CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE
– THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to present the conflict's significance in an organizatio's functioning. The notion of a conflict, the reasons for its emergence, functions as well as methods of overcoming it were explained. The dynamics and consequences of a conflict in an organization's functioning were described.

Key words: organizations, organizational behavior, work, conflict.

Introduction

Every workplace being a social organization, i.e. a group of workers aiming towards certain goals in an organized manner, can be efficient in actions, when it functions under the conditions of the so-called social order. Social order is therefore a state of balance necessary for social life processes of a particular organization to run smooth. It also provides cohesion of activities in human resource management. The essence of social order in the workplace is subjective treatment of employees [1]. Sometimes, the disorganization caused by social and cultural factors occurs. The most frequent sources of pathology in the workplace are: excessive absenteeism, increased staff turnover, constantly more accidents at work, conflicts and arguments between employees and between staff and management.

One of the most frequently analyzed subjects by social sciences is an organizational conflict at the workplace. Conflicts occur and widespread in every area of social life. Contemporary world undergoes constant changes, new ideas, political currents, technical progress, complicated economic processes start gaining considerable significance. All of these foster conflicts. The essential elements of a conflict are:

1. contentious issue – its subject can be some social welfare, idea or social relations arrangement;
2. antagonistic parties – individuals or groups;
3. objective – achieving certain benefits at an opponent's expense;
4. fight – deliberate activity directed against others.

Conflicts at the workplace are specific cases of more general phenomena, i.e. social conflicts. The type of conflict at the workplace happens between people cooperating with one another on various professional tasks in workplaces, offices or institutions. Conflicts at the workplaces result from certain objective as well as subjective conditions. The more divisions in the workplaces and the more advanced technological processes, the more complicated the dependencies between employees and the higher the possibility of various conflicts [2].

The essence and reasons for conflicts

The objective conditions of conflicts are various contradictions in the structure of the particular workplace and the environment typical for it. The most crucial conditions are: place and character of work, social and demographical features of the staff, technical equipment of the workplace and worksite, work organization, remuneration system and other tangible and intangible incentives as well as peer relationships.

The existence of internal objective contradictions in the workplace may foster disputes. These may be e.g. contradictions between the existing remuneration system and professional qualifications, their degree of responsibility for work.

The subjective conditions are also of a complex character. They include psycho-social qualities of the staff, i.e. their consciousness, morale, interpersonal skills, qualifications, social activity, life experience etc [2].

Some of the reasons for conflicts in an organization result from its design, others relate to an individual or a group.

Interdependence – greater interdependence intensifies problem with coordination, but also increases conflict's potential. A conflict may emerge in a situation, when one group produces too much (the other group does not keep pace), too little (the other group is not able to fulfill its tasks) or also when the work of the first group is of improper quality.

Differences in objectives – e.g. various departments have different objectives, which are sometimes difficult to bring together.

Competition for resources – most organizations not profit-oriented as well as enterprises from declining branches of industry have limited resources, so competing for them may be the next source of conflict.

Interpersonal Dynamics – conflicts may also emerge from interpersonal dynamics, the most general situation relates to the so-called personality clash, when people do not have trust in the conflicted partner's intentions, they do not like each other or for any other reason they cannot come to terms [3].

In case of considering the reasons for conflicts, the conflict source should be determined. The foundation for conflict situation can be the organization itself. The real organization life is full of various disputes and disagreements. The more diversified the organization, the higher the conflict possibility. R.A.Webber claims that 'the possibility of a conflict emergence depends on three factors: the necessity to share limited resources, incompatible goals, inevitable interdependence of activities' [4].

Inevitable interdependence of activities is very often a sufficient condition leading to a conflict. The character of this interdependence decides on various possibilities of conflict emergence. If a task fulfilled by one group or department depends on other group's (or department's) task, then the possibility of a conflict is higher than when groups (departments) independently fulfill tasks and are independent from each other. It results from the fact that people in organizations depend on one another and this, in turn, restricts their freedom of activity. They need a mutual flow of information, they must decide and coordinate their activities. Cooperation and conflict are strongly linked and they do not exclude each other. The necessity to share resources results from the fact that people constantly have to deal with various restrictions in their organizations. It does not always matter if those restrictions pertain to human, material, financial resources or any other else. The very fact of their existence may generate conflicts. An organization is never able to meet all the needs and expectations of its participants. It relates either to individuals, groups as well as teams. The more restricted the resources, the more probable the conflict. Dependence on common resources is also important. If we deal with individuals, groups or teams which function on the basis of 'own' resources, then the possibility of a conflict is much lower than when those entities use mutual resources.

