Workplace conflicts: Classifications, causes and management strategies

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Abstract
Conflicts in organizations or workplaces can have serious consequences. Workplace conflicts can lead to hostile relations among individuals within a group. Sometimes, conflicts can hamper overall efficiency of organizations. Its negative consequences can gravely affect relationships resulting in inhospitable work environment and psychological stress. On the other hand, conflicts, when managed properly, can open the doors of opportunity to strengthen relationships in workplaces. Conflict management depends on a range of causal factors, the nature of which varies from conflict to conflict. Sometimes, conflicts may become difficult to resolve without the help of impartial mediators. As a result, negotiators may be required; they can play a significant role in managing and mitigating conflicts, especially organizational conflicts. This paper attempts to explain causes of organizational, institutional, and workplace conflicts. It also focuses on workplace conflicts' outcomes and organizational conflict management strategies.

Keywords: conflict, conflict management, intra-inter conflicts, organizational conflicts, management techniques, way-out

1. Introduction
Conflict is a very common scenario in our everyday life. It is also very common at our workplace. Workplace conflict (organizational) can trigger negative consequences affecting relationships (individual and group). It can lead to a serious loss of time and energy when there is a failure to address it competently. However, it can sometimes open up new opportunities for relationship-building if it is handled honestly, impartially, and smoothly. Moreover, conflict management strengthens relationships among groups and individuals in their workplaces and indeed, other arenas of life.

To ensure a productive and vibrant workplace, it is necessary to find out the causes of workplace conflicts. Furthermore, understanding workplace conflicts and applying management strategies can produce a sound and friendly workplace. This is where the necessity of conflict management comes in, which is examined in detail in this paper. Conflict management is necessary to keep harmony within the group.

2. Statement of research problem
In the discourse of Political Science and Sociology, it is hotly debated whether human beings by nature are 'selfish, introvert, and greedy' (Machiavelli[1]) and 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes[2]) or not. Contrary to popular belief, modern scientific inquiries have found little or no evidence for the notion that human beings are genetically aggressive [1]. If so,

why do people gravitate towards conflicts? Why do conflicts happen in the workplace and why do people embroil themselves in conflicts so frequently? Once conflicts have arisen, how can they be resolved in a manner that is acceptable to all parties concerned? These research questions demand further academic analyses.

Conflicts in workplace may lead to organizational and institutial failure. It can have long term consequences that are dangerous for maintaining a productive work environment. This research attempts to explain causes of organizational, institutional, and workplace conflicts. It also tries to focus on conflict management strategies. This paper has endeavored to explain why workplace conflict management is necessary and how to apply conflict management instruments to mitigate the outcomes of conflicts.

3. Theoretical basis of conflict and conflict management
Conflict theory originated from the work of Karl Marx. His work focused on class conflicts (Bourgeoisie and Proletariat). Conflict arises when resources, status and power are distributed unequally [2].

If we ask why and how do people create conflicts– numerous motivations can be found. Those reasons help to build theoretical ground of conflicts. According to the Bruce Knauft *et al*. (1991)[3], "Simple human societies constitute a major anomaly for models which propose evolutionary similarity between great apes and prostate human patterns of violence". Humans have engaged themselves with various types of violence and wars (collective wars, intra and inter group wars) from the

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[1] Niccolo Machiavelli was an Italian Renaissance historian, politician, and philosopher. He has been called the founder of the modern Political Science. The Prince by Machiavelli is a widely read book among students and scholars of Political Science.

[2] Thomas Hobbes was an English philosopher. The Leviathan is one of the best writings by Hobbes.

[3] As cited in - A. oberschall. 2010. Conflict theory, K.T. Leicht and J.C. Jerkins (eds.), Handbook of politics: State and society in global perspective, LLC. p. -178.

time of primitive societies [3]. "Although sociobiologists assume that genes exist for specific behavioral dispositions, like 'self-sacrificial bravery in warfare'[4] no such genes have been identified, and behavior in warfare and group conflict situations has been explained in other terms" [4]. In other words, it is likely that social, economic and environmental circumstances, rather than a genetic predisposition, are mainly responsible for the creation of conflicts.

Conflict in the work place, can be very harmful for individual well-being, at the same time, dangerous for institutions, departments, and teams. For effective conflict management in workplace the 'Dual Concern Theory' is very popular. Its main argument is that "conflict management is a function of high or low concern for self, combined with high or low concern for others" [5]. Pruitt and Rubin's (1986)[5] 'Dual Concern Theory' is based on the earlier work of Blake and Mouton (1964) and the work on the 'Theory of Cooperation and Competition' (1973).

