

## AN INVESTIGATION OF SOURCES OF INTERGROUP CONFLICTS

Ali Shirazi

Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran  
E-mail: a-shirazi@um.ac.ir

### Abstract

Conflict is a natural and ever present element of human relationships, including organizational activities and interactions. Identifying sources of conflict is the first step in understanding and solving dysfunctional conflicts. The purpose of this study is to identify key sources of interdepartmental and intergroup conflicts in a large provincial organization in Iran. To identify the sources of group conflicts, a representative samples of manager and employee groups attended a series of semi-structured interviews. The interview texts were transcribed, coded and grouped along with findings in the previous research which together formed the basis for a separate questionnaire for each group. The Cronbach's coefficients for the employees' questionnaire and managers' questionnaire were 0.93 and 0.82 respectively. The data collected from 323 employees and 42 managers revealed that organizational and personal factors are the main sources of conflicts in the organization. Furthermore, there are more intergroup conflicts than interdepartmental conflicts. Finally, it is concluded that organizational structure, politically charged climate, ad hoc decision-making and processes and inefficient human resource system are the main sources of conflicts among and between departments and groups. Several recommendations for reducing conflicts in organization are suggested and discussed.

**Keywords:** Organizational conflicts, Conflict sources, Departmental conflicts, Intergroup conflicts

### Introduction

Organizations are operating in a turbulent and competitive environment, and hence face numerous

uncertainty and challenges to perform competitively. This has led to search for ways to maximize the utility of resources, particularly human resources that are believed to be a key competitive advantage in a knowledge-based economy. One of the main obstacles for improving individual and group performance is conflict. Conflict is ubiquitous in organizational life and is generally regarded as disagreement regarding interests or ideas [1]. Wherever there are people, there are personality, views, values, situations and styles that can be in conflict. Organizations are gathering places for a variety of people with diverse aspirations, ideologies, perceptions, motivations and goals, however, they ought to work together toward achieving common goals. In doing so, individuals are assigned work, roles, authority and responsibility and expected to perform at a given standard. But, organization performance is not determined by the work of individuals rather by how individuals work as a team and support each other. Furthermore, individuals and groups are different to one other in many aspects, including power, influence, and importance. Finally, organizations have limited resources to spend on different activities, and often it is the most powerful individuals or groups that gain the largest and most valuable proportion of available resources, including money, information and human talents. When the number of organizational variables and their complexity increases, the incidences of conflict increases too. This situation bound to lead to adversarial relationships and conflicts and because it involves egos, wants and values, it is the most formidable challenges to management [2].

Given the diversity and complexity of conflict issues and circumstances and limited time and resource organizations can devote to solve them, it is highly

beneficial to know what the sources of organization conflicts are, how important they are, and which ones must be attended to quickly. This paper aims to identify sources of conflicts within and among departments and groups in a large provincial organization.

### **Sources of Organizational Conflicts**

All humans have a basic tendency to satisfy their physiological, social and psychological needs. However, according to growth scholars, including Maslow, Herzberg, Alderfer and Argyris, the most important and long-lasting human needs are related to the development of the human inner self toward self-fulfillment or self-actualization. This implies that as people mature, in addition to motivation to meet their lower level survival needs, such as food and shelter, they want to be given more responsibility, broader horizons, and the opportunity to develop their personal potential. At the same time, as individual becomes more educated, knowledgeable and skilled, his or her desire to satisfy these needs become more potent and visible. However, this process is interrupted whenever a person's environment fails to encourage and nurture these desires which ultimately leads to conflicts and dissatisfaction.

According to Roloff [3], "organizational 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 organization". Conflicts in organization may occur at several levels, including when:

1. A person's work activity is incongruent with his or her needs or interests.
2. A person's preferences are incompatible with another person's preferences.
3. A person's desire resources that are scarce and are wanted by others.
4. A person's position and role places him or her in a position of power and influence which may be seen by other less powerful people as unfair or selfish.
5. Work groups or departments have different goals, wants or behavioral preferences regarding their joint actions.
6. Work groups or units are interdependent in the performance of functions or activities.
7. Organizations compete in single market for the same resources, skills and customers.

8. Organizations' goals and interests are incompatible with requirements of outside powerful political entities or inspectorial regimes.

