

## Managing conflicts at workplace

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### ABSTRACT

Much has been written on workplace conflict and this paper is one more addition. The difference lies in that this paper is not theoretical but it narrates the tricks of managing workplace conflicts through real-life experiences that span over a few decades and would easily get grasped and translated into the work habits of the readers. Conflicts as we know, cannot be avoided because we, humans, unlike machines, possess minds, which make us think and think differently and on occasions, our thinking takes diametrically opposite stances and conflicts occur. There are several reasons for workplace conflicts which are discussed in the paper. The steps to resolve conflicts are laid down with detailed discussions of each step. Not all conflicts are negative, there are positive conflicts arising out of healthy competition amongst groups. Even negative conflicts can be made to impact positively by effective resolution of conflicts if conflicts are viewed as opportunities for improvement.

**Keywords:** *Workplace Conflicts, How To Resolve Conflicts, Positive-Negative Conflicts, Clashes At The Workplace*

We, the people, are the most difficult species to deal with. There is no simple rule to deal with different people effectively. We all grow in different environments, inculcate in us different values, and develop different attitudes and ways of thinking. So, it is not wrong to say that no two people are the same. Since we are social animals, we have to interact with each other. Interactions sometimes lead to conflicts in all groups be it at home or workplace. We shall confine our discussions to conflicts at the workplace.

A lot of literature is available on conflicts at the workplace. While taking their cognizance, we would, in this paper, try to understand what we mean by conflicts, what are the factors behind their occurrence at a workplace, what harm can these do to the organization and its people; can these conflicts have a positive impact in some cases and finally what is a most effective way of their resolution? We shall use real-life situations that the author encountered in his long professional journey spanning over four decades in manufacturing industries.

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### ***Anatomy of Conflicts-Definition and factors behind the conflicts***

What do we mean by conflicts? Webster's dictionary defines conflict as a sharp disagreement or opposition of interests or ideas.

***Sharp disagreement in ideas-*** Given a topic there can be diametric opposite ideas- we see this daily in TV news debates.

To illustrate the point, suppose the debate topic (current hot issue on Indian TV news channels at the time of writing this paper) is, "Is the killing of gangster Vikas Dubey in police encounter justified".

Let us debate

- 1. Arguments in favor**—yes, it was the only action which could be taken in face of his flight and attack on police party who asked him to surrender arms—after all, he was most dreaded as he had already killed eight policemen. Why should police show mercy on a gangster who mercilessly killed eight police officials? Even if the encounter was fake, this action was also justified because had he not been killed, he would have influenced the witnesses and trial could have evicted him and leave him free to kill more people was done by him in past.
- 2. Argument Against**—Killing was not justified, instead of killing him, police could have fired on his hand/feet to make him immobile and could have captured him alive if the event happened as police claimed. Whether it was an encounter is under doubt. If it was a fake encounter then not only it is inhuman but also it is denying justice as the avenue for exposing other culprits got closed. Justice must happen in courts only and police cannot take law in their own hands.

So, there is not only sharp disagreement in ideas but the two ideas and arguments are diametrically opposite and hence there is a conflict between two categories of people holding diametrically opposite view on a topic.

***The opposition of interests-*** Consider real-life workplace situation in a manufacturing set up. Here the Production department and Quality departments have frequent conflicting situations because of opposite interests. Production's interest is in increasing the production quantity whereas the interest of the Quality department is to maintain quality levels by rejecting non-conforming products which get produced, thus, resulting in reduced production. Conflicts happen. These are sometimes bitter when Production feels that Quality is being unnecessary rigid and is rejecting production when the product is good and the Quality department is firm to reject the product maintaining that the product does not conform to laid standards. Mostly these are borderline cases. Thus, there is an opposition of interests and conflicts manifest.

***Thus, conflicts are situations arising out of disagreement of ideas or due to opposition of interests.***

Prachi Juneja in her paper says that "Conflict arises whenever individuals have different values, opinions, needs, interests and are unable to find a middle way. ***Conflict is defined as a clash between individuals arising out of a difference in thought process, attitudes, understanding, interests, requirements, and even sometimes perceptions.*** A conflict results in heated arguments

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sometimes escalate even to physical abuses, and definitely in loss of peace and harmony. Conflict can actually change relationships. Friends can become foes as a result of the conflict. A conflict can arise not only between individuals but also among countries, political parties, and states as well.”

The above definition by Prachi brings in additional factors of differences of attitudes and perceptions. These are important.

Attitudinal differences are very common among people because they are brought up under different environments, different cultures and develop their attitudes which are different and sometimes the attitudinal responses are exactly opposite which becomes a source of conflict. In one of the companies where I happened to be GM (operations), we had PPO Manager (production process optimization Manager) who was virtually a machine man who would know all about machines and nothing else. His superego was built in him as he knew that there was no one in the organization matching his technical calibre. This super ego reflected badly in his inter-personal relations with superiors, peers and juniors. Due to his rude behaviour he was not liked by seniors, colleagues or juniors.

Let us call him Mr. X.

Our store manager was a dedicated but rigid person who would not budge from the laid protocols. Let us call him Mr. Y. Both were having different virtues and different attitudes. Sometimes the different attitudes result in conflict.