Sometimes conflicts occur when all the groups are provided with too many tasks. There may be tensions between members of particular groups, who accuse each other of avoiding duties or responsibilities. A conflict may be caused also when work is evenly distributed, but the remuneration for it varies. If one organizational unit cannot commence work until another one finishes its task, then the emergence of a conflict is highly probable [4].

Incompatible goals of particular departments or units is an example of another conflict situation. It results from the fact that particular departments in an organization specialize in various tasks and activities. This diversification often results from the conflict of interests or priorities even when the general goals of an organization are compatible. Particular employees of a department have different goals and points of view, so it is very troublesome for them to determine action plans [4].

When we speak about the reasons for conflict situations, it is worth mentioning the personalities of people who like discussion, polemic, different opinions. Their individual characteristics can intensify those conflicts. Differences in background, education, age and culture decrease the possibility for cooperation. It is not the only reason for inter-group conflicts. This kind of conflict may occur also when the members of various groups do not know much about each other's work and unconsciously make unreasonable claims. If the situation is under control, then the moderate discrepancy may even increase the efficiency of work of organization members. However, there are people who intensify their claims, rise disputes and different opinions and even lead them to the level of a fight. It pertains mainly to highly authoritative people, but also those with low self-esteem [5].

A distinct, but also a very important group of reasons for conflicts includes problems connected with changes in an organization. There may be resistances and even conflict situations. Conflict of interests, views or attitudes of individuals or larger groups reveal. It results from the fact that the implemented change disturbs a certain balance, which was shaped in an organization. Conflicts related to it can be deemed specific, occurring only in certain situations. However, they can occur as a result of improper implementation of innovations.

W. Jarecki slightly differently presents the reasons for conflicts, which he divides into: personal, organizational or social [6]. The behavior of parties is influenced by either individual predispositions and skills as well as pressure from closer and more distant surrounding. Every individual living in a group is in a state of a constant conflict between the aspiration to achieve maximum personal advantage and the necessity to provide group integrity [6].

Summing up all the reasons for conflicts, five most significant can be indicated:

1. The necessity to share limited resources (values).
2. Incompatible goals of particular individuals, groups and organizational units.
3. Interdependence of work visible in the fulfillment of tasks engaging more than one entity.

4. Cultural and personal differences: various attitudes, values, views.

5. Individual styles and lack of clear organizational solutions [4].

Types and functions of conflicts

The literature indicates that a conflict occurs when:

1. values that the parties strive for are limited and their division evokes inevitable disputes;

2. values that the parties strive for are impossible to divide.

Before all, one can distinguish: macro-social conflicts – they include, among others, racial, religion, class, national wars and micro-social conflicts with four basic groups of conflicts, where the distinctive criteria is the character of the engaged entities. Those conflicts are experienced by an individual inside and in his or her social surrounding and they include [7]:

1. Internal conflict of an individual (intra-personal);

2. Conflict between people (inter-personal);

3. Conflict between an individual and a group (intra-group);

4. Conflict between groups (inter-group).

An interpersonal conflict occurs when two or more people belonging to the same society (organization) realize the contradiction between them. This type of conflict can emerge in the workplace. The most frequent reasons for it are: different views, conflict of interests, fight for promotion, prizes and privileges, access to usually restricted organizational resources. These conflicts pertain mostly to people holding certain responsible roles in the workplace and they usually take place at three levels:

1. between a supervisor and a subordinate;

2. between managers holding equal positions;

3. between subordinates.

Employees holding many personal and professional roles, living in a hurry and under pressure are prone to stress. There may be the atmosphere of dissatisfaction around them, their self-esteem diminishes, they more frequently experience internal and interpersonal conflicts [7].