Scholars believe that there are essentially two categories of organizational conflicts: directional and hierarchical. Two types of directional organizational conflicts include vertical and horizontal conflict [4]. Vertical conflict occurs in groups of different hierarchical levels, such as supervisors and salesmen, whereas horizontal conflict occurs between individuals of the same level, such as managers in the same organization. In the vertical conflict, differences in status and power between groups are generally larger than in the horizontal conflict [5], because these aspects tend to equalize in equivalent hierarchical levels. When vertical conflict takes place between operational workers and administration, their sources refer to: (i) psychological distance: workers don't feel involved in the organization and feel that their needs are not met; (ii) power and status: workers feel powerless and alienated; (iii) differences in value and ideology: this difference represents underlying beliefs in objectives and goals of an organization and; (iv) scarce resources: disagreements regarding benefits, salary and work conditions.

In vertical conflict, apparently individuals in lower organizational level seek to avoid conflicts with higher hierarchical levels [6]. Pondy [7]. observed that it is expected that top management peers perceive more conflict internally between their groups than those of lower position. This happens because of the following reasons: (i) people in higher hierarchical level, rather than the lower ones, are engaged in non-routine activities and development of politics, where orientation for the actions are less clear and chances for disagreement, bigger and; (ii) people in higher hierarchical level, rather than the lower ones, are probably less flexible in their points of view.

In the hierarchical conflicts, conflicts are distinguished from one another by the levels where the conflict occurs, which includes intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, and interorganizational. Becovitch [8] argues that to trace the source of organizational conflict, one must consider the unit of analysis involved. Units of analysis is the parties to the conflict. They perceive, initiate and sustain a conflict. Their characteristics specify the conditions which affect the course of a

conflict and determine the mode of its management. Thus, we have conflicts that originate in the individual person, conflicts that have their basis in the relationship between individuals, and conflicts that occur as a result of interactions between groups. These may be described as (1) intrapersonal conflict, (2) interpersonal conflict, and (3) interdepartmental conflict. Each of these categories raises different questions about the three interrelated components of conflict and each emphasizes different aspects of conflict management. According to Becovitch [8], intrapersonal conflict is internal to the individual and is perhaps the most difficult form of conflict to analyze and manage. Intrapersonal conflict is basically a conflict between two incompatible tendencies. It arises when a stimulus evokes two different and incompatible tendencies and the individual is required to discriminate between these tendencies. Interpersonal conflict, on the other hand, emphasizes factors involved in human interaction. These conflicts include personal and functional conflicts. Personal conflict occurs when individuals with their own needs, preferences and styles are brought and kept together, and are expected to coordinate their actions. These differences produce conflict behavior and affect organizational performance. Functional conflicts are the result of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding who should do what, when and where. Interpersonal conflict can be accounted for, to a great extent, in terms of the incumbents' roles and their expectations in particular situations. Finally, interdepartmental conflict is related to structural complexity and ensued power struggle. Organizations are designed around product lines, regions or technical specialties. These activities are assigned to departments that often have mutually exclusive structured interests and goals and interact within a framework of scarce resources and task dependence. When resources are relatively fixed and when one department's gain is at the expense of another, conflict should be expected. If two sub-units in an organizational system have differentiated goals and are functionally interdependent, conditions exist for conflict. Interdependence produces the need for collaboration, but it also presents occasions for conflict. Other contextual factors which affect the interaction structure between departments and create the conditions for interdepartmental conflict include: different attitudes between line and staff units, organizational size (directly related to level of

conflict) and standardization (inversely related to conflict), physical/communicational barriers between departments, unequal access to authority, rewards or organizational resources and ambiguity or uncertainty in assigning tasks/rewards to different departments.

### Models of Conflict

Conflict, as a product of social and organizational life, has always been the subject of philosophical and scientific discourse and argument. The basis of our modern understanding of conflict originated in Lewin's work which was published in his seminal work entitled "A dynamic theory of personality" [9]. Lewin's emphasis on the role of social context in forming perceptions, values and beliefs revolutionized the field of psychology which up to that time believed in biological determinism. He proposed that behavior was the product of individual and environment.