It so happened that Mr. X while working on a machine, learned that a machine part is worn out and needed replacement. The normal protocol in the company is that if anything is to be bought then the respective manager must raise a requisition and get it approved by the plant manager and send it to the store and store manager will procure it and deliver it to concerned manager. Mr. X with the superego phoned the Store manager and gave details of the part and asked him to purchase it else the machine will suffer a breakdown. Mr. Y told him that he will purchase it after he gets an approved written requisition from him. He cannot accept a verbal request. Mr. X shouted at him and told Mr. Y to obey him because he was a senior manager and Mr. Y must make this part available because the machine will undergo breakdown if the part is not purchased. Mr. Y told him that Mr. X cannot order him as he is not his boss and there is a laid down protocol that Mr. X should follow and unless he sends a written approved requisition, he is not going to purchase the part. Mr. X became furious and shouted at Mr. Y to behave properly and learn to talk properly to seniors and he should immediately buy the part as the machine needed it urgently. Mr. Y rebutted and shouted back that who is he to teach him how to talk to a senior and in fact, it is Mr. X himself, who must know how to work in an organization and must respect the laid protocols. Mr. X started abusing Mr. Y with counter abusing from Mr. Y and the conflict escalated.

So, attitudes result in clashes and conflicts. We all are not the same, we come from different backgrounds and we are groomed in different environments and we develop different attitudes some with good ones and some not with so good ones. Illogical attitudes trigger conflicts as we saw in the above episodes. So the *attitudes* are an important component in the definition of “Conflict”.

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Another component in the definition of conflict is “**Perception**”. It is commonly experienced that sometimes given one event, different people perceive it differently and the different perceptions trigger conflict.

When I joined as GM (operations) in one company I was asked to manage 3 units which were situated near each other. Later on, we went for expansion and established a unit in Himachal Pradesh and this unit also came under my control. Our company was on a big expansion program. It recruited a vice-president manufacturing and I was put under him (earlier I was reporting to MD directly). Even when I started reporting to newly recruited VP, the MD still used to pass on instructions to me directly and I was in good books of top management. The company went in to acquire one group of companies that had two units locally and these units were also put under my control. I was asked to consolidate one of these units with one of the parent units and I did it successfully and our efficiencies went up. Subsequently, one more unit was established at Uttaranchal and it was also put under me. Thus, I was managing two outstation units and four local units. The units were doing well and our turn over and profits were soaring. I was very happy and was confidently adding value to the working of the company. And suddenly came a sudden jolt with the event which is relevant to the discussion for the role of perception in the definition of conflict.

Suddenly, one day I got a phone call from MD and he told that henceforth the two outstation units will be directly managed by the vice president who will take this work as an additional responsibility and I should concentrate on only local units. I was shattered and could not understand where I had gone wrong. I felt that the management had lost confidence in me irrespective of all my good work. I could not concentrate on my work. However, the local units did not suffer much due to turmoil in me because I had established sound systems and these were helping even when I was not able to concentrate on my work. I wrote a big note, “Where have I gone wrong” and sent it to MD to register my feelings to him and he called me to HO for a personal meeting.

A lot of discussions happened, which I shall be using in this paper when we discuss conflict resolution. But the outcome of the meeting was that the message from MD was perceived differently by me and the MD. My perception I mentioned in the above paragraph; whereas the MD's perception was that he was still very happy with my work and had confidence in my ability but was not so sure about the capability of VP because all work was being done by me; so he had decided to give some units to him so that he could prove himself. Thus, his perception of the event was at wide variation with my perception.

*Thus, different persons can perceive the same event differently as per the thoughts in their minds which leads to interference in their behavior and actions, resulting in conflicts. **Perception**, thus, is a vital component of conflicts.*

Another way of looking at conflicts is summarized by Mike Myatt (2012), “What creates conflict in the workplace? *Opposing positions, competitive tensions, power struggles, **ego**, pride, jealousy, performance discrepancies, compensation issues, just someone having a bad day, etc.* While the answer to the previous question would appear to lead to the conclusion that just about anything and everything creates conflict, the reality is that the root of most conflict is either born out of poor

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communication or the inability to control one's emotions. Clear, concise, accurate, and timely communication of information helps to ease both the number and severity of conflicts. Another common mistake made in workplace communications which lead to conflict is letting emotions drive decisions."

Similar views are expressed by Rose Johnson (2019), "Poor communication is one of the main causes of conflict between employees in the workplace. This can result in a difference in *communication styles or a failure to communicate*. For example, a manager reassigned an employee's task to the employee's co-worker but failed to communicate the reassignment to the employee. This may cause the employee to feel slighted, which can transform into animosity among the two employees and the manager.

Failing to communicate in the workplace may cause employees to make incorrect assumptions and believe in workplace gossip. Poor communication in the workplace not only causes conflict but decreases productivity and employee morale."

Truly said, at the root of most conflicts lies poor/ vague communication or the inability to control emotions by people involved in conflicts. These factors prominently emerge from the example just discussed. MD had communicated poorly without giving all facts behind his thinking; he had just passed on the order without laying a foundation and I could not control my emotions and a conflict manifested.

### ***Personalities and egos are other factors which often clash to produce conflicts***

Angelina Farell 2014 is of the view that "Personality clashes at a workplace are generally fueled by perceptions about someone's actions, character or motives. For instance, if a team leader verbally insults another member of your staff, they will easily view him or her as inappropriate and disrespectful. When left unchecked, that employee (and others) may harbor resentment. The best way to tackle this type of situation is to understand each other's feelings and encourage team members to push their egos aside."

