ROLE OF ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP IN MANAGEMENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT
Research into behavior in organizations can be divided into two categories: normative and descriptive. Normative research is concerned with how things should be, whereas descriptive research addresses itself to what is - rather than what could or should be. This dual perspective is most apparent in approaches to the issues of conflict and conflict management in organizations. Normative approaches reflect attitudes and beliefs which identify all conflicts as destructive and promote conflict-elimination as the formula for organizational success (Thomas, 1992). Descriptive approaches accept conflict as inevitable and consider its proper management the primary responsibility of all administrators. This paper pertains to the descriptive mode of inquiry in presenting a framework for the study of conflict in organizations. But it goes beyond this domain in suggesting that administrators must take the offensive and seek to manage conflict, and also in advocating that traditional methods of dealing with conflict be replaced by a new and more sophisticated approach.
LEADERSHIP AND CONFLICT: TOWARDS A DEFINITION

Conflict is endemic to all social life. It is an inevitable part of living because it is related to situations of scarce resources, division of functions, power relations and role-differentiation. Because of its ubiquity and pervasive nature, the concept has acquired a multitude of meanings and connotations presenting us with nothing short of a semantic jungle. Like other terms, conflict generates considerable ambivalence and leaves many scholars and administrators quite uncertain about (1) its meaning and relevance and (2) how best to cope with it.

The normative conception of conflict, strongly influenced by a preoccupation with stability and equilibrium in organizational design, links conflict to violence, destruction, inefficiency and irrationality (De Reuver, 2006). This form of intellectual myopia was especially invidious in suggesting that administrators have the responsibility of avoiding, controlling or eliminating conflict (Alison, 2001). Descriptive approaches challenge the whole basis and rationale of these assumptions. They permit us to depart from an outmoded paradigm by suggesting that any social interaction in which the parties (however they may be structured or defined) compete for scarce resources or values has the potential for conflict (Frederick, 1999). Using the term in a broad sense we suggest that conflict refers to all kinds of antagonistic interactions. More specifically, it can be defined as a situation in which two or more parties have incompatible objectives and in which their perceptions and behaviour are commensurate with that incompatibility (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

This definition is purposely broad. It suggests that conflict is a social phenomenon that is found in personal, group or organizational interactions.

As such it comprises several dimensions. Carson, Tesluk & Marrone (2007) distinguish between (1) antagonistic-psychological relations and (2) antagonistic behaviour, whereas De Reuver (2006) observes that conflict is made up of (1) antecedent conditions, (2) affective conditions, (3) cognitive conditions and (4) behavioural conditions. We advance a conception of conflict which emphasizes its three, interrelated dimensions, namely: (1) conflict situation (the basic incompatibility), (2) conflict attitudes (range of psychological factors) and (3) conflict behaviour (set of related behaviour) (Adam, 2000).

Conflict refers to more than just overt behaviour. Concentrating only upon its behavioural manifestation is an extremely limiting exercise. The three-dimensional conception of conflict emphasizes the need to consider the situation in which parties (individuals, groups or organizations) come to possess incompatible goals, their structure of interaction and the nature of their goals. We have to consider emotional (e.g. distrust) and cognitive (e.g. stereotyping) orientations that accompany a conflict situation as well as the range of action undertaken by any party in a situation of conflict.

Administrators often feel that discussions of fundamental terms are merely academic. This is not always the case. Effective action and sensible responses depend upon clear thinking and systematic analysis. Understanding must precede action. If administrators consider the problem of conflict and understand that conflicts stem from ineradicable human qualities and are related to situations of interdependence, scarce resources and perceptions of incompatibility (Jacqueline, 1999), they might readily accept conflict and recognize its values - provided, that is, they are properly aware of "conflict management" and the need to find a solution. Both conflict management and a satisfactory solution are easier to attain when it is accepted that what we normally call conflict is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. It is not caused by "inadequate" structures, nor is it undesirable. It is natural and inevitable and, properly managed, it is productive, relevant and creative.

CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations are living systems consisting of interacting units performing a task in a mutually dependent manner within a structure of scarce resources.

