LOOKING AT THE FACTORS AFFECTING CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATION: AN UNDERSTUDY LEADING TO A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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─Abstract─

The purpose of this paper is to present and group an array of factors that are affecting employee related conflicts within organizations. Understanding sources of conflict has been a subject matter that raises interest from academics, professionals and managers alike. Extant research has shown that conflict is an essential characteristic of learning organizations and a certain level of it should be tolerated as it is often the medium of knowledge transfer to and from individuals. The difficulty arises when managers do not understand, or are able to identify, the sources, the clusters and the ensuing factors generating conflict and as such their efforts to choose between resolution and managing conflict are rendered inutile and without focus. The identification and grouping or such factors becomes an imperative and needs a general framework that could be applied and adapted to each organization regardless of industry. We therefore identify the following clusters of factors affecting conflict: environmental, individual and firm related factors based on which we issue propositions and managerial implications.

Key Words: *Conflict Theory, Emotional Intelligence, Skill Deficiency, Conflict*

JEL Classification: M16

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict theory has undergone significant changes in perspective over the past ten years; perhaps the most basic change is reflected in the emergence of the term conflict management (Rahim, 2002:219; Somech, Desivilya & Lidogoster, 2009:360) alongside the term, conflict resolution. It has been generally agreed that a certain degree of conflict at key organizational levels – what may be termed substantive, cognitive or issue-oriented conflict – is to be tolerated for effective strategic development (Rahim, 2002:208; West & Noel, 2009:12). Extant research has also shown that is not the presence of conflict, but how an organization manages and identifies conflict that determines whether it becomes constructive or destructive to its goal and strategy realization and implementation (Amason, 1996:130; Kurtzberg & Mueller, 2005:337). The existing conflict related research contributions have been following two general direction: one in which findings have been deduced based on rigorous tests therefore generating, refuting or defending theory and a general one that localized different traits – industry (Kurtzberg & Mueller, 2005:338), organization or topographical area specific (Maltz & Kohli, 2000:480; Cronin & Weingart, 2007:764) that lead to conceptual findings. These two directions, while valuable in defining the subject matter related to conflict, have been focused either of measuring a sample affected by conflict in a particular industry or geographical area, or have been conceptually qualitative without reaching a compilation within a framework. This paper attempts to address this perceived void by combining aspects from these two dimensions into a unified model that would allow for a more comprehensive discussion. Conflict, therefore is advanced here as a byproduct of three categories of sources: (a) organization and firm related; (b) individual related factors and (c) environmental and external related factors. Each of these categories is presented subsequently alongside the components that contribute to its contents.

2. ORGANIZATION AND FIRM RELATED FACTORS

The fragment takes a look at identifying firm related factors that are seen to contribute to the emergence of conflict and therefore conflict management followed studies and measurements, already posted by researchers, as the concept is seen as global and encountered by organizations regardless of size, location or industry. The underlying premise is that firm related conflict erodes employee commitment and ultimately affects organizational staff retention. The effect of stress, time pressure, workplace safety, job satisfaction and work/family balance

are identified at as components of the cluster. Just as pointed to in the introduction segment each of the component will substantiate a proposition.

2.1 Stress

The word stress, an Anglo-Saxon derived term, defines a situation under which an individual or a group is subjected to the requirement to adapt to a new set of circumstances (Treven & Treven, 2010:249). The rationales for looking at stress lies in the fact that it affects individuals differently, yet the result is often in the lack of performance and commitment to organizational goals. Treven and Treven (2010), in a study focused on Central European institutions - distinguished the following dimensions that substantiate each individual's ability to negotiate stress: self-perception and power; control and courage; behavioral patterns; level of flexibility and work involvement. *Self-perception* separates individuals based on their self-esteem as the moderating element for responding to stressors (Nowack, 1986:7; Treven & Treven, 2010:257). *Control and courage* points to each person's perception with regards to their ability to decide and control their fate; individuals that are less inclined to believe that they control their environment are more likely to experience higher stress levels (Treven & Potocan, 2005:156). *Behavioral patterns* divide individual under two categories, those that believe strongly that results and action are time sensitive for the purpose of achieving organizational goals and those that see their impact as moderate and therefore do not react strongly when stress stimuli are introduced (Treven & Mulej, 2005:39). The *level of flexibility* dimension points to the reaction to stimuli relative to an individual's ability to adapt to new job related requirements. *Work involvement* reflects the individual's drive towards work involvement, their level for enthusiasm to performing different job related activities (Treven and Treven, 2010:259). Summarizing the section of stress we can point that it leads to conflict and conflict is closely related to how individuals and we assess the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Stress affects employee commitment and higher degrees of it may provide the background for conflict and lack of job satisfaction.