The central aspect of personality is **EGO** which is a driving force for people for their actions and when **egos** clash at the workplace, great harm is done. Dr. Wadhawan Kompal, 2016, comments, ".....*Workplace ego clashes happen for various reasons," says Dr. Lisa Matthewman, Principal Lecturer in Occupational and Organizational Psychology at the University of Westminster. They can be the result of a conflict of personalities, professional jealousy, or communication problems. Sometimes they happen when someone is trying to establish themselves as the alpha female or male.*

Serious workplace ego clashes can be highly stressful and demoralizing for colleagues who aren't directly involved. It can seriously disrupt productivity and efficiency, because people's energy, time, and attention are taken up with conflict, not working productively as a team. If such clashes or conflicts are left unresolved, the culture of an organization can stagnate, this can harm creativity. In small set-ups, problems are often made worse because people usually need to work more closely together."

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I have seen small scale organizations stagnate because the super Ego of the entrepreneur resulted in super conflicts. Recently the organization from where I retired, had got shifted to a new premise. This new plant under construction had the super conflict between its MD (who was the owner) and his senior managers because of his *super-ego*.

The new plant was built with an ambition of MD to make it the best plant in way of infrastructure and also by way of its working. We were enthusiastically engaged in its construction. Costly bricks were bought and the novel idea of "No Plaster" on bricks was used. It was Ok for the special bricks( these looked good and also did not shed dust) which were put on outer walls to give it beautiful look; plaster was not done on these bricks but the plaster was not allowed even on inside brick walls where ordinary bricks were used and were likely to shed dust. MD did not listen to us when we explained the disadvantages of not doing plaster on the ordinary bricks but he did not budge. This was a small conflict arising out of his super-ego but more serious conflict awaited us.

Plastic manufacturing is affected if the atmosphere has dust and dirt. To prevent the entry of dust and dirt, he blocked the windows for entry of air by using transparent bricks in the windows which prevented the entry of air but allowed sunlight. Not only this, but he asked the architect to do away with "louvers" at the roof below the roof sheets. The "louvers" are always provided for ventilation in the plant. The architect pointed out this fact to MD but he insisted that he does not want the entry of dust and dirt so he would prefer not to have louvers below the roof sheets. When we, the managers, learned about this, we told him that there will be suffocation in the plant. He said we shall see it at a later stage after completion of the plant. We knew that the louvers had to be put before the structure for roof sheets is made and this cannot be done at a later stage but he did not change his decision. We tried to convince him by involving the project specialist from our parent company to which we were a subsidiary unit. He took MD to show one of the best plants of our parent company and he showed him the ventilation system to convince him to change his decision but he did not change it, probably his super-ego did not allow him to admit his mistake.

Air ventilation is a must; dust/ dirt can be prevented by putting air filters but if no provision is kept in the building for entry of air then we are not creating a plant but a furnace to roast the workers and employees! Plastic machines produce heat as the plastic raw material is to be molten to form the products. No air, coupled with heat generated by machines, would certainly make life miserable for employees. We, the managers, were burning with rage but could do nothing and the plant got completed.

After commissioning the plant, when few machines were started, the realization dawned on MD that the atmosphere was not healthy for humans and then there was no option but to go for costly air handling units which will cost not less than 80-90 lakh rupees and a decision was taken to go for costly air handling units. The air handling units were getting installed when I retired from that organization.

Super-egos not only made employees lose respect for MD but also resulted in a huge avoidable loss to the company. The super conflict between him and the team is going to stay because now onwards, no one would get encouraged to come out openly to point to his evident mistakes nor will come a culture in the organization which will be conducive to get innovative ideas from employees. This loss will be colossal but will never be known to him/ understood by him—his

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super-ego has closed all the doors to get this learning to reach him. There is lasting adverse impact on employees which would certainly harm the company!!

How aptly words of Michelle (Staffing Atlas) fit here, “ .....Say it with me again: We are all different. We’re not always going to like everyone we meet, and it’s not easy to work with someone whose personality we find distasteful. ....Personalities, egos and situations joined together churn out conflicts.”

The team of the above MD will always be living with his distasteful personality as a professional – as a human being, he was a very kind and pleasant person to live with and is admired by all.

In the above paragraphs, we saw what is meant by **conflicts**, how these get caused, and what factors trigger a conflict. At the root of all the conflicts is the fact that we, humans, are not machines; we have a mind that creates thoughts and emotions. Our thoughts and emotions are vastly different because of our upbringing and environment where we grow. The conflicts are going to be there as these are natural phenomena. We can reduce its incidences through healthy protocols and training but we cannot eliminate these completely.

Summarizing the anatomy of conflict at work-place, we can say that work-place conflicts are constituted by

- Sharp disagreement in ideas
- Opposition of interests
- the difference in the thought process
- difference in Attitudes
- difference in perception
- unclear communications
- Personality and Ego clashes
- Professional jealousy
- Power struggles at work-place,
- Biased Performance appraisals resulting in favoritism in rewards
- Disturbed mental state due to tensions at home
- The imbalance between what leaders say and do i.e deviation between thoughts and behavior

### *Closed single-track minds of leaders*

The list can be endless because all these relate to the working of mind and mind is mysterious and unpredictable in innumerable ways!!

### *Impact of work-place conflicts on the organization and its employees*

If the conflicts are resolved amicably at the grass-root level, the adverse impact is short-lived in most of the cases and lasts only till their resolution and maybe it lingers on for some more short time and people forget and come back at the old level of vigor in their work.

But there are cases when even after resolution, the impact stays – above example of MD with super-ego is such a case. The problem of ventilation was eventually solved as without the solution,

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the plant could not function but the conflict has left a permanent effect on employees by making them meek, inhibiting their thoughts to themselves, and making a habit of overlooking actions leading to harm to the organization.

