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A MANAGER'S GUIDE TO DIAGNOSING CONFLICT: THE 3-D APPROACH

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a natural part of organizational life (e.g., Caudron, 1998; Guttman, 1999; Jameson, 1999; Lippitt, 1982)). Managers struggle daily to effectively manage or resolve conflict (e.g., Cottringer, 1997; Robbins, 1974). As management educators and consultants we found ourselves constantly responding to requests by students and practicing managers for suggestions on how to more effectively deal with conflict. As a response to the many requests, we have developed the 3-D Approach to conflict management and/or resolution. The 3-D approach is based on a framework that enables managers and students to systematically:

- diagnose the source, scope and type of conflict
- describe the dynamics of speed and direction in which the conflict may spread, and
- determine whether the conflict can be resolved or managed

The 3-D approach is holistic in that it integrates theory along with insights gained from years of consulting with a variety of organizations. Our objective is to provide a comprehensive tool for managers and students to systematically think about conflict management. The framework is designed to deal with conflict situations that occur within organizations and is not intended for dealing with inter-organizational disagreements. In this paper, we will offer an in-depth discussion of the various steps in the 3-D approach along with illustrations from actual organizational situations. In order to ensure privacy and confidentiality, all names and other identities of concerned parties have been changed.

II. THE 3-D FRAMEWORK

The 3-D framework is a three step approach to handling conflict (see Figure 1). Step one involves diagnosing the source of the conflict, the scope of the conflict, and the

type of conflict. Step two describes the dynamics of the speed in which the conflict may spread along with the direction in which it may take. In step three, the manager determines whether the conflict can be resolved or just managed. The 3-D framework enables the manager to approach organizational conflict in a systematic and rational manner. The three steps are described below.

1. STEP 1: DIAGNOSING THE SOURCE, SCOPE, AND TYPE OF CONFLICT

An accurate diagnosis of the conflict situation is critical since it determines the effectiveness of the next two steps outlined in the framework (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1992; Van Auken, 1993). For a variety of reasons, many managers incorrectly diagnose the situation exacerbating the current conflict dilemma and thus, making it more difficult to handle in the future (Filley, 1975). The 3-D approach suggests that an accurate diagnosis involves analysis of three components - source of the conflict, scope of the conflict, and type of the conflict.

Source of conflict First, the manager must investigate the source of conflict to ascertain whether it arises from sources that are external to the organization or from sources emanating from within. For example, consider the following scenario:

Dora, a manager in a wholesale distribution facility, was faced with breaking up a fight between two employees (Steve and Doug) on the night shift. Each accused the other of starting the fight by throwing tools at the other - a practice that was strictly forbidden by company policy. After an extensive investigation, Dora found that on the night before the fight, Steve had allegedly assaulted his girlfriend (who was Doug's sister). Doug, the concerned brother, took it upon himself to resolve this issue in the workplace. The ensuing verbal exchange ended in an altercation where tools were thrown by each employee at the other.

Dora's investigation led her to conclude that (a) the primary source of the conflict was a consequence of factors external to the organization, and (b) simply resorting to a disciplinary course of action for violating company rules would not get to the heart of the problem between Steve and Doug. By taking the time and effort to properly diagnose the source, Dora was able to pinpoint the exact source of the conflict. Like Dora, many managers face circumstances where employees' personal concerns and issues (inadequate day care, family sickness, marital discord, etc.) impact workplace performance and behavior. Managers should go beyond superficial symptoms to ascertain the true source of the problem.

Alternatively, there may be situations where the source of conflict may be internal to the organization. Consider the following example:

A regional university had an overseas MBA program in Taiwan. Faculty who traveled to Taiwan to teach during winter and summer breaks were compensated in addition to their regular salary. The Taiwan MBA program was structured in a manner where some of the courses were taught by U.S.-based faculty via the internet. Students from Taiwan were required to enroll in these internet courses along with other students. The internet-based courses were considered to be part of a faculty's regular teaching load. Therefore, these faculty did not receive additional compensation. This created a conflict between the department head and the dean over perceived fairness of the situation which resulted in a strained working relationship.

Unlike Dora's problem, this situation has its root cause in a policy within the organization. From the department head's perspective, the compensation policy was biased and inequitable as it rewarded only those individuals who traveled to Taiwan. From the dean's perspective, extra compensation to faculty teaching internet courses would compromise the financial viability of the overseas program. The preceding conflict situation is not unique. Internal sources of common conflict are frequently encountered by managers (Robbins, 1974).

Scope of the conflict. The second component of diagnosing conflict involves determining the scope of the conflict. Scope refers to the extent to which a conflict impacts the length and breadth of an organization (Costello, 1996). In other words, is the conflict limited to a few individuals; an entire department, several departments? Does it involve a single shift, multiple shifts, or the entire organization? Determining the scope enables the manager to assess the magnitude of the conflict situation. For example, in the vignette concerning the two fighting employees (Steve and Doug), the scope of the conflict was limited to two individuals. In the following vignette, however, that is not the case.

A risk management company based in Texas developed three company wide strategic initiatives. One was to become Y2K compliant. Another was to increase revenue. The third was to develop software that replicated the WINDOWS environment that was standard for most customers. Employee compensation was tied to the successful accomplishment of all three initiatives. Unfortunately, due to limited resources (adequate number of personnel), the pursuit of one initiative came at the expense of the others. Because top management failed to prioritize the initiatives, each department worked on those initiatives that best benefited them. This resulted in widespread interdepartmental conflict for the scarce resources.

In the above scenario, the conflict affected hundreds of employees in several locations throughout the company. Therefore, in this situation, conflict permeates the entire organization.

Type of Conflict. The third component involves diagnosing the type of conflict. Based upon insights from the management literature and our consulting experience, the two most common types of conflict are (a) personal dislikes arising from individual differences in values, personalities, and perceptions and (b) work related issues such as incompatible work goals, competition for scarce resources, and ambiguous organizational rules and policies (e.g., Cramer, 1991; Jehn, 1997; Jehn, 1995; Kochan, Huber, & Cummings, 1975). Often the ability to discriminate between the two types of conflict is difficult because one conflict can lead to the other.

The vignette of the risk management organization that established conflicting strategic initiatives is an example of work-related conflict. In contrast, the following example, demonstrates conflict arising from personal dislike.

Emily was alone at lunch. All her co-workers had left her again when they went for lunch. The tension began when Emily complained that a co-worker used a cleaning solvent that Emily claimed she was allergic to. The more she complained, the more the co-worker used the solvent. When Emily took her complaint to the manager under the guise of the Americans with Disabilities Act, she became the focus of ridicule within her department. Colleagues perceived her to be fussy and neurotic, and avoided her. The conflict escalated to a point where Emily had to be placed in an isolated work area.

Managers may find themselves involved in similar situations where employee dislikes and biases become a source of tension in the workplace.

2. STEP 2: DESCRIBE THE DYNAMICS OF SPEED AND DIRECTION

Dynamics of speed. To understand the full nature of the conflict, the manager must describe the dynamics of the speed at which the conflict may spread to other parts of the organization (Smith, 1989). For example, the fight between Steve and Doug, described earlier, actually involved members of two different