4. Methodology of this study

This study is qualitative in nature and utilizes extensive literature review and secondary sources such as, national and international journal articles, newspapers, books, weekly and monthly magazines, research papers, and daily national and international newspapers. Additionally, empirical experience is also employed as an observational research tool. Practical experience in the study of social phenomena enriches research findings. In the empirical method, we have focused on why and how employees' dissatisfactions level rises and how this can lead to conflicts in the workplace.

5. Conceptual framework of conflict and conflict management strategies

Conflict in an organization can be defined a struggle for political, economic or social power, and a strong disagreement between people and groups with opposing needs, ideas, values, and goals. Conflict is an unavoidable part of life [6].

Conflict is probably the outcome of human values differentiations. It is usually fueled by the opposition of one community, group or party to another, in an attempt to reach a different objective from that of the other community, group or party [7].

Conflict management, on the other hand, is the ability to be able to identify and handle conflicts wisely, honestly, positively, and efficiently [8]. It is the process of decreasing and sometimes limiting the dreadful consequences of conflicts while increasing the positive aspects of conflict resolution [9]. Learning how to manage

conflict can easily minimize the chances of "serious escalations of conflicts"[6] in a workplace or organization.

6. Organizational conflict and its classification

Conflict might be the result of individual or group expression of resentments and discontents. Conflict within organizations can be classified into four categories[7]:

6.1 Interpersonal conflict

This conflict arises between two different individuals. Naturally, people are different in terms of their views, beliefs, and life-styles. Conflicts arise from differing opinions and misunderstandings. It spurts out when "dissatisfaction feelings go out of control"[8]. It is a situation of competition in which the one group is aware of the incompatibility of the wishes of other groups [10]. For instance, supporters from two major political parties of Bangladesh, namely, Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), may be colleagues or co-workers. Both parties claim they are ideologically different from each other and they often accuse each other for bad deeds. Sometimes, this may lead to interpersonal conflicts within an organization.

Differences in personal character and work ethics may also lead to conflict. For example, one officer may be very honest; another very reckless. These differences may foster hostility toward one another.

Interpersonal conflicts in the workplace can lead to hostile and aggressive relationships. Besides, it can hamper routine functions of a workplace by creating a conflict zone, which can affect others as well.

6.2 Intrapersonal conflict

Intrapersonal conflict arises within an individual. Sometimes it is called intrapsychic[9] conflict [11]. It can develop out of one's psychological factors, such as, own thoughts, ideologies, emotions, and values. Intrapersonal conflict takes place in the individual's mind. It occurs when one argues with oneself but cannot come to a good decision. Sometimes its outcome can become dangerous and can cause impatience, downheartedness [12] or other psychological problems.

Many employees work together in an organization. Their individual thoughts are different. When a sincere employee notices that his boss routinely chooses a careless employee for best performance reward, the sincere officer can feel disheartened. In other words, institutional breakdown is a possible outcome of injustice

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[4] Tiger, Lionel and Robin Fox. The Imperial Animal. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston (1971). Also cited by A. Oberschall. 2010. Conflict theory, K.T. Leicht and J.C. Jerkins (eds.), Handbook of politics: State and society in global perspective, LLC. p. -178

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[8] Sajid, M., Intrapersonal Conflict, 2015. [Online] Available at http://www.speakingtree.in/sajid-merchant (4 January, 2015).

[9] Intrapsychic conflict is the very early Freud's psychological writings. According to the Haelen H. Tartakaff, M.D. " the fact that the concept of intrapsychic conflict between opposing forces in mental apparatus appeared very early in Freud's psychological writings." Available at http://apa.sagepub.com/content/11/3/619.extract

towards performance reward. That honest officer neither gets motivation nor gets inspiration from the workplace. This downheartedness can be the reason of his mental illness. It can possibly weaken their future creative potential. Final outcome of this situation is likely psychological intrapersonal conflict.

6.3 Intergroup conflict

Intergroup conflict arises between two groups. It occurs due to the different interests, objectives, and principles of different groups. Competitions and misunderstandings may also be responsible for intergroup conflict. For example, two different religious groups can be involved in conflict for domination of the same territory. Lack of resource is another potential reason for intergroup conflict. Social-psychological processes accelerate intergroup conflict [13]. Conflict between two major political parties in Bangladesh is an example. The debate over which party is more popular and therefore, should rule the nation is a constant source of strife in Bangladesh.

Small group conflicts maybe lead a national crisis. For example, Muslim and Hindu group conflict during the last days British India is a vivid example of intergroup conflict. This type of conflict can be prolonged and sometimes seemingly never ending.