On the other hand leaving conflict unresolved can cause serious problems to productivity at the workplace, and company culture. No one wants to work in a tense, passive-aggressive environment where they're constantly uncomfortable. They will not be motivated to give their best in an unpleasant environment. They may avoid their presence if the environment turns nasty. When people don't want to be at work, it shows: higher staff turnover, more absenteeism, and poor job performance; innovative and creative ideas get curbed and the organization stagnates at a mediocre level.

When conflict arises, there is a tendency for morale to be lowered, an increase in absenteeism and decreased productivity results. It has been found that the managers have to spend a considerable amount of their time in resolving workplace conflict, which could have been used at better value addition activities towards improved productivity and improved office performance.

Picincu Andra 2019 has made several observations about the impact of conflicts, these are presented in the following paragraphs--"If left unaddressed, the conflicts can affect employee morale and hinder performance. In the long run, they may even impact the company's reputation and bottom line, leading to revenue loss. They can also affect a company's public image, making it unappealing to clients and investors alike.

Each year, American companies lose a staggering \$359 billion due to workplace conflicts. The conflicts affect an organization's productivity and performance, create tension between employees, and increase stress levels. Conflicts may also result in project failure, dissatisfied customers, and high absenteeism.

The effects of conflict on individual performance at work go beyond missed deadlines. Conflicts increase tension and stress in the workplace, which could potentially lead to errors, poor planning, and disagreements. Over time, they may create a toxic workplace environment that hinders employee performance and motivation. As a result, your business will suffer.

Workplace conflicts can affect team morale, job satisfaction, and motivation. Your employees may take time off to avoid the conflict and those who are responsible for it. They may feel stressed and emotionally drained, which can result in higher turnover rates and absenteeism. This means that you'll have to spend extra on recruitment and training."

Her observations mostly cover most of the adverse effects the unresolved conflicts can have on the organizations working and their employees. I recall a series of conflicting situations (concerning Mr. X of the above example) which occurred as a resolution of conflicts from their roots was avoided at each stage. In the example, the conflict concerning the order placement was not resolved but a short cut was done by the plant manager who called Mr. X and persuaded him to give a written requirement to him personally, and on basis of this document, Mr. Y bought the item and machine was repaired. Mr. X was not made to realize in clear cut terms that he is not above the laws and protocols prevailing in the organization and strict action can be taken if he does



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not follow the protocols and behaves properly with juniors to maintain harmony in the organization. For the future, for Mr. X a new protocol inadvertently came in existence whereby, he kept on ordering verbally to Mr. Y and kept on bullying him and the plant manager would pacify Mr. Y.

Plant manager expressed helplessness when GM pointed out to him that this action is not correct; he maintained that he cannot displease Mr. X because he is dependent on his services and moreover past experiences with MD had also shown that he did not want to take disciplinary action on Mr. X for his misdeeds due to same fear. This behavior gave more and more courage to Mr. X to bypass the discipline of the company, disobey and insult peers/seniors and subordinates because MD and the HR department shied away from taking action because he was felt indispensable due to his machine maintenance capabilities. He defied and insulted even GM but top management and HR preferred to ignore his bad deeds.

Subsequently, he became uncontrollable even by MD and was even caught lending his services to external companies i.e., he was taking a salary from the company but was also minting money by lending his services to others by taking leaves to work elsewhere. For this also no stern action was taken, and he was just given a verbal warning by the MD.

Ultimately even his strength of machine maintenance could also not be put to use eventually because he started neglecting his basic duties and the GM, the plant managers and production managers could do nothing because top management was not willing to take stern steps. He started behaving whimsically and would often disrupt the running machines on the pretext of doing some R&D on some imaginary problem. Many times, deliveries were missed as the machine was overtaken by him for researching on imaginary problem. Eventually, the GM, the Plant managers and the production managers had no option but to ignore him and would rather call outside agencies for repair and maintenance which cost the company unnecessary huge avoidable expenses and precious times were also lost due to delays in attending to breakdowns which, often affected supplies to customers. He remained in the company with a virtual social boycott and without work. This put him under tremendous mental stress and eventually pushed him towards insanity. When I was leaving the company, his mental condition had improved a little but he was still able to give his best which the company deserved from him.

An excellent technical talent was wasted because minor conflict at its start was not resolved from its roots and even recurring future conflicts were not properly addressed which ultimately made the company lose a precious talent. A story about dacoit Sultana is very relevant here. Dacoit Sultana when ultimately, sentenced to be hanged was asked by the judge, “how come he reached this ultimate stage of losing his life”; he replied that for this his mother was responsible because she did not slap him when he committed his first crime!! The fate of this executive followed the same path because management failed to take action to make him amend his ways at the very first misdeed!

We must remember if a minor wound is not treated timely and appropriately it grows into cancer and necessitates amputation. Conflicts are like that, if a minor conflict is not resolved timely from its root, it goes on becoming bigger and bigger and may explode in a big way causing big harm to the company. But some organizations do not realize this and the above was such an example.

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The above paragraphs captured the negative impacts arising out of workplace conflicts. The major negative impacts on the organization and its employees can be summed up as follows:-

- Lowering of employee motivation
- Financial losses to the organization
- Lowering of productivity
- Permanent adverse impact on work culture in the organization
- Increased absenteeism of employees
- Increased employee turnover
- Poor job performance
- Curbing of innovative and creative ideas
- The reduced bottom line of the organization
- Set back to customer-satisfaction
- Increased mental stress affecting the health of employees
- The tarnished reputation of the organization

These are the major adverse impacts but the list can go on increasing because the negative impact of unresolved conflicts is very profound.

***Positive conflicts*** -- “Conflict” often has a negative connotation but the effects of conflict within an organization can also be positive which helps in the betterment of the organization.

