

# Conflict Theory

## I. Conflict Theory and Conflict Management

### A. Definition

The term conflict has been defined a number of ways. However, for a person viewing conflict from an administrative post in an organization, the definition offered by March and Simon is appropriate. They note that, most generally, the term is applied to a breakdown in the standard mechanisms of decision-making so that an individual or group experiences difficulty in achieving a goal.

### B. Functional vs. Dysfunctional

As a general rule, conflict is viewed as bad. However, to most theorists, conflict is viewed as both functional and dysfunctional. In addition, theorists tend to view conflict as inevitable where alternatives are present and there are decisions to be made. Coser tells us that no group can be entirely harmonious as it would then be devoid of process and structure. Both positive and negative factors build group relations. Conflict as well as cooperation has social functions. Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life.

It is within the functional-dysfunctional dimension that conflict management is often defined. Specifically, conflict management refers to understanding and dealing with conflict in such a manner that it serves a functional rather than a dysfunctional purpose.

Theorists have focused their attention on the types of conflict, sources of conflict, and strategies for responding to conflict.

### C. Types of Conflict

March and Simon identified three major types of conflict:

1. individual conflict (in individual decision making)
2. organizational conflict (involving individuals or groups within the organization)
3. interorganizational conflict (between groups or organizations)

### D. Bases of Conflict

In examining the bases for organizational conflict from a structural perspective, it has been suggested that in complex organizations there are four structural areas where conflict is most evident:

1. Hierarchical conflict (between the various organizational levels, e.g. the school principals in conflict with the superintendent and her/his staff)
2. Functional conflict (between functional units of the organization, e.g. the division of instruction in conflict with the division of operations)
3. Line-staff conflict (between line personnel and staff personnel, e.g. conflict between principals and subject area supervisors)
4. Formal-informal conflict (between the formal organization and the informal groupings, e.g. conflict between the norms of teacher cliques regarding participation in in-service activities and the demands of the board of education for ongoing teacher training)

#### E. Stages of Conflict

Pondy identified five stages in a conflict episode:

1. latent conflict (ever present in organizations)
2. perceived conflict (when threats to value systems are recognized)
3. felt conflict (when focused anxieties are created)
4. manifest conflict (when conflict behavior is exhibited)
5. conflict aftermath (the conditions that exist after the conflict is resolved or suppressed)

#### F. Dimensions of Conflict

The dimensions of conflict include:

1. antecedent conditions of conflict behavior (e.g. scarcity of resources)
2. affective states of the individuals involved (e.g. stress, tension, hostility, anxiety, etc.)
3. cognitive states of individuals (i.e. their perceptions or awareness of conflict situations)
4. conflict behavior, ranging from passive resistance to overt aggression

#### G. Sources of Conflict

1. Poor communication
2. Personalities
3. Unclear jurisdiction
4. Conflict of interest
5. Dependent relationship
6. Different objectives
7. Differences in assumptions

8. Differences in methods
9. Differences in values
10. Using the same solutions over and over

#### H. Conflict Modes

1. Competing (forcing)
2. Collaborating (problem-solving, win-win-process is important)
3. Compromising (sharing, each side gives up something)
4. Avoiding (withdrawal)
5. Accommodating (smoothing)

#### I. Outcomes of Conflict

1. Deadlock
2. Victory/Defeat
3. Compromise

### **II. Conflict Resolution/Management**

A number of writers have suggested approaches to reducing or resolving conflict within and among groups and there is considerable similarity in their formulations:

1. Follett- offered three ways of dealing with conflict- domination, compromise, and integration
2. March and Simon- suggested four basic processes by which an organization may react to conflict: problem-solving, shared persuasion, bargaining, and “politics”
3. Pondy- proposed three models for conflict management: The bureaucratic model, the systems model, and the bargaining model (which is similar to the March and Simon model)
4. Kast and Rosenzweig- identified five typical responses to organizational conflict: withdrawal, smoothing, compromise, confrontation, and forcing
5. Luthans- identified three basic strategies for conflict management:
  - a. First, a buffer can be created between the parties to a conflict
  - b. Second, the structure of the organization can be altered
  - c. Third, the conflicting parties can be helped to understand themselves better and how they affect others

In sum, the scholars suggest that there are a limited number of strategies for handling organizational conflict. Conceptually there seems to be agreement that the preferred approaches are those that enable the various parties involved to gain better insights into themselves and to the critical elements of the conflict to the end that “win-win” solutions are created.

### III. Conflict Resolution/Management Tools

- A. How To Use the 6 Universal Rules for Conflict Management
- B. Turning Conflict into Opportunity for Growth and Teambuilding in Schools

#### How To Use The 6 Universal Rules For Conflict Management

1. Avoid Either/Or Situations
  - a. Ask, "What do we need to accomplish?"
  - b. Develop alternative solutions
  - c. Strive for consensus
2. Avoid "We-They" Division
  - a. Focus on actual situation
  - b. Don't divide into opposing camps in the meeting room
3. Avoid the Personal Pronoun
  - a. Use situational descriptions
  - b. Attach the problem, not the person
4. Don't Try to Control Feelings with Arguments, Persuasion or Threats; Use Facts and Logic
5. Limit the Number of Decision Makers to Those Directly Involved with the Conflict
6. A Solution Must Have Quality and Acceptance or It Will Only Be the Source of Further Conflict

#### Turning Conflict into Opportunity for Growth and Teambuilding in Schools

1. Questions to Ask:
  - a. Why does this conflict exist? Very often we deal with a symptom that leads to the conflict rather than tracing the cause of the problem.
  - b. Is there anything in the design of the system itself that causes conflict?
2. Key Points to Remember:
  - a. Conflict is inevitable in an educational organization and may be a healthy signal that something needs attention. This can lead to important changes being proposed, considered, or implemented to complete. Absence of conflict over a long period of time may suggest a stagnant organization and educational program.
  - b. You can't consider alternatives that don't exist. When handled properly, reasonable conflict can function as an "idea generator."
  - c. Look at conflicting viewpoints as intellectual or procedural "sparring partners." Avoid the "win-lose" philosophy and references to "the good

guys and the bad guys.” To the greatest extent possible, the final resolution of a conflict should advance the interests of all of the parties.

- d. Avoid the “playground mentality.” Emotions are as important to consider in dealing with a conflict, as are facts. Facts may change emotions, but unless there is a sufficient understanding of the way people feel about the issues and about the other parties involved, the conflict will probably not be resolved.
- e. Let the other party save face unless you want to start a “revenge account” that earns compound interest. Smoothing and “compromise” are essential tactics. Keep in mind whether you want to win the battle or win the war.
- f. The quality of the solution and its acceptance is the end goal. If your strategy isn’t leading toward that kind of solution, re-examine your strategy and motives immediately.
- g. A sense of humor, perspective, and a belief in the innate good intention of most people are important not only to the resolution of conflict but to resolution of conflict situations in the near future.