In case of a conflict between a supervisor and a subordinate, its progress is complicated due to the fact that their relationship is not based on equal rights. The supervisor's position is usually strong enough to put the other party in an inferior position. Conflicts between supervisors and subordinates are caused by:

- misunderstandings when it comes to giving orders;

- lack of skills to fulfill them;
- imprecise criteria of assessment;
- forgetting orders either by a supervisor as well as a subordinate;
- improper fulfillment of orders;
- tiredness impeding the fulfillment of tasks set;
- unfair employee's assessment or unjustified preference for others.

Noticing a conflict between a supervisor and a subordinate is hindered due to the fact that very often a manager is very much engaged and he or she is not always able to be objective and self-critical. Very often, this kind of conflict can be hidden. Sometimes it results in the elimination, i.e. dismissal of an employee who, according to the supervisor, creates conflicts [4].

The second group of inter-personal conflicts is composed of conflicts occurring between managers holding equal positions in a company. A conflict in managerial teams is not only probable, but also valuable. It may play a positive role in an organization by leading to a proper distribution of resources and increasing efficiency of the whole company. A conflict causes that managers can receive much more information, they start to understand various points of view and have more possible solutions. Conflicts between managers can emerge also as a result of striving to obtain much more power, eagerness to hold a dominant position, or enhance prestige. Prolonging those phenomena is dangerous as it influences the activity of the whole organization. The solution may be to avoid personal conflicts. When information and decision bonds get broken, it becomes necessary for a superior manager or an independent mediator approved by both conflict parties, to intervene [4].

Interpersonal conflicts between subordinates have various reasons. It is not always necessary for supervisors to interfere as conflicts occur very often and simultaneously they can very quickly die out and therefore sometimes they are difficult to notice.

Other type of conflict is the inter-group one – it emerges usually in organizations with complex structure and the higher the complexity of those organizations, the more frequent the conflicts. This conflict may occur between various departments, organizational divisions (line – staff). The parties of it are certain groups of people represented by leaders. The levels at which the conflict occurs are professional differences between groups of employees, their membership in organizational units that are dependent or competitive as well as different understanding of their and counter-partners role in an organization. Conflicts arising between managerial and production units happen relatively often and are related to as misunderstandings. Their reason lies usually in the misunderstanding of tasks or roles and in frequently existing stereotypes. The same group of conflicts includes the disputes between employees and management,

sometimes even of an aggressive type. They result from, among others: dysfunctional, in relation to company's goals, tasks distribution and participation in decision-making; limited resources, such as: material goods, posts, privileges, prestige, power; disputes pertaining to goals and the way of their fulfillment; incompetency of managers; difficult working conditions [5].

Conflicts functions

Conflicts, due to the function they play in an organization, can be divided as follows:

- eufunctional;
- disfunctional.

The first ones strengthen the organization by revealing mistakes in its functioning and by providing the possibility and impulse to remove them. The second ones eventually weaken the organization as they reveal irregularities that are impossible to remove. Contemporary researchers of effects occurring in conflicts point at new phenomena and attribute them with a positive role. It is therefore claimed that the positive influence of a conflict evokes gradually increasing adaptive abilities of a system, because according to the conflict parties, it causes: the increase in differences between conflict groups, centralization of power, ideological solidarity within the group, elimination of differences in a group.

Within the whole organization, a 'positive' conflict leads to: the increase in adaptive abilities and integration, creation of better norms, establishing power balance in a system, enhancing system cohesion by creating coalitions [4].

A conflict allows to explicitly state who exercises real power in the company, emphasize interdependencies, improve current norms and create the feeling of unity in a team.

J.Walas provides a slightly different division of conflict functions in an organization. He distinguishes:

1. Motivational function;
2. Innovative function;
3. Identification function;
4. Conflict implies some kind of change [8].

Motivational function stimulates enhanced activity, looking at oneself and one's activities from a certain perspective, performance of an objective assessment of one's behavior and an assessment of activities done by the second conflict party [4].