It seems commonplace to suggest that conflicts would be present in such a setting. The parties in an organization may have a conflict about the distribution of resources, or they may have a more fundamental conflict about the very structure of their organization and the basic nature of their interaction (Arthur, 2000). Once the parties are in a situation of goal incompatibility, their conflict develops in a dynamic fashion, initiating valuable and much-needed constructive changes or leading to escalating strategies and destructive consequences (Hunt, Osborn & Boal, 2009).

As there is nothing pre-determined about its course or development, it seems erroneous to view conflict from a negative perspective only - as destructive or dysfunctional. It is true that conflict may be uncomfortable, it may even be a source of problems, but it is absolutely necessary if change is to occur, if organizations are to survive and adapt. Organizational change and innovation does not just happen, it requires a stimulant.

Administrators must accept the need to influence the developmental dynamics of a conflict, so that the parties' attitudes and actions will lead to better coordination and a more appropriate interdependence. They must not seek to stifle or eliminate organizational conflict - for that is hardly a realistic goal. As Rico has noted, an organization devoid of conflict "... may indicate autocracy, uniformity, stagnation and mental fixity" (Diana, 1996). It would also be protecting only the vested interests of the status quo. Administrators must accept and indeed occasionally encourage conflict, because change and other desirable consequences are products of conflict (Jeremy, 1997). The challenge administrators face is to utilize such conflict management techniques that would ensure that as a conflict passes from a latent to a manifest phase, it proceeds towards its potential and realizes its constructive values.
ANALYZING ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

Three distinct criteria define the role of an administrator in an organization: planning, resource allocation and conflict management (Mohr & Wolfram, 2008). There is no doubt that managing conflict permeates every aspect of the administrative role. Awareness of the various forms of conflict management that can be employed at different stages of the development of a conflict is vital, if administrators are to organize efforts towards influencing the conflict situation, the parties’ attitudes or their behaviour. In addition to that, effective conflict management requires a recognition of the sources that generate a conflict. What, then, are the sources or bases of organizational conflicts?

Sources of Conflict. Organizational conflict appears in a variety of forms and has varying causes. These can generally be separated into several categories. Carson, Tesluk & Marrone (2007) identify three sources of conflict. These are: (1) structural conflict (conflict arising out of the need to manage the interdependence between different organizational sub-units), (2) role conflict (conflict arising from sets of prescribed behaviour) and (3) resources conflict (conflict stemming from interestgroups competing for organizational resources). Robbins16 identifies three sources of organizational conflict and indicates that an understanding of the source of a conflict improves the probability of effective conflict management. The main factors which serve as sources of conflict are identified as (1) communicational (conflicts arising from misunderstandings etc.), (2) structural (conflicts related to organizational roles), and (3) personal (conflicts stemming from individual differences). Methods of conflict management which are appropriate in one case may not necessarily be appropriate when applied to a conflict generated from another source.

Here I wish to suggest a different perspective which traces the source of organizational conflict to the unit of analysis involved. Units of analysis are the parties to a 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 (John, 2001). 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.

Intrapersonal Conflicts

Intraperononal conflict is internal to the individual (though its effects can profoundly influence organizational functioning) 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. In such a situation it is common for individuals to experience frustrations and to allow their conflict situation to be expressed in a range of behavioural strategies ranging from apathy and boredom to absenteeism, excessive drinking or destructive behaviour (Paula, 1998). If such behavioural consequences are to be avoided, then it is essential to diagnose individual perception and utilize some techniques that would reduce anxiety-eliciting stimuli and increase consonance between individual behaviour and organizational requirements.

Interpersonal Conflicts

Interpersonal conflict emphasizes the interaction of human factors in an organization. Here we are concerned with these factors as they appear in a dyadic relationship. We can broadly suggest two classes of factors as conflict sources. These are:

1. Personal. Individuals are not identical, constant or consistent. When two individuals are brought together and kept together, each with his own qualities, needs and skills, a conflict may ensue if their attributes are not meshed together in a coordinated way. Interaction between individuals with different attitudes, values and needs can produce conflict behaviour and affect organizational performance (Thomas, 1998).