The dominant paradigm in organization conflict is Pondy's organizational conflict model. Pondy [10] synthesizes the relationship among structural and personality variables that affect conflict, conflict processes and conflict outcomes by treating them as elements of a conflict "episode". Every episode has five stages: (1) antecedent, (2) latent conflict, (3) perceived conflict, leading to (4) manifest conflict, and then to (5) some conflict aftermath. Pondy proposes that the primary antecedent conditions in organizations includes competition over scarce resources, individual and/or subunit efforts to achieve autonomy and escape interdependence, and divergence of individual and /or subunit goals. According to this model, the latent conflict is determined by consequences of previous conflict episode (Figure 1).

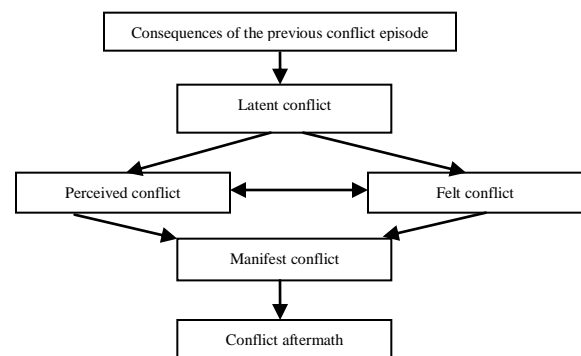
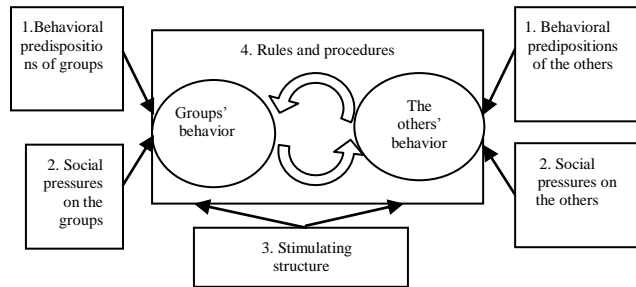


Figure 1. Pondy's organizational conflict model

Thomas [11] in his structural conflict model proposes four determinants of behavior: (1) each party's behavioral predispositions, (2) respective social pressure, (3) respective conflict incentives and stakes in their relationship, and (4) jointly applicable rules and procedures. The model is represented by the stimulating structure or the manner in which the satisfaction of a group is connected to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of another group (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Thomas' structural model of conflict

Although there are other models of conflict, including Blake and Mouton's conflict grid [12,13], Likert and Likert's [14] and systems 1-4 or Blake and Mouton's [15] interface conflict – solving that focus on conflict solution styles and approaches, Pondy's and Thomas' descriptive model of conflict attend to the way conflicts are formed and proceeded. They bring forward the confrontation areas when group of individuals and groups interact.

### Methodology

This study uses qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect data. At first, a group of managers and staff employees of a large provincial organization were selected to participate in a series of semi-structures interviews. Then, the content of these interviews were transcribed, coded and grouped to identify interdepartmental and intergroup conflicts. The findings of interviews formed the basis of designing two research instruments, one for the management group and the other for the employees' group. The 57 items management questionnaire included a personal information section and a questionnaire section related to four types of conflict variables under four subheadings: general, organizational, departmental and interdepartmental. The 59 items employee questionnaire had similar format, except that the conflict variables subheading

were: general, organizational, personal and group. Both questionnaires were pilot-tested and their Cronbach's coefficient were 0.82 and 0.93 respectively. Given the small size of management group, all managers were asked to participate in the survey. To collect employees' data, a random clustered data collection technique was used to determine each cluster sample population. A four-point unipolar scale was used to record responses (0 = strongly disagreed, 1 = disagreed, 2 = agreed, 3 = strongly agreed). A total of 42 questionnaires from managers and 323 questionnaires from employees were returned, which subsequently were used for analysis.

### Findings

The demographic statistics show that while there was only one female out of 42 managers, the number of female and male employees who participated in the study were 94 (30%) and 229 (70%) respectively. Over 80% of respondents were married. The majority of respondents of both group had undergraduate or postgraduate university degree in technical, particularly engineering, and human sciences fields. The mean of managers' age and employment in the current organization were 43 and 12 years. These numbers for employees were 34 and 9 years respectively.