Innovative function relates to the fact that conflicts bear the need of searching for new, more beneficial solutions and possibilities of changes for the better. They allow to articulate the weakness of the system and force to launch innovative processes [4]. Every individual remaining in a conflict

determines its place in an organization and gets to know oneself better. The conflict function can also be the change of the existing state of affairs for another, better, more efficient and satisfying for all the people concerned [4].

Dynamics and consequences of an organizational conflict

A conflict develops by going from the emergence stage, to the assessment of its results. In the first stage, there is the feeling of dissatisfaction. One of the parties feels that the other party disturbs him or her in the fulfillment of his or her goals. Most frequently, the conflict triggering situations emerge with the incompatibility of goals and restriction of resources. The fewest possibilities of conflict emergence are provoked by situations when goals and resources are not related to the activities of the analyzed organizations. The next stage is the moment of conflict outburst. In a certain moment, the accruing frustration and dissatisfaction cause the conflict outburst. The conflict parties or one of the parties change their behavior. It can be reflected in, among others: the growing eagerness to destroy the opponent, the belief in the rightness of one's case, if somebody presents a contrary belief, he or she can be suspected of the worst, dehumanization of opponent, i.e. the opponent in a conflict does not have the same rights as the others, readiness to sacrifices only to go out from the conflict as a winner.

In the outburst stage, it is too late to withdraw, so it is necessary to manage the conflict, as lack of control is very dangerous to the organization [3].

Stage three is the progress of a conflict. It lasts the longest and constitutes an essential element of a conflict cycle. It runs in various manners. The examples are as follows:

1. Accruing consistency. Group members in a situation of an inter-group conflict close ranks and put previous misunderstandings aside.
2. Emergence of leaders. When the conflict gains strength, the significance of those who could do most for the group's winning grows. Those who are aggressive, or have the ability to speak persuasively, gain authority and power.
3. Distortion of views. The views of members on their own group and the opponents' group become distorted. They claim to be better than the opponents. They exaggerate their advantages and they reduce the significance of the opponents' strength.
4. Accumulation of negative stereotypes. As each party intensifies the criticism of the opposing party's ideas, the differences between the parties seem larger than they really are, but the differences within the group as smaller than in reality.
5. Choosing strong leaders. In order to negotiate with the other party, each group can choose representati-

ves, who according to it, do not surrender under the pressure of the other party. Each group perceives its representatives positively and the opposing representatives – negatively.

6. Occurrence of the so-called 'blind spots'. A conflict, especially in a fighting stage, negatively influences the ability to comprehend and precisely think mutual statements over. The fear of losing prevents both parties from noticing similarities in their proposals, which would enable reaching agreement.

When the conflict progresses, it may sharpen. The thing that initially was only a difference in opinions, may now make people turn to fight. While it proceeds, difference in opinions passes on new things, which very often do not have anything in common with the reason for conflict.

The last stage is the result of a conflict. A conflict's result usually brings profit to the winners, i.e. it strengthens their position, while the defeated ones are left frustrated. Sometimes, the result of a conflict is the next conflict and the aforementioned stages repeat. Every conflict is characterized by some kind of cyclicality. An unsolved active dispute can after some time turn into a hidden one (passive). It is possible in a situation when the participants implement ineffective strategies of conflict solving. Postponing it can after some time result in the intensification of antagonisms between the parties, cause disappearance of active actions and lead to a passive stage of a conflict. This kind of dynamics occurs usually in a situation of a direct mutual dependence of conflict sides [9]. Taking control over a conflict between groups is very important for every organization's functioning. Its long continuation can threaten its survival. The conflict size and thus its type depend on: conflict level, organizational structure and the way it is dealt with. Depending on those factors, other phenomena can be enumerated, which resemble a normal conflict. They include, among others: disputes, clashes and crises. Disputes – belong to conflicts with a moderate level of intensification. They occur quite often and are hard to avoid. However, they are not a threat as they do not damage interpersonal bonds and they do not disturb team work. If, however, disputes happen more often and in time they accrue, they may turn into another type of a conflict – clashes. They happen when: disputes over the same thing repeat and last for a long period of time; the accumulating disputes cover constantly larger number of various things; willingness to collaborate with the other party disappears, periods of aggression and anger towards the other party prolong.

While the level of a conflict increases, the temptation to perform destructive activities grows and it is always unfavorable for an organization.

