *Smoothing*-High concern for people; Low concern for production.
- *Compromising*-Moderate concern for people and production
- *Problem Solving*-High concern for people and production

After the introduction of Blake and Mouton's theory, *assertiveness* and *cooperativeness* were introduced as two components of conflict behavior by Thomas and Kilmann (1977).

Integrating Conflict and Emotional Intelligence

Organizational scholars, according to Godse and Thingujam (2010) consider EI to play an important in organizational and social behavior. Rahim (2002) notes that employees with high emotional intelligence are able to negotiate and effectively handle their conflicts with

organizational members, as compared to employees with low emotional intelligence. With the basis of cooperativeness and assertiveness in mind, Thomas and Killman (1974) introduced five categories of conflict handling styles, which are also noted as “conflict management or resolution styles.” According to Godse et. al. (2010), these categories are:

- *Avoiding*-unassertive and uncooperative behaviors
- *Dominating/Competing*-assertive and uncooperative behaviors
- *Accommodating*-cooperative and unassertive behaviors
- *Compromising*-moderate level of cooperation and assertiveness
- *Collaborating/Integrating*-strong level of cooperation and assertiveness

According to Jordan and Troth (2004), EI is often associated with conflict handling styles.

According to McShane and Von Glinow (2000), the collaboration strategy is the best level to obtain as it allows information sharing, openness, and clarification of issues. McShane et. al (2000) feels this type of strategy allows both parties to reach a mutual solution. According to Salami (2010), the strategy involving compromise often yields positive work behavior and attitudes. In order to obtain the positive work behavior and attitudes, the parties must come to a mutual compromise with a little more complexity than the collaboration strategy. Salami (2010) describes this strategy as a “give and take” method (77).

The competitive strategy is known to result in negative work behavior, according to Salami (2010). Salami (2010) explains this strategy as a “forcing” strategy, in which one party forces the other part to accept the concept, idea, or position (77). The accommodating strategy

is known to produce positive work behavior and positive attitudes as it is focused on the main points that connect the two parties, versus the points that separate the parties (2010). The avoiding strategy often creates negative behavior and attitudes as it avoids the conflict entirely and has no strategy to resolve it (2010).

Mannix and Trochim (2008) feel that a significant factor in understanding group performance is to focus on the choices made when dealing with conflict. Jordan et. al. (2004) state "If teams make conflict resolution choices that do not allow the team to resolve conflict effectively, those teams are likely to be prone to continuous and escalating conflicts as the group members will focus on the behaviors versus the task at hand (171)." According to Rahim, Garrett, and Buntzman (1992), conflict management strategies are successful with the following conditions:

- Social needs are satisfied
- Moral and ethical needs of members are fulfilled
- Organizational learning and long-term effectiveness are contributed

If the conflict management strategies are not successful, and conflict exists within a group, *mediation* is often needed between conflicting parties. According to Modaff et. al. (2012), mediation and arbitration are forms of alternative dispute resolution that involve third parties. Wiseman and Poitras (2002) define *mediation* as "the balance of power between disputing individuals (Modaff et. al., 2012, 82). In order for the mediation to be effective, full participation is required by all participants. Mediation sometimes can involve an arbitrator,

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who has the legal authority to make decisions for conflicting parties when a decision cannot be reached in other ways (2012). Arbitrators make binding decisions based on evidence collected during negotiation processes (Putnam and Poole, 1987).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explained the definition of emotional intelligence (EI) and several theories associated with it; reviewed the definitions of emotional competencies; defined conflict and explained the evolution conflict and its theories; and explained the integration of conflict and EI and how it affects the workplace. While conflict is often present in organizations, and several factors were defined, conflict can be resolved by utilizing EI as stated in this literature.

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