Course Learning Outcomes for Unit III

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

5. Recommend communication techniques that are effective in managing conflict.

Reading Assignment

In order to access the following resource(s), click the link(s) below:

Bain, V. (2000). How to diagnose and treat poor performance. *The Journal for Quality and Participation, 23*(5), 38-41. Retrieved from https://libraryresources.columbiasouthern.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.libraryresources.columbiasouthern.edu/docview/219160561?accountid=33337

Antonioni, D. (1995). Practicing conflict management can reduce organizational stress. *Industrial Management, 37*(5), 7-8. Retrieved from https://libraryresources.columbiasouthern.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.libraryresources.columbiasouthern.edu/docview/211594375?accountid=33337

Click here to view the Unit III Presentation.
Click here to view the Unit III Presentation transcript.

Unit Lesson

Introduction

For many people, conflict can be a word with negative connotations. Within an organization, employees may equate conflict to open hostility or harsh, interpersonal clashes. However, *conflict* is merely a state of unresolved differences between entities. Sometimes, the difference is functionally productive; sometimes, it is dysfunctional. This unit explores conflict within organizations and discusses communication techniques that can help to effectively manage conflict.

Consequences of Conflict

In *Managing Conflict in Organizations,* M. Afzalur Rahim (2000) explains that conflict has the potential for both positive and negative consequences. In order to achieve the benefits from conflict, an organization must mitigate the negative or dysfunctional outcomes of conflict and develop the positive effects to their highest potential. Rahim (2000) lists seven categories for both functional outcomes and dysfunctional outcomes that have been studied extensively by a variety of authors. The functional outcomes have been provided below (Rahim, 2000, p. 7):

Rahim's Functional Outcomes
1. **Conflict may stimulate innovation, creativity, and growth.**
2. **Organizational decision-making may be improved.**
3. **Alternative solutions to a problem may be found.**
4. **Conflict may lead to synergistic solutions to common problems.**
5. **Individual and group performances may be enhanced.**
6. **Individuals and groups may be forced to search for new approaches.**
7. **Individuals and groups may be required to articulate and clarify their positions.**

In their groundbreaking study, *Scientists in Organizations*, Donald Pelz and Frank Andrews (1976) concluded that a certain amount of *creative tension* had to exist between the states of worker security and conflict to stimulate innovation, creativity, and growth. They noted that employee productivity increased when the organizations they studied changed established patterns or when technical disputes arose. During these times of conflict, communication between employees and between management and employees increased.

Pelz and Andrews (1976) also noted that output improved when management provided positive reinforcement and encouraged employees to participate in policy-making. Positive communication between management and employees helped to promote the functional outcome.

After T. J. Peters and R. H. Waterman reviewed the practices of companies like IBM, 3M, GE, Boeing, and Hewlett Packard, they found that the companies used management practices that were designed to stimulate competition. Many of the organizations created a contest atmosphere by assigning the same problem to two different teams. This manufactured conflict allowed managers to see who would come up with the best solution (Denton, 2002).

A degree of serendipity can develop from conflict. The conversations generated because of the disagreement can lead to alternative solutions by accident.

When conflict occurs between employees working on a project, managers should encourage a dialogue to exchange information regarding the issues. During this information exchange, employees will need to explain their differences in perspective. Without the conflict, this exchange might never happen. Employees will be forced to reevaluate project goals and problems, which can lead to better solutions.

When conflict arises, the organization simply cannot follow the *status quo*—the established way of doing things—and the need to resolve the conflict can force organizations to try new approaches. This encourages communication, which can trigger creative solutions for problems and encourage new ways to achieve goals.

Conflict can have a direct impact on communication. It can force employees to explain their perspectives and to seek information from coworkers on an issue. Employees will need to explain their differences in perspectives, which might not happen otherwise (Rahim, 2000, p. 7).

Rahim's (2000) dysfunctional outcomes have been provided below (p. 7):

Rahim's Dysfunctional Outcomes
1. **Conflicts may cause job stress, burnout, and dissatisfaction.**
2. **Communication between individuals and groups may be reduced.**
3. **A climate of distrust and suspicion can be developed.**
4. **Relationships may be damaged.**
5. **Job performance may be reduced.**
6. **Resistance to change can increase.**
7. **Organizational commitment and loyalty may be affected.**

Too much conflict burdens and overwhelms the minds/emotions of the employees, shutting off the capacity for creativity. For example, the University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted a study that evaluated elements of job stress, burnout, and dissatisfaction for middle managers in organizations that were experiencing organizational changes (Antonioni, 1995). The survey also assessed how the organizations used conflict management to resolve the stressors faced by the employees. Organizations that had regular communication regarding the conflict management had employees with lower levels of stress. Organizations that employed

individuals who had concerns about discussing situations with their superiors had employees with higher levels of stress. The study demonstrates that knowing how to manage and resolve conflict is a valuable skill to combat workplace stressors. As Antonioni (1995) suggests, successfully managing stressful work situations to help avoid burnout and job dissatisfaction boils down to mastering communication skills.

Sometimes, different conversational styles or faulty inferences create apparent conflicts when no real disagreement exists. Efficiently managing conflict involves matching the style of communication with the situation (Rahim, 2000). Managers need to analyze their audience before addressing any type of conflict and to recognize not only the personal feelings of the employees but also the policies and procedures of the organization. As Antonioni (1995) relates, communication has to work both ways: Active listening must be a part of the communication process. All of the concerned parties must claim responsibility for their actions and collaborate to find a solution that is satisfactory to both sides.