2.2 Time pressures

The segment looks at the consequences that time pressures bring to employees of retail networks in Western companies, as analyzed by Thomas, Esper and Stank (2010). The analysis has at its foundation the assessment that a supply chain's

success is directly dependent on an efficient flow of goods and services which points to time as the primordial element affecting the process (Brown et al. 2005; Ganesan et al. 2009:64). The past decades have seen a continuous improvement in the supply chain networks – collaborative planning forecasting/replenishments (CPFR); vendor managed inventory (VMI); just-in-time (JIT) – each aimed at improving firm related efficiency and reduce the time required to bring raw materials or merchandise throughout the value chain (Thomas et al. 2010:387; Brown et al, 2005:47). The effort and quest for staff and organizational related efficiency did not leave untouched the relationship between employees and the firm; with the first, under the duress of time, manifesting both a gradual detachment from the organizational goals and a higher propensity for initiating conflict with the management of the employer-firm and with the client-firm's management and staff. This find brought to light through supply chains measurement, undertaken by Thomas et al (2010), points to conflict emerging not only as a consequence within the firms implementing systems requiring significant time pressures upon their staff, but also between the firms and each other's employees. The corresponding emerging increase in conflict levels seem to have become a manifestation affecting employees and impacted in the overall business relationship between suppliers, retailers, manufacturers and their employees (Thomas et al 2010:389; Thomas, 2008:35; Golcic & Mentzer, 2006:16). Bu virtue of these findings we advance the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Increased time pressure upon staff performance is a firm related factor that increases the propensity of conflict between employees and organizations.

2.3 Workplace safety

The point behind workplace safety as a firm related factor generating conflict, while restricted to industries where such a concern is viable, is that it affected the relationship and trust between employees and the firm. A study related to mining conducted in the US by Rolston (2010) found that in the face of firm's commitment to profits instead of safety guidelines employee generated conflict arose alongside all levels of staff. The conflict between firm's management and employees escalated to where the staff's commitment and trust in all the existing safeguards and corporate goals came under review (Gill, 2000:21; Szablowski, 2007:26). The staff of mining operations that was affected by safety violation showed increased levels of promoting conflict between employees and the

respective firm, manifested through labor protest actions – strikes, worker's council meeting, employee run safety assessments committees, work slowdowns - with an increased desire to scrutinize and assess safety safeguards at the cost of meeting organizational goals for production or operational efficiencies (Rolston, 2010: 332; Smith 2008:77). The segment provides the content for the next statement.

Proposition 3: Concerns over workplace safety provide for a an active environment for elevated levels of conflict between employees and firms.

2.4 Job satisfaction effect on affective commitment

The job satisfaction section is based on the research on staff and middle management in Pakistan and India advanced by Malik, Waheed and Malik (2010) which points to the job satisfaction as both a source of conflict and as a mediator factor for stress. Job satisfaction is defined as "an attitude that individuals have about their jobs. It results from their perception of their jobs and the degree to which there is a good fit between the individual and the organizations (Ivancevich, 1997:123; Larson, 2004:242; Malik et al, 2010:235)." The higher fit between employees and the organizations is seen as the key to lowering role stressors that promote the occurrence of conflict. Stress is seen as originating from the interaction between employees and firms in the environment surrounding the performance of job duties. Malik et al (2010) characterize stressful jobs as jobs that contain heavy workloads, several deadlines, severe time constraints and high degree of contact with customers. This work related stressful environment is seen to affect employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, increased absenteeism and turnover (Kemery et al. 1985:27; Schaubroeck et al 1989:43; Yousef, 2002:55, Malik et al 2010:222). The research points to a definitely linear rapport between an employee satisfaction with their job related duties and the organization as a mediator for conflict (Yousef, 2002, Malik et al, 2010:224), yet to what extent an organization is entirely able to adjust both organizational processes and job duties to where results are not negatively unaffected remains unknown. The following statement emerges:

Proposition 4: Job satisfaction affects the existence of conflict and employee commitment to the firm, while also acting as a mediator for both.

3. INDIVIDUAL RELATED FACTORS

Firm related factors, while providing the backdrop for factors that lead to conflict, in the organizational setting while employees are engaged in the performance of job duties would not provide for a complete content without looking at individual related factors – the subject of this segment. We have chosen four factors as representative for the section: emotional intelligence, personality type, skill deficiency and attention deficit.