If people learn to understand that differing cultures are not threats, they can probably avoid intergroup conflicts and lead a peaceful life. Equitable distribution of wealth and resources is another mechanism that would very likely help to reduce the danger of intergroup conflict.

6.4 Intragroup conflict

This type of conflict arises among individuals within a group. It can primarily occur due to misinterpretations and ruthless conduct within a group. A group consists of different people with different personalities. For example, ethnic groups–they have common ancestry, common memory, religion, and language; but individuals have different beliefs about their identities. They may use different approaches to dealing with particular issues and each other. If we explain it politically, political parties of Bangladesh face these types of conflicts. If we consider, BNP, we can easily find many examples of intragroup conflicts. Khaleda Zia[10] versus A.Q.M. Badruddoza Chowdhury[11] is one of the best examples. They were from same political party but their ideological differences and perhaps personal ambitions lead to intraparty conflict. On the other hand, if we focus on AL, we observe some of the same conditions; many fractions are vivid within the party.

From our empirical observations at workplaces, we have observed that people from many different ideological,

regional and political backgrounds work together for institutional or organizational well-being. We have also noticed senior-junior competitions and regional, political, ideological groupings within in the work place. Sometimes, employees join or create different regional, political, ideological groups for the benefit of their personal interests. These sorts of groupings can possibly create an unfriendly environment in workplace which can lead to intragroup conflict.

7. Causes of conflict

Conflict can arise between couples, work peers, religious and ethnic groups, political organizations, and governmental institutions. Interpersonal conflict is highly prevalent. On an average, we encounter five conflicts per day and generally respond in three ways–fights, flight or flow [14]. There are many reasons for conflict. Conflicts can result from external influences, political differentiations, economical reasons, emotional forces, behavioral reasons, and societal reasons. Lack of information, personality variations, gender and sexuality,[12] culture, race and ethnicity, and lack of knowledge are common reasons for conflict. Misunderstanding is perhaps is a common reason of organizational conflict. Communication gap can create misunderstandings and misunderstanding leads to conflicts in organization.

According to the University of Maryland [15] sometimes conflict starts and intensifies because of 'half-listening'. In a conflict prone situation, one party does not concentrate on listening to what other party is actually saying. From our empirical observations, it has been noticed that half-listening and misunderstanding are sometimes the starting point of workplace or organizational conflicts.

Workplace is not always a peaceful place. It brings together a verity of people from different socio-economic levels. When working conditions are harsh, conflicts may easily emerge; it is even worse when personal differences begin to develop between the authority and the employees [16].

From our empirical observations, it is evident that workplace or organizational conflicts can occur due to political, ideological, cultural and regional variations and differences. These variations can create complex situations. Employees of the same department can be divided on the basis of political, ideological or regional groupings. Moreover, it can be visible in many workplace spheres. Political, cultural, ideological, and regional groupings may lead serious organizational conflicts within a team. Figure-1 illustrates conflict resulting from political, cultural, and regional differences in the workplace.

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[10] Begum Khaleda Zia is a Bangladeshi politician who was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. She was Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996 and again from 2001 to 2006.

[11] "Abul Qasim Muhammad Badruddoza Chowdhury was the 13th President of Bangladesh, serving from 14 November 2001 until his resignation on 21 June 2002. He was the founding secretary-general of Bangladesh Nationalist Party." Available at https://www.google.com/search?q=khaleda+zia&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8#q=a+q+m+badruddoza+chowdhury

[12] Peace Pledge Union Project (PPUP). *Understanding conflict, learn peace,* 2015. [Online] Available at http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/conflict/st_conflict1.html (1 January, 2015).
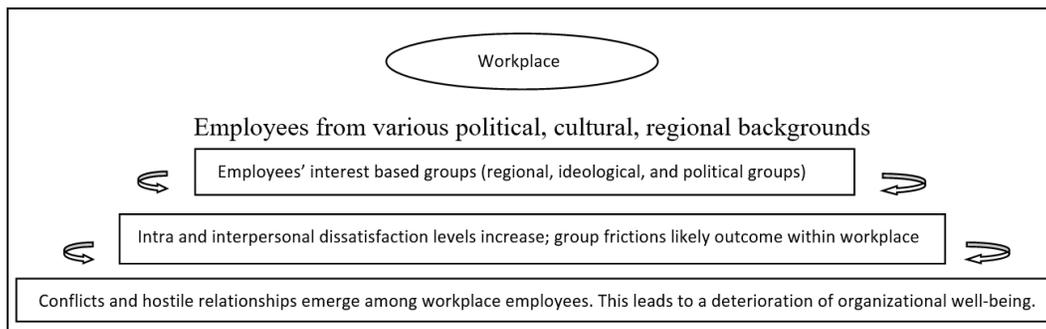
Source: Developed by author

Fig 1: Conflicts in Workplace

Intrapersonal conflict is often misinterpreted and unacknowledged [17]. Emotional factors can cause serious conflicts related to intrapersonal difficulties. Mixed feelings, expectations, perception of injustice, feeling unappreciated–all of these are related to intrapersonal conflict.