Unacknowledged conflicts rarely go away; rather, they fester and make subsequent exchanges more difficult. In "How to Diagnose and Treat Poor Performance," Victoria Bain (2000) explains that teamwork is undermined by derogatory attitudes. Employees do not function at a high level of effort when they are cast into stereotypes or oppressed by bias (Bain, 2000).

Conflict is difficult to resolve when an employee criticizes another person instead of focusing on the issue. This leads to counterattacks and an escalation of the conflict. The issue becomes more difficult to resolve because feelings are hurt.

Bain (2000) recommends that managers take an active role in resolving the conflict rather than letting the employees work it out amongst themselves. The author recommends gathering specific information about complaints rather than general information. This makes it easier for the employees to address the problem. Bain discusses an example from a chemical plant where an employee did not feel valued by his manager and intentionally reduced the amount of work he did on a daily basis. The manager did value the employee but never communicated this to him. The conflict developed due to this lack of communication and was resolved only when a dialogue between the two began.

Managers need to review systems and/or procedures for changes that may have caused the conflict. People who have already made up their minds about a situation are highly resistant to change. The structure of a work group in an organization may have altered, new technology may have been introduced, or resources that once were plentiful may now be scarce (Bain, 2000).

In order to overcome the opposition, it is important to send an unambiguous message: People who are embroiled in conflict can misread topics that neutral parties may consider clear. It also can help to start a message with an area of agreement or common ground.

Often, conflict arises because an employee does not feel respected or appreciated by the other members of the organization. Bain (2000) considers it a manager's responsibility to determine root causes and develop solutions.

Antonioni (1995) describes the following situation that shows how a project manager phrases a request may make a great deal of difference. If the manager states that he or she wants the employee to attend meetings because he or she values the employee's input, this is a positive way to phrase the request. If the manager states that he or she wants the employee to attend meetings because it is a corporate policy, this is a negative way to make the request.

In this example, the conflict could arise because the statement "you need to be at the meeting because that is our policy" does not reflect the reality of the situation. Attendance may indeed be a policy of the organization, but the desired outcome of that policy is the important input of the employee. If this is not communicated, conflict can arise.

Communication Techniques

In "Practicing Conflict Management Can Help Reduce Organizational Stress," Antonioni (1995) discusses four communication techniques that can help effectively manage conflict in organizations. These techniques can both promote functional conflict and resolve dysfunctional conflict.

- *Assertive communication*: Each individual in a conversation needs to stand up for his or her rights, needs, and expectations while also being attentive to the same attributes for the other person (Antonioni, 1995). It is helpful to determine what is at stake and who will be affected by the decisions. The message will be most effective if it considers the entire organizational context as well as the larger context of shareholders, customers, and so forth.
- *Active listening*: Active listening is critical for developing a shared understanding of a problem (Antonioni, 1995). Often, individuals do not listen attentively when another person speaks. The listeners may be distracted or, during a conflict, may be trying to formulate a response to win the argument. In active listening, listeners (receivers) demonstrate that they have understood a speaker through feedback. Receivers can paraphrase the content, mirror the speaker's feelings, ask for clarification, or request additional information.
- *Problem solving*: Defining the problem and identifying the causes are essential aspects of helping to manage conflict through communication.
- *Negotiation*: Generate as many options or alternatives as possible before deciding on a solution. In all but the very simplest problems, there are several possible solutions. Antonioni (1995) believes that both parties need to utilize effective negotiation skills. Focus on seeing the issues from the other party's perspective, he recommends, rather than negotiating solely from a fixed individual position.

Conclusion

As Rahim (2000) notes, it is impossible to eliminate all conflict from an organization. He believes that a moderate amount of conflict is beneficial for an organization and is even necessary for maintaining effectiveness. What remains central to both the functional and dysfunctional results of conflict is communication.

Through communication, the participants establish what the conflict means and the way that it affects the organization. In the functional examples, conflict led to greater communication among the participants. In the dysfunctional examples, employees and/or managers did not communicate effectively, and the conflict was resolved only through increased levels of communication between the participants.

References

Antonioni, D. (1995). Practicing conflict management can reduce organizational stress. *Industrial Management, 37*(5), 7-8.

Bain, V. (2000). How to diagnose and treat poor performance. *The Journal for Quality and Participation, 23*(5).

Denton, J. (2002). *Organisational learning and effectiveness.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Pelz, D., & Andrews, F. (1976). *Scientists in organizations.* Retrieved from http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071812346;view=1up;seq=27

Rahim, M. A. (2000). *Managing conflict in organizations.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Suggested Reading

The e-textbooks below highlight some of the issues discussed in the Unit III Lesson. Use the E-books link found in the CSU Online Library to access the books below.

Denton, J. (2002). *Organisational learning and effectiveness.* New York, NY: Routledge. Retrieved from http://site.ebrary.com/lib/columbiasu/detail.action?docID=10070700&p00=organisational+learning+effectiveness

Rahim, M. A. (2000). *Managing conflict in organizations*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. Retrieved from http://site.ebrary.com/lib/columbiasu/detail.action?docID=10017971&p00=managing+conflict+organizations

Please copy and paste the link below into your web browser to access the resource. This textbook offers more examples of how to manage conflict strategically.

Pelz, D. & Andrews, F. (1976). *Scientists in organizations: Productive climates for research and development.* Retrieved from http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071812346;view=1up;seq=27

Learning Activities (Non-Graded)

Apply What You Have Learned

Consider organizations where you have worked in the past or where you are currently employed. Have you encountered any situations of functional or dysfunctional conflict? If so, how did this conflict affect your working environment and job performance?

Non-graded Learning Activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions, contact your instructor for further guidance and information.