It may sound strange when we say that conflict can impact in a positive way but it does happen. Gosnell Stephanei (2019) says, “Positive conflict does not mean that the conflict was good, but rather that the occurrence of that conflict led to something beneficial. Positive conflict is constructive in nature. It produces new ideas, solves continuous problems, provides an opportunity for people and teams to expand their skills, and fosters creativity. When opposing ideas are explored, a breakthrough in thinking can occur.”

Imagine your team is working on a problem concerning lower output given by a machine and the ideas concerning possible reasons by different groups in the team are in conflict, then brainstorming does throw up an optimal solution. This type of conflict is a positive conflict and must be encouraged.

In fact, especially in Research and Development, it becomes a need that the researchers must get into conflict with ideas on the projects which do not have an agreement. Such conflicts give them food for thought to understand the weakness in their ideas and force them to intensify the research to remove weaknesses in their logic and come to brilliant ideas which go to contribute immensely to the progress in the research undertaken by the group. These are healthy conflicts.

Meinest Dori (2017) has another way of looking at conflicts: “Conflict is simply the energy created by the gap between what we want and what we’re experiencing,” says Nate Regier, a former practicing psychologist. If we define conflict as an energy that's created by the gap, then the real question is 'How are we going to use that energy?' "

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Negative conflict, characterized by struggling against other people, drains energy, which is costly to companies, teams, and relationships. But when approached in a positive way, conflict can spark innovation, trust, and engagement, says Regier, chief executive officer of Next Element, a consultancy.”

Very truly said that the positive conflicts do charge the atmosphere with positive energy; it causes people to consider different ideas and alternatives and lightens up the path for issuance of clarifications leading to positive and better solutions to the issues under debate. Hence we must encourage positive energy thrown up by positive conflicts to create a healthy working environment very conducive to an innovative and creative way of working. This will keep our organization way ahead of competitors.

We have learned about the anatomy of conflicts and reasons causing them. We have also further seen that conflicts are not always with negative connotations but has positive aspects also. Positive conflicts are good for the organization.

We shall see further down in our paper how even negative conflicts which have impacted negatively can eventually bring positive changes in the organization if the conflict resolution is done in an effective manner. Let us now turn to the most vital issue of resolving the conflicts: -

### ***Towards Conflict Resolution***

***Conflict Resolution*** must be attempted with a faith that conflicts are opportunities for improvement.

### ***We shall go stepwise in dealing with Conflict Resolution:***

#### **Step 1: conflicting parties to be brought in Receptive frame of mind**

Naresh Kumar (2020) gives the first vital step in effective conflict resolution, "The first step in conflict resolution is to put the conflicting parties in a receptive state of mind. Since both the parties are agitated and as we know, in a disturbed state of mind, the capability of rational thinking reduces considerably. If there is a mediator, then he has to act in such a way that both parties are first put in a receptive state of mind before we start discussing the core issue”.

When conflicting parties approach the authorities with their conflict both are in an agitated state and are emotionally charged. As we know unless our mind is stable, no meaningful discussions can take place. Charged emotions defy logic. No meaningful discussions can happen till emotional outbursts subside. Mediator has to take actions to cool down the tempers before he can start his efforts for conflict resolution.

The receptive frame of mind is achieved when the charged emotions subside and the thoughts do not get vitiated by the flow of the charged emotions which drove them to conflict stage. This is not a small task, rather it is an uphill task to pacify the conflicting parties, make them lower their high-pitched voices charged with emotion, persuade them to control emotions, make them push their egos to backstage and listen to reasons. A great amount of patience is needed in this effort. Empathy without being judgemental on part of mediating authority is the only virtue that can help diffuse the volatile situation and help in creating an atmosphere where people talk sense in normal tone, appreciating views of the mediator and also of the opposing party.

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Generally, the mediator's effort in breaking the emotional outbursts is done by temporarily deviating their attention from the conflict and give them time for cooling down. There can be several ways to do it and depend upon the tact of the mediator. Normally when I faced such a situation, I asked the agitated people to be silent and sit down and have a glass of water. There can be innovative ways of temporarily diverting attention to topics other than the conflict which will certainly sprinkle water over the rage of fire in minds of both the parties, this will not extinguish the fire but will prevent further flaring up of fire. People will retain their composure and will talk sense while presenting their side. When shouting/counter-shouting and emotional outbursts reduce, we should request the conflict parties to move to a secluded area where they can talk privately without interruption—this could be the conference room / training room etc., (not the mediator's office where people will come and interrupt).

The mediator can, then, continue his efforts for diffusing the tension by allowing the parties to steam out their feelings without clashing- Initially when they do start talking, still emotions will prevail in their narrations but it is advisable to let them steam out their feeling. The mediator's job is very difficult in preventing the other side from butting in when one side is steaming off his side of the story. It is advisable that the mediator should do this singly and separately with each conflicting party i.e., in absence of the other party) until both of them have blurted their hearts out without getting interruption from the other party.

Confronting them together or discussions in presence of both the parties must be done only after the initial outburst has happened singly in front of the mediator. Without being judgemental the mediator must be patiently listening actively and continuously trying to explore the real facts and try to reach the root cause of the conflict. How this is done will be discussed in step 2.

To bring more clarity about step 1, I would like to refer to the conflict between me and my MD over his issuance of an order that took away two of outstation units from my control and was put in direct charge of my vice president to whom I was reporting. I was greatly disturbed as it appeared to me that I was wrongly penalized in spite of excellent work being done by me in managing factory operations of local as well as outstation units. I wrote a strong note, "Where have I gone wrong" and sent it to MD and he summoned me to head-quarters to his office.