3.1 Emotional intelligence

Akintayo (2010) by analyzing Nigerian firms advances the concept of emotional intelligence, defined as an individual's ability to moderate the relationship between work-family conflict and job satisfaction and the relationship between work-family conflict and career commitment. Career commitment, equates a high degree of acquiescence of a firm's goals (Martin et al, 2002:234; Edward, 2008:119). An employee that is best suited to mediate the requirements of their work-family environment would be an individual that would be able to dedicate significant time to meeting job related requirements and duties (Geroge, 2009:34). Meeting these duties and requirements would in turn allow an individual to position the firm related interests as a priority, which in turn would show benefits in the form of a progressive career situation. Inversely stated, an employee that cannot mediate work-family conflict would eventually experience a lower degree of job satisfaction and commitment to a career in the same place of employment (Tsui et al, 2008:269; Akintayo, 2010:131). Summarizing the above we can indicate that emotional intelligence is seen to have an effect on an individual's ability to moderate conflict and commitment and as such allow for the following proposition:

Proposition 5: Emotional intelligence is a factor affecting the degree to which an individual can moderate conflict for the purpose of commitment to organizational goals and personal career.

3.2 Personality type

Mukhtar and Habib (2010) in their research of Middle Eastern companies found that personality type provides the linking factor between conflict and personality type. This link points to the conclusion that individuals have different personality types and as such adhere differently to conflict and conflict management (Mukhtar & Habib, 2010: 305). The personality type and propensity for conflict is

seen as being determined by the ranking of the following two dimensions: the individual's desire to satisfy their own concerns versus the desire to satisfy the other's concerns. Individual's interested in satisfying their own concerns have identifiable extrovert characteristics and as such are seen to have a higher propensity to germinate conflict within the work environment (Boonsathorn, 2007:231; Mukhtar & Habib, 2010:308).While the researchers agree with the fact that conflict is unavoidable in the organizations to point with a high degree of resolve to the influence that an individual's personality type can have in an organizational setting as it relates to conflict and the management process for it (Herkenhoff, 2004:389; Mukhtar & Habib, 2010:307). There is, therefore, a strong identification between personality types and conflict, conflict which is seen to affect the way organizational task are completed as the degree of commitment to them varies significantly. Given the above representations the following proposition is advanced:

Proposition 6: Personality type affects conflict, conflict management and employee commitment to an organization.

3.3 Skill deficiency

The concept of skill deficiency and its effect upon conflict and firms' ability to realize stated goals has been well researched for decades. A study that stands out is the one conducted by Turnbull et al (2010) as it focuses on its effects inside an organization as well as the need to address it and solve it. While the solution part will be further discussed in the recommendation section, here we look at the stated deficiency and its relationship with the emergence of conflict (Allen et al, 2008:177, Turnbull et al, 2010:2). The discrepancy between an individual's skills and the skill required to complete a task, activity, or product are seen to affect immediately the results; results which reach subpar levels therefore affecting both the organization's ability to meet production and performance goals and projections (Roberston, 2006:268; Chavez & Weisinger, 2008:44).Upon displaying subpar performance organizations enter a period or self-assessment and adjudication of decisions with regards employee job security and to job related recruitment of a labor force capable of delivering on past tasks. This not only promotes conflict with the existing labor force in the face of job loss risk aversion, but also does nothing to prevent future conflict with the new hires if they should not have the skill flexibility and competence to meet future job related requirements (Plees & Maak, 2004:130; Turnbull et al, 2010:14). The conflict

reach present and potentially future environment is seen to reduce substantially employee commitment to the organization given that their economic security is becoming unattainable. The proposition generated by this state presented below:

Proposition 6. Skill deficiency is seen as a factor affecting conflict and its aftermath creates an environment in which employee commitment is significantly reduced by a lack of economic security

3.4 Attention deficit

A study of US and Canadian employees and students conducted by Coetzer and Trimble (2010:23) suggests that adult related disorders are producing a wide variety of difficulties and inefficiencies in the workplace. The finding was seen to significantly affect work teams ability to offer effective and efficient performance related responses to job related tasks that appeared monotonous or attention intensive and as such resulted in a higher degree of conflict with both other employees and managers. The higher the conflict situations emerged the lower the affective commitment to the organization became apparent (Biederman et al 2006:140; Coetzer & Trimble, 2010:26). The proposition emerging is presented below:

Proposition 7: Attention deficit affects both an individual's inclination towards conflict and organizational commitment as tasks are unevenly performed.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

The environmental factors need to be recognized as they affect the milieu in which individuals live and work and organizations undertake the process of meeting strategic goals. The factors identified for the segment are: sustainable practices, environmental and social responsibility

4.1 Sustainable practices

Kwok and Rabe (2010) in their research focused on US based multinational breweries found that employing sustainable practices for the purposes of supporting organizational goals attracted significant employee commitment and ameliorated situations where conflict existed in the past (Sanchez, 2005:3; Kwok & Rabe, 2010:125). The workforce employed by companies that showed innovative, environmentally sustainable and community-minded business processes received high levels of employee generated commitment and registered

a reduction in the occurrence of conflicts. This provides background for the next proposition.