There are many factors that are both directly and indirectly responsible for organizational interpersonal conflict, such as, competitive personality, hostility, avoiding, perfectionism, inconsiderate behavior, passive-aggressiveness, abuse of authority, over dependency, and power struggles [18]. Professional employment mediation website Mediate.com notes that "some employees bring stress from their home life to work and this can cause conflicts among co-workers and managers" [19]. A University of Colorado study suggests that "some personal conflicts arise when employees are unable to accept personal differences, which can involve such things as race, religion or ethnic background"[13]. According to Royal Geographical Society (2014)[14],

"There are a number of different causes of conflict; however, these can largely be classified under a limited number of headings, namely land disputes, politics, religious and cultural differences and the distribution and use of resources. Most conflicts are caused by a combination of factors and it is very difficult, in most cases, to highlight dominant and less dominant causes".

It is generally believed that economic disputes can be a major source of conflict. It can lead to intragroup conflicts such as disputes among relatives regarding inheritance, among business partners regarding profit or loss and among neighbors regarding use of community belongings. Another one is "value conflict"[15]. Conflicts driven by this factor are demonstrated in wars throughout human history. Conflict among political parties may be driven by diverging values. Sometimes, political conflict results from the desire for capturing and enjoying power.

Power conflict is one of the major causes of conflict. It involves assertion of influence to another [20]. When one group tries to dominate another group, conflict becomes a likely consequence.

8. Instruments for managing conflict

Conflict is very common scenario in our everyday life and its consequences can be destructive and dangerous if left uncontrolled [21]. However, it shouldn't always be viewed negatively [22]. It has some positive aspects too. Conflict can be seen as an opportunity for learning and understanding our differences regarding our judgments, principles, and perceptions. A liberal and democratic society is a fertile environment for solving political conflicts [23].

8.1 Healthy and unhealthy ways

There are many ways to handle conflict but all of them can be categorized into two major groups – one is healthy and another is unhealthy [24]. We are usually aware of the possible consequences of our actions. But resolving conflict in an unhealthy manner can cause great devastation. Thus, healthy and efficient conflict management methods could be applied to mitigate negative consequences of conflict.

One should be calm and show respect for others' opinions to manage our everyday conflicts. Emotions are important factors in conflicts. They should be acknowledged rationally. If all other attempts fail to resolve a conflict, then mediation should be sought. Mediators will normally attempt to find a solution by proposing a 'third way'[16]. Forceful solution should be the least desirable strategy for conflict management.

Conflict management is the practice of being able to identify and handle conflicts rationally, honestly, and competently. There are five conflict mode instruments which are globally used to identify conflict management [25]. Although there have been criticisms of these instruments, they are generally of great value with regards to managing conflicts in workplaces, organizations, and institutions. These are as follows:

8.2 Collaborating

Collaborating method is a novel style that makes sure both sides are satisfied. Sometimes it is effective in complex situations [26]. It is also called a win-win strategy

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[13] Available at http://mediate.com/

[14] Royal Geographical Society.2014. Advancing Geography and Geographical learning, IBG, 1 Kensington Gore, London, 2014. [Online] Available at http://www.rgs.org/OurWork/Schools/Teaching+resources/Key+Stage+3+resources/The+geography+of+conflict/The+causes+of+conflict.htm (12 December, 2014).

[15] Available at http://www.livestrong.com/

[16] Darlington, R., *How to resolve conflict: Roger Darlington's World, 2007.* [Online] Available at http://www.rogerdarlington.co.uk/conflict.html (10 January,2015)

of conflict management. To be successful, participants need to be able to surface concerns in a non-threatening way. This is achieved through active listening and identifying problems [27]. To solve conflict, it requires an open discussion, exploration of alternative solutions, and needs commitment from both parties. It is an excellent way to reduce damage in the case of conflict within organizations.

The collaborative mode is appropriate when the conflict is important to the people who are constructing an integrative solution, when the issues are too important to compromise, when merging perspectives, when gaining commitment, when improving relationships, or when learning [28]. One has to retain the ability to analyze the issues of concern with active listening without threatening confrontation. It also can be applicable for a smooth workplace environment for maximum productivity.

Collaborating leads to solving the actual problem with win-win outcome while it also reinforces the mutual trust and respect to each other[17]. As it is a win-win way of conflict management strategy, it needs more time and energy and assurance from both sides. Therefore, it may not be wise to apply this strategy when time is limited and a hasty verdict is required [29].

8.3 Accommodating
Accommodation is an adaptation process. It can be called a smoothing approach. Accommodation involves having to deal with the problem with an element of self-sacrifice; an individual sets aside his own concerns to maintain peace in the situation [30]. Some people use the accommodating mode when the issue or outcome is of low importance to them [31].

A balance must exist between assimilation and accommodation as well as between an individual and the environment for accommodation process [32]. An ample amount accommodation or smoothing is often necessary to meet and adapt to new situations.

Accommodation might bring an immediate solution to a prevailing conflict [33]. It is applicable when one demands short-term or fast respite from conflict [34]. It gives an opportunity to reconsider the scenarios from different positions. However, accommodation process carries a risk of being abused (e.g. opponents may constantly try to have it their way) [35]. It can make it more difficult to get win-win solutions in the future.

8.4 Compromising
This is a lose-lose [36] approach where both parties are willing to sacrifice their own set of goals as long as the other party will do the same [37]. Some people define compromise as "giving up more than you want,"[18] while others see compromise as both parties winning. This requires a moderate level of assertiveness and

cooperation [38]. It is appropriate where collaboration or forced resolution do not work.

Compromising may have a positive effect when time is a limiting factor and both parties want to look for a quick solution; it decreases the level of pressure and anxiety emanating from the conflict [39].

A disadvantage of this strategy is the fact that both parties try to find an easy way out of the problem, which may prevent a smarter solution from being implemented [40].

8.5 Avoiding
Avoiding is also known as withdrawing. It is a low stress approach that one might attempt when other methods of conflict resolution are not an option. It is a method when one does not want to address the conflict and simply withdraws [41]. Avoiding is appropriate when one thinks it is not the right time for confrontation. It might be appropriate in certain circumstances but not in all [42]. More often than not, it is possibly better to confront the problem before it gets worse. One should have some abilities to apply this method (e.g. "ability to withdraw, sidestep issues, leave things unresolved and keep sense of timing")[19].

Avoiding has little value in managing conflicts in workplace. It can be used for short term management of workplace conflicts in limited circumstances. Cooperation regardless of underlying conflict is sometimes necessary for workplace success. It can be applicable when conflict avoidance is urgent for attaining a vital goal[20].

8.6 Competing
This is a win-lose [43] approach. It is also known as forcing. In this case an individual or group is acting in a very assertive [44] way to achieve its goals without seeking to cooperate with other parties.

Competing maybe appropriate in some situations but it shouldn't come to a point where the aggressor becomes too unreasonable [45]. It works as a last choice to solve severe problems. The positive outcome of the competing method is making a quick decision when the conflict must be resolved in some fashion. Competing mode is appropriate when quick action needs to be taken, when vital issues must be handled, or when one is protecting vital self-interests [46]. The negative aspects of forcing are that it may adversely affect a relationship and cause other long term problems with the opponents.

9. Concluding Remarks
People have different points of opinion due to different beliefs, faith, and traditions. As a result, conflict occurs in relation to divergent views of life. People usually try to avoid conflict, although conflict is a common scenario in our everyday life. However, the emergence of conflict

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[20] Conflict Management Techniques (CMT), 2015. [Online] Available at http://www.personalityexplorer.com/FREEResources/ConflictManagement Techniques.aspx (10 January, 2015)

does not necessarily have to be a bad thing; sometimes it gives us opportunities to better understand each other and strengthen relationships.

Most people have their own ways of dealing with conflicts. Sometimes they do not have enough skills to manage it properly. Due to lack of conflict management skills, they often increase negative consequences of conflict rather than find a good solution. Prudent conflict management strategies can effectively manage conflicts and consequently lead a more peaceful life.

Workplace conflicts and the resulting hostile relations need to be resolved rationally. This is possible when all employees (workers, co-workers, supervisors, managers and chief executives) try to understand the causes of conflicts and try to resolve the situation through respectful negotiation. In addition, mediators can play a very positive role in managing conflicts in organizations. By applying wise conflict management strategies, an organization can ensure a friendly work environment while employing personnel from diverse social, economic, regional and political backgrounds.

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