I narrate the details of my interaction with him to explain the steps involved in conflict resolution and hence I will be reverting to this incident time and again at each stage of conflict resolution.

He himself was a party to the conflict and he also played the role of a mediator. As mediator first step which he took was to take me to the conference room where only he and I could talk without interruption. He instructed his secretary that we were not to be disturbed there in the conference room. This is the step that I discussed above in the paper. MD realized that he had to put me in receptive frame of mind. He started with patting me on my shoulder and said, "What happened Naresh, you are my star manager, why I found you here in this distressed state" His kind words brought tears in my eyes and seeing me weeping he offered me a glass of water and pleaded me to calm down and speak. His appreciative gesture and words of appreciation had a great effect on my mind as it assured me that my work was still in good books and there could be some other reason for the disturbing action which MD had taken. But since I was so much emotionally charged, I started speaking at a fast pace, I spoke non –stop venting my anger and fury at his unjust action.

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He kept on patiently listening with a concerned gaze at my face and prompted me to continue when I stopped to catch a breath between sentences. His active listening was attentive and body gestures showed real concern. He did not offer any comment nor tried to defend his action; he only prompted me to talk and talk. Having talked non-stop for over ten minutes, my mind calmed down and I was ready to hear his side of the story. In a mediator's role, he had won half the battle by making me come in a receptive frame of mind to appreciate what he had to say.

I narrated this incident to capture the importance of the first step where the aggravated conflicting parties have to be calmed down to bring them to a stage where they can receive further communications in a calm, logical, unbiased, and rational way. His action of choosing a place for uninterrupted discussion in privacy was important. He did not want others to know that there is a conflict between him and me. People could think that we were discussing some future projects where confidentiality was needed so we had gone to the conference room with instructions to his secretary for no disturbances. I could not weep in his office which had glass doors; I could not shout at him because I could be heard by others. His very thought of moving out from his office to the conference room showed his presence of mind to let me steam off my feelings without any hindrance- a very important action to cool me down to come to a receptive frame of mind.

The body gestures play a very important role in conveying what is going in your mind. His patting my shoulder and saying appreciative words genuinely broke me down and brought tears in my eyes. He was quite matured to understand my hurt and wanted to convey at the first opportunity that my work was not being looked down and he made no hesitation in coming out with appreciative words casually but in true genuineness. Normally people indulge in flattery when they deliver appreciative words; the sensing of flattery washes away the impact of the words. The genuineness reflected by his gestures had a soothing effect on my mind and helped to me to regain my composure after the tears and I was able to speak out without hesitation as he had given me a feeling of genuine concern for me and showed his willingness to listen to me out even if he was at receiving end during my narration.

His silent listening showed his patience. The mediator must have a great deal of patience and must be able to control his emotions. Normally when confronted with narrations that you feel are too much deviating from logic, you tend to lose temper. In a conflicting situation, such occasions are frequent when the conflicting parties while putting their viewpoint speak illogically and if you lose temper as a mediator you would lose your battle then and there. Patience and the ability to control emotions is tested while you are trying to pacify the conflicting parties to come to a receptive frame of mind and my MD did this excellently. He allowed and encouraged me to speak and he remained a concerned active listener and the result was that after I finished talking, I was in a receptive frame of mind and was curious to know what MD had to say. The conflict was almost resolved in the very first step by the mediator i.e., my MD.

In this example, one of the conflicting parties was he and he himself was also the mediator which is often the case when there is a conflict between the boss and his team member. But the methodology for creating an environment where the conflicting parties come in a receptive frame of mind is the same when there is the third party who mediates between the conflicting groups and mediator must make efforts to bring mental states of both conflicting groups in a receptive frame of mind before proceeding to the second step.

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Let us now turn our attention to the next step in conflict resolution.

***Step 2-Analyzing to Figure out the real cause of conflict*** — In order to reach the real root cause of the conflict, the next step is to arrange joint discussions where both the parties are encouraged to present their side of the story in presence of the other party. The mediator can just initiate the discussion by prompting one of the parties to begin explaining their viewpoint. When the narration starts by one party, the mediator must request the other party from refraining to interrupt and ask them to make notes on the points where they disagree and explain their case and highlight these points when they are asked to present their case. Both parties talking simultaneously must be strictly discouraged in a tactful manner without offending the intruder who gets prompted to interrupt.

The mediator must listen to the narrations very carefully to segregate and eliminate the emotional outbursts and register in his mind only the hard facts pertinent to conflict. The mediator must focus to learn issues where both are in agreement so that he can start his talks with those issues for creating a positive atmosphere for discussions to proceed towards a conflict resolution. The mediator must select at least one factor from narrations from each of them where they hold strong positive ground. Such positive factors (more than one) would certainly be there on both sides because in a conflict it is not that one is absolutely white and the other is absolutely black, i.e., they will have positive as well as negative aspects relevant to the conflict. The mediator can dwell on these points at an appropriate stage of conflict resolution.

After the narrations from both the parties, the mediator would have got a clue over the root cause of the conflict. The next stage would be to guide the discussions towards that real root-cause by prompting them to discuss and analyze so that the discussions move towards the real root-cause. The mediator should not be judgemental even now but should make attempts to influence and guide them to move towards the root cause and ultimately to the solution by themselves. Only then they will own the solution. How this will be done will be discussed in step 3.