Proposition 8: The implementation of sustainable practices has been found to mediate conflict and increase employee related commitment.

4.2 Corporate social responsibility

The subject of corporate social responsibility has been and will remain continuously researched as it provides for an ever-changing set of demands from corporate citizens. The findings of a study conducted by Mozes, Josman and Yaniv (2011) explore the "impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement on employee motivation, job satisfaction and organizational identification as well as employee citizenship in voluntary community activities (Mozes, 2011: 318)." The study focused on multinational airline companies and showed a strong relation between corporate environmental and social responsibility and employee work motivation and identification with the organization (Collier and Esteban, 2007:27). According to the study employees of companies that showed a high degree of corporate responsibility displayed an affirmative perception of the organization, elevated identification with organizational goals, positive work motivation and consistent levels of job security. In addition the study's measurements proved that higher employee involvement in programs servicing the firm's social responsibility became accompanied by lower levels of conflict with management and other stakeholders. This points to the last proposition:

Proposition 8: Corporate social responsibility when employed by firms is seen to provide for an environment where employees display higher levels of motivation, job satisfaction, identification and lower levels of conflict

5. CONCLUSION

The propositions stated above will be utilized to create a model and compilation for the factors affecting conflict and employee commitment; commitment which may affect an organization's ability the reach higher levels of staff retention. The subject of conflict and ensuing relationship between organization and employees is ever-changing and as such a compact conceptual framework will remain the subject of continuous review and enrichment. The framework below aims at opening a dialogue regarding the need to find strategies that minimize conflict and increase the employee job satisfaction, retention and commitment to

organizational goals. The plus and minus signs attaché to each of the identified factors point to the effect that each has upon increasing or ameliorating conflict. In the case of firm related factors we forward that increasing stress, time pressures would increase the likelihood of conflict, while increasing workplace safety and job satisfaction would lower it perceived occurrence. When analyzing the individual related factors we conclude that higher levels of emotional intelligence, understanding personality types, addressing skill deficiencies and awareness of the effects of attention deficit would lower conflict levels, while lower levels or lack of understanding of each would increase the propensity of conflict within organizations. The environmental factors point to the implementation of sustainable practices and commitment to corporate social responsibility as key ensuring a conflict placid work environment. Moreover employees operating in an environment where these factors had not negative effect were seen to show higher levels of commitment and identification with organizational goals, at the same time with increased retention and job satisfaction. The logical organizational step from this framework is to devise strategies to minimize the negative effects.

Figure -Factors affecting conflict: framework
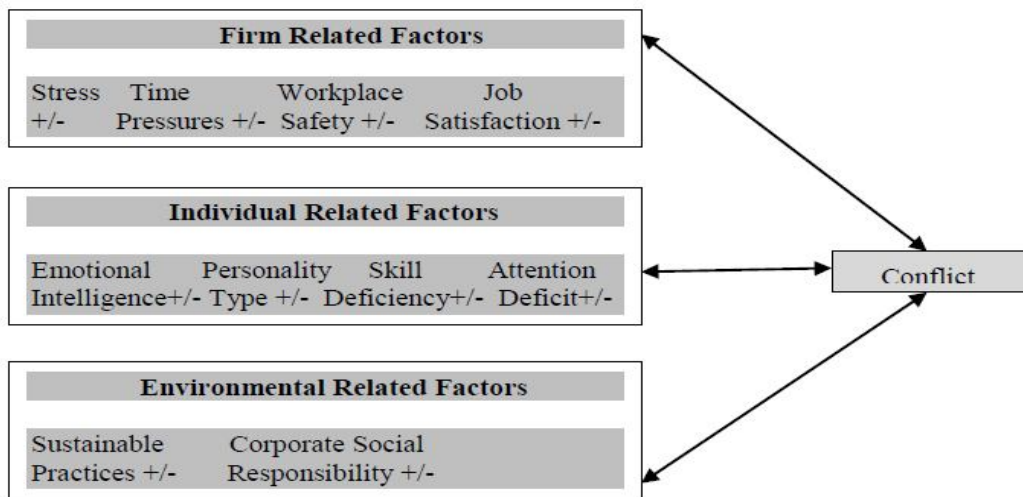
6. LIMITATION

The framework presented here is not comprehensive and stops before providing strategies and solutions that would alleviate the repercussions that these factors bring upon the emergence and existence of conflict.

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