The highest level of a conflict is a crisis. It differs from a clash with certain features, i.e.: one of the parties takes decisions on interrupting activities or talks; there is a fear that remaining in a certain relation can negatively influence the psyche of both parties; there is high probability of using physical strength by one of the parties.

Proper recognition of conflict type is a very significant stage in the course of its solving. Whether it appears to be a functional or dysfunctional conflict will depend greatly on manager's abilities and thus on proper management of this phenomenon [5]. In relation to a social group, the results of workplace conflicts are:

- work disorganization. Conflicts can mostly influence production, which normal progression becomes slower or even hampered. The prolonging conflict can impact efficiency reduction and deteriorate work discipline;
- a conflict can negatively influence work atmosphere, create hostility and suspicion climate, disturb group norms; supportive group can drift apart, people become enemies to each other;
- increase in irrational behaviors at the expense of decreasing common sense and rational behaviors [2].

Methods of conflict solving

Either weak as well as too intensive conflict can happen to be dysfunctional for an organization. In both cases, it can cause insufficient work results. When there are no conflicts we can talk about stagnation and with too many – about hostility or reluctance to cooperation. An optimal (moderate) level of conflicts provides energy to work, unleashes motivation, creativity, initiative and can result in better results at work. Some kinds of conflicts are harmful and others – beneficial, either from the point of view of individual goals as well as the whole organization. The method of conflict solving which is very efficient and brings many benefits for the individuals as well as the whole organization is bringing the existing inter-group conflict to a mutual problem, which all the parties try to solve together. This method is composed of three stages. In the first one – agreement – the parties meet in order to find the best solution. In the next stage – confrontation – opposing parties present their suggestions. During the last stage – applying primary objectives – people jointly set the primary objective, which includes less important objectives [10].

Wide range of methods for dealing with conflicts can be divided into traditional and modern. This division is of a contractual character and its criterion constitutes the very attitude to the notion of a conflict. In a traditional one, the belief prevails that a conflict usually ends up with a victory of one of the parties ('win-lose' rule). The selection of methods to deal with a conflict depends on various factors, among others, on a situational context, qualifications of people settling the dispute, conflict type as well

as resources and goods accessibility. The professional approach to solving a dispute should cover: precise recognition of conflict participants, diagnosis of reasons for conflict emergence, assessment of potential results, resignation from emotions, rejection of personal animosities as well as assurance of contact between parties. Depending on the situation, when solving a conflict, a manager should make use either of traditional as well as modern methods. It also often happens that a particular conflict situation can be efficiently solved only with simultaneous application of various methods, selected from both sides [9].

The most common traditional methods of conflict solving include: escape, postponing – defense reactions, which are comfortable but inefficient; domination, repression – elimination of a party, which is an apparent solution; ignoring – omission, avoiding the exchange of views; peaceful coexistence – ignoring causes, suspicion of disloyalty; eorientation – looking for a scapegoat; restructuring – change of parties' dependence, creating buffers [5].

In case of modern methods of conflict solving, the importance of turning the opponent's attention from the subject of a conflict is highlighted. The best method to do so is to create the second strong stimulus, which would focus opponent's attention. The most commonly used modern methods include:

- revealing mutual interest. It is about revealing or creating for the conflicted parties some mutual interest, e.g. goal, tasks for defending against danger, or possibilities to satisfy needs. A strong element that integrates the conflicted sides is the defense against mutual danger;
- leading to compromise – its activity consists of mutual concessions at the expense of achieving partial benefits. It is applied, among others, in a situation when the number of resources is limited and two or more parties want to use them;
- arbitrator or mediator method. It is not an independent method and it is applied in connection with other ways of conflict solving. The manager should be neutral and he should enjoy confidence of the parties participating in a conflict;
- motivating through conflict – it consists of purposeful influence on employees so as to shape their aspirations, needs, professional and life goals;
- development through conflict – in this method, it is assumed that the greater diversity of views in a given case, the higher the chance for finding optimal solution. The aim of the method is to find new solutions in the field of job organization, organizational structure, decision-making process, perfecting the technique, technology, economics as well as improving working people attitudes [5].

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