In the current episode since the role of mediator was played by MD himself; he found the positivity in me that my performance was not the cause for his decision; he was happy with my performance and this he told with all genuineness and force at his command. Searching a positive trait in both the conflicting persons is of paramount importance and the mediator begins the discussion with those factors so that a positive atmosphere gets created; and that is precisely he did when he started his talks with me. He started with a positive note that the management is really happy with my work and this is not the reason for taking the decision of taking away the outstation units from my control. This reassurance removed all disturbances in my mind and increased my curiosity for the reason behind MD's thought process leading to his decision which had put disturbances in my mind.

We move to step 3 for mediator's efforts in guiding the conflicting parties towards the root cause of conflict and then in step 4 we shall move towards the resolution of conflict and then step 5 will be the follow up of conflict resolution.

So now we move to stage 3—reaching the root-cause of conflict.

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***Stage 3—reaching the root-cause of conflict-***We all like to feel that we've been heard with full attention. The mediator must appreciate the narration and must listen and try to put himself in their shoes so that he is able to correctly understand their view points.

Atticus Finch said in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "If you can learn a simple trick ... you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Very true, the mediator while listening actively to narrations from both sides has to let his mind get involved in self-reflection on both sides of the situation. He has to enter the shoes of both the parties and try to understand the perspectives from points of view of both the parties. It helps to see from the other person's point of view and it helps you to understand what they're thinking and feeling so you can resolve the conflict.

Tervino II Richard, (2020) adds further tips for conflict resolution, "How we respond to conflict can intensify the tension. Conflicts worsen when the arguing parties become emotional, and the argument becomes personal. The best way to handle conflict is to stay calm: Calmer minds produce clearer ideas. Keep yourself and your team calm. Avoid showing signs that you agree with one group and not another. Show your team that you can keep calm and reasonable. Insist all parties talk to each other in a relaxed and civil manner. Don't let emotions overwhelm the situation by making sure no one shouts, makes offensive comments, or blames.

***Conscientiously look at the facts-***Be sure you have all the facts before making any decisions to move towards resolving a conflict. Clarify the points first, taking into consideration each person's different perspectives. For instance, if a conflict arises while the team is deciding how to solve a problem, try to identify what each team member perceives as the problem. Different perspectives on the same problem will lead everyone to consider different solutions. Let everyone present their ideas without interruption so that you can all get the relevant facts you need to make an informed decision. As with careful listening and consideration, be sure to listen to each person and consider the facts they present. Be thorough in your investigation.

***Cooperatively work together-*** With each of these tips, you're focusing your team on addressing the shared problem instead of attacking each other's personality. Because you and your team carefully listened, considerately looked at the situation, calmly discussed perspectives, and conscientiously looked at the facts, you can all cooperate despite initial disagreement. Letting everyone be a part of conflict resolution teaches your team how to handle conflict for themselves. The next time they find themselves disagreeing, they are less likely to need your intervention."

The essence of conflict resolution lies in leading the conflicting parties to do arguments and counter-arguments after putting forward their side of cases. The mediator must refrain from giving his own judgmental comments as it will amount to taking sides as pointed out by Richard Tervino II, (2020) when he says-- Keep yourself and your team calm. Avoid showing signs that you agree with one group and not another. Show your team that you can keep calm and reasonable. Hence the mediator must be calm but must persistently guide the debate towards finding root-cause through active participation of the conflicting parties by arguing against the points raised by the other party in his presentation.

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While listening patiently, the mediator must keep on analyzing the negative actions on either side which could have triggered the conflict. When both the conflicting sides are put in a state of mind where they can think logically then the mediator should gently draw their attention to the negative factors which could have resulted in the conflict and encourage both of them to counter each other. The mediator should only facilitate them solving through healthy and logical arguments between two of them. He should be tactful to keep the arguments proceeding on positive lines and if getting derailed he has to intervene and do proper, rational, and meaningful counseling to bring back the discussions on a positive plane.

Mostly the conflicting persons themselves find out solutions through active participation of the mediator and are made to realize where each of them had gone wrong. The mediator must make sure to be only a facilitator for reaching a solution and nothing beyond that, he should refrain from being judgmental, else, one of the parties would think that he has not been fair to him. The conclusion has to come by discussions between the conflicting parties only. They will eventually agree on a solution leading to conflict resolution. Any attempt of forcing a decision by the mediator will take both parties away from reaching a solution because it will make parties feel that the mediator is taking sides and is not impartial. A good mediator will certainly lead the discussions towards root-cause by prompting the parties to move towards it while arguing and counter-arguing. In the current case under discussions, my MD while discussing with me as the opposite conflicting party put his side of the story that he had recruited the vice-president but was not able to gauge his ability as most of the work was being done by me so he wanted to give him independent work and decided to ask him to manage the outstation units. My counter-argument was that before announcing his decision he should have taken me into confidence and to this, he immediately agreed. Thus, the root-cause for our conflict was that MD had not taken me into confidence before implementing his decision of transferring outstation units from my control to the controls of the vice-president.

***Step 4-resolution of conflict***—Having reached a common understanding on root-cause, both parties come to an understanding where they had gone wrong and they voluntarily agree not to repeat the mistake. The root-cause itself throws up the final solution.

I understood that since I was not knowledgeable about the exact reason behind the MD's action, I reacted the way I did. Once MD admitted his mistake of not laying the foundation for his action, the conflict vanished. So, root cause puts at rest the turmoil in the minds of conflicting parties and paves way for the solution which is found by themselves with support of the mediator.

***Step 5—Follow up***—The mediator must keep a watch on behavior of the conflicting parties for some time after the resolution of conflict and must take steps if there is any indication of doubts in minds of the conflicting parties till both the parties start normal behavior.

My MD kept on talking to me on some pretext or the other on weekly basis for few weeks to ascertain whether all doubts are cleared from my mind and I have started work on full vigor and speed.