2. Functional. Individuals in organizations have roles which are expected sets of behaviour associated with their position. In theory, individuals are not expected to engage in any discretionary behaviour. Such specification would be consistent with organizational preferences for consistency and predictability. In practice, however, role specifications tend to be ambiguous and incomplete, and in their interaction with others, some individuals often feel dissatisfied with their role or position, or they may feel that their aspirations for higher positions are being frustrated. Interpersonal conflict can be accounted for, to a great extent, in terms of the incumbents' roles and their expectations in particular situations.
Interdepartmental Conflicts

The third major cause of organizational conflict is structural. Organizations are designed around product lines, regions or technical specialities. These activities are assigned to departments that often have mutually exclusive structured interests and goals and that 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 (Mohr & Wolfram, 2008). 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 or communicational barriers between departments, unequal access to authority, rewards or organizational resources and ambiguity or uncertainty in assigning tasks or rewards to different departments (Thomas, 1998).

These, then, are the sources of conflict situations in organizations.

How a conflict situation will change over time, how its interrelated components will alter and the environment in which it occurs will respond, is dependent upon the administrator’s efforts to manage or influence it. This, in turn, is related to one’s understanding of the source of a specific conflict situation.

Conflict Management

Ways of managing organizational conflict are as varied as its causes, origins and contexts. The purpose of conflict management, whether undertaken by the parties in conflict or whether involving the intervention of an outside party, is to affect the entire structure of a conflict situation so as to contain the destructive components in the conflict process (e.g. hostility, use of violence) and help the parties possessing incompatible goals to find some solution to their conflict. Effective conflict management succeeds in (1) minimizing disruption stemming from the existence of a conflict, and (2) providing a solution that is satisfactory and acceptable.

We describe efforts directed towards containing or limiting some aspects of behaviour as strategies of conflict settlement and efforts directed towards the parties’ attitudes, situations as well as behaviour as strategies of conflict resolution. Skilled administrators are aware of these methods and techniques and know how to utilize them effectively.

All organizations, however simple or complex, possess a range of mechanisms or procedures for managing conflict. These are built into the organizational structure and are consciously employed by administrators to influence the course and development of a conflict. The success or effectiveness of such procedures can be gauged by the extent to which they limit conflict behaviour and the extent to which they help to achieve a satisfactory solution. It is the contention of this article that strategies of conflict avoidance, conflict prevention or institutionalization of conflict will change or replace coercive behaviour, but that only the injection of a behavioural social scientist, acting in a facilitative, non-directive and nonevaluative fashion, will achieve a resolution with respect to the basic issues, attitudes and structure of interaction. If administrators care for optimal methods of conflict management, they should give their strongest support to a strategy that can end a conflict in a satisfactory and selfperpetuating manner. All this is not to contend, however, that conflict resolution is the immediate outcome of any intervention.

The outcome of a conflict depends upon many aspects of the conflict process prior to the efforts to manage it (e.g. issues in conflict, relative power of actors, degree of proximity etc.). What I am suggesting is that if four basic conflict outcomes may be distinguished - namely (1) withdrawal, (2) imposition or dominance, (3) compromise and a (4) creative, problem-solving resolution (Adam, 2000) - then the most likely mode by which outcome (4) may be reached pertains to the voluntary intervention of an outside consultant acting as a professional helper. Let me then present a model of conflict management which can describe the relationship between modalities of conflict management and conflict outcomes and give some directions for managing organizational conflict.

Conclusion

Organizational conflict is an inevitable phenomenon and its proper management is the primary responsibility of all administrators. Administrators must take proactive approach to seek and to manage organizational conflicts. Traditional methods of dealing with conflicts are effective to a certain extent, however, with the advent of the modern organizational realities, they should be amended or replaced by new and more sophisticated approach. Effective action and sensible responses to organizational conflicts depend upon clear understanding, systematic analysis and appropriate actions. If administrators identify the root cause of the conflicts and realize that organizational conflicts stem from situations of interdependence, scarce resources and perceptions of incompatibility, they can find suitable solutions more easily. Organizational conflicts may not be caused by "inadequate" structures, nor are they undesirable. On the contrary, organizational conflicts are natural, inevitable and, if properly managed, can prove to be productive, relevant and creative.
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References