The results revealed that organizational and general factors have the most effects on interdepartmental conflicts. The variables with mean value of 2 or higher are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Mean and ranking of interdepartmental variables

Rank	Mean	Variable	Factor Group
1	2.34	Dependency	General
2	2.33	Size	Organizational
3	2.13	Authority	General
4	2.09	Specialization	Organizational
5	2.07	Work duplication	General
6	2.03	Demographic composition	Departmental
7	2	Compensation	Interdepartmental

The results also showed that all four factor groups have effects on intergroup conflicts, with three

variables related to personal group ranked first, third and fifth (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Mean and ranking of intergroup variables

Rank	Mean	Variable	Factor Group
1	2.26	Power	Personal
2	2.24	Performance evaluation	Organizational
3	2.17	Job security	Personal
4	2.16	Human resource system	General
5	2.15	Cognition	Personal
6	2.11	One way dependency	General
7	2.07	Ethnicity	Group

To compare the management and employees views, a t-test of independent samples was performed. This test identified 13 common variables in interdepartmental and intergroup conflicts. The results showed that there is a meaningful difference between managers and employees' views regarding conflicts in the organization, except four variables, namely affective conflict, authority, dependency and HR system. In other words, given the positive mean difference, managers compared to employees believe that these variables play a greater role in causing conflicts in their organization. Similarly, since the mean difference for political climate is negative, employees compared to managers tend to think that the organization climate is highly political, and a source of conflict.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study show that organizational conflicts have variety of sources occurring at every level. While the key sources of conflicts at departmental level are dependency, size, authority and specialization, at group level they are power, performance evaluation system, job security and human resource system. The findings also revealed that there are some differences between managers and employees' views of sources of conflicts.

A major source of departmental and group conflicts is dependency or one way dependency. From the system perspective, it is important to develop a mutual or two ways dependency, since the parties' self-interest is at stake, and hence are more willing to

cooperate with each other to get the work done. One way dependency reinforces hierarchical power structure and adversarial relations between and among departments and groups. It is recommended that top managers adopt structural changes that aim to equalize the power of departments. This requires the structural and leadership style changes that promote individual and group empowerment and responsibility. Finally, employees are dissatisfied with the organization's human resource system and feel that it is neither transparent nor fair. However, the size, diversity of activities and employees' composition make the formulation and implementation of a system wide HR system a challenge to management.

The findings and opinions expressed at interviews suggest that power struggle, lack of systematic thinking and perceived political or bias appointments and decision-makings are the primary sources of interdepartmental and intergroup conflicts. Hence, it is recommended that top management reviews the organization's systems, particularly its HR system, improves management information system, promotes cooperation and commitment through participation and teamwork, and adopts structural changes, so that it becomes more efficient and responsive to its clients' needs and expectations.

### References

- [1].Esquivel, M.A. & Kleiner, B.H., The importance of conflict in work team effectiveness. *Team Performance Management*, 3(2), 1997, pp. 89.
- [2]. Adomi E. E. and Anie S.O., Conflict Management in Nigerian University Libraries. *Journal of Library Management*, 27(8), 2005, pp.520-530.
- [3]. Roloff, M. E., Communication and conflict. In C. R. Berger & S. H. Chaffee (Eds.), *Handbook of communication science* (pp. 484.-534). Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987.
- [4].Imazai K. and Ohbuchi K., Conflict resolution and procedural fairness in Japanese work organizations. *Japanese Psychological Research*, 44 (2), 2002, pp. 107-12.
- [5].Robbins S. P., *Organizational Behavior*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1983.



- [6].Brewer N., Mitchell P., and Weber N., Gender role, organizational status, and conflict management styles. *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, 13 (1), 2002, pp. 78-94.
- [7]. Pondy L. R., Reflections on organizational conflict. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. 13, 1992, pp. 257-261.
- [8].Bercovitch, J., Conflict and Conflict Management in Organizations: A Framework for Analysis. *The Asian Journal of Public Administration*, 5(2), 1983.
- [9].Lewin, K., *A dynamic theory of personality*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1935.
- [10].Pondy, L. R., Organizational conflict. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12 (2), 1967, pp. 296-320.
- [11]. Thomas, K. W., Conflict and conflict management. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook in industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 889.-935). Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976.
- [12].Blake, R. and Mouton, J. S., *The managerial Grid*. Gulf, Houston, 1964.
- [13].Blake, R. and Mouton, J. S., *The new managerial Grid*. Gulf, Houston, 1978.
- [14]. Likert, R. and Likert, J. G., *New ways of managing conflict*. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1976.
- [15].Blake, R. and Mouton, J. S., *Solving costly organizational conflicts*. Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 1985.