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**Positive impacts from conflict resolution-** We had mentioned somewhere in the paper that the effective resolution of conflicts has a positive impact on the organization and its employees. It does have a positive impact in the following ways:

- Group Unity,
- Group Cooperation,
- Inspiration for Creativity,
- Environment to Share and Respect Opinions,
- Improve Future Communication
- Renewed motivation
- Improved culture with better confidence in its leaders

**Group Unity-**Conflict strengthens intragroup unity by providing an outlet for group members to discuss and negotiate their interests within the group.

**Group Cooperation-**Conflict between groups produces intra-group unity as the conflict provides the opportunity for increased intra-group cooperation while working towards the group's common goal for the conflict's outcome.

**Inspiration for Creativity-**Fortunately, some organization members view conflict as an opportunity for finding creative solutions to solve problems. Conflict can inspire members to brainstorm ideas while examining problems from various perspectives.

**Environment to Share and Respect Opinions-**As organizational members work together to solve a conflict, they are more willing to share their opinions with the group. Conflict can also cause members to actively listen to each other as they work to accomplish the organizations' goals.

**Improvement in Future Communication-**Conflict can bring group members together and help them learn more about each other. From learning from each other's opinion on topics relevant to the organization's growth to understanding each member's preferred communication style, conflict within an organization can give members the tools necessary for solving conflicts easily in the future.

**Renewed motivation-** Conflict resolution results in a win-win situation within an organization and does inspire typically silent members to step up and get motivated to demonstrate their leadership skills by offering meaningful solutions to the problem the group is facing.

**Improved culture with better confidence on its leaders-** With the acceptance of a win-win situation on conflict resolution both the conflicting parties and also other members of the organization develop respect for leadership and work with confidence that they will be looked after well and this creates a good work culture where employees deliver their best.

## CONCLUSION

We have learned that conflicts cannot be avoided at the workplace because unlike machines we, the humans, possess a mind which makes us think and think differently and being social animals we have to interact with each other as we cannot remain in isolation, more so in the workplace where by virtue of our work demand we have to interact with each other; many times our thinking

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is not only at variance but are diametrically opposite which results in clashes and the conflicts result. Our different way of thinking and our different attitudes, our different levels of egos are all due to the different environments where we grew and which shaped us to what we are now.

The reasons behind the conflicts are elaborated in the paper and they can be summarized as the conflict of interest, clash of egos, sharp disagreement in ideas, attitudinal differences, perceptual differences, vague and unclear communication, communication carrying double meaning, competition, professional jealousy, power struggle at the workplace, biased performance appraisals and rewards, mental tensions carried to the workplace, dubious and incompetent leadership, etc.

Whatever you do, conflicts cannot be eliminated, these will still happen, only their frequency will vary. Not that all conflicts are bad. There are positive conflicts that are healthy for the organization and those must be encouraged, rather, we must make efforts to make them happen more frequently because these add value to the organization. The positive conflicts happen often when people compete. Healthy competition results in surfacing conflicting ideas which offer an opportunity for improvement, and brainstorming between the competing groups bring out the best idea which benefits the organization in an optimum way. Research organizations benefit the most through positive conflicts.

Even Negative conflicts when resolved effectively lead to a positive impact on the organization. Summarizing we can say that the conflicts are going to stay and we must resolve them effectively to reap the positive benefits. We must promote an integrative approach to managing team conflicts. Attempt to pursue a common goal, rather than individual goals. Openly and honestly communicate with all team members. When conflict resolution is avoided or approached on a win/lose basis, it becomes unhealthy and can cause low morale and increased tension within your teams. As a leader, focus on finding ways and solutions in which all team members “win.”

Foster a culture in which differences of opinion are encouraged, placing emphasis on the common goals among your team, employees, and departments. Many times, people place a focus on the differences in opinions, rather than focusing on goals that they have in common. Encourage your team to be inclusive of others and speak up when they disagree or have a different opinion. As a leader, you must be willing to reward and thank those who are willing to take a stand and support their position. Positive conflict and a culture that supports it go hand-in-hand. View Conflict as Opportunity: Hidden within virtually every conflict is the potential for a tremendous teaching/learning opportunity. Where there is disagreement there is an inherent potential for growth and development. If you're a leader at a workplace who doesn't leverage conflict for team building and leadership development purposes, you're missing a great opportunity. Divergent positions addressed properly can stimulate innovation and learning in ways like minds can't even imagine. Smart leaders look for the upside in all differing opinions.

Dave Clough, 2018 truly says, “Put Yourself in Their Shoes-You will never get to truly understand the motive behind the conflict if you're not able to put yourself in their shoes. When handling conflict, actively listen to both parties. Put yourself in their position to get a true sense of what has motivated the issue.”

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We have discussed the steps involved in conflict resolution—The most important and the first step is to bring conflicting parties in a receptive frame of mind (patience and attentive listening helps) followed by mediator facilitating a healthy discussion which guides the conflicting parties themselves to analyze to figure out the real cause of conflict and reach the root-cause. Conflict Resolution has to be achieved by the conflict parties themselves, mediator just facilitates this to happen without being judgmental at any time.

Mediator must do follow up and take corrective actions if any of the conflicting party shows some doubts through their behavior. The follow up must be continued till normalcy returns.

Conflicts are going to stay and we have to live with them. We must look at them as opportunities for improvement and must strive to gather a positive impact on the organization through effective resolution.

I conclude by putting my firm belief that we must not shy away or ignore conflict but must see it as an opportunity for positive change, growth, and improvement and tackle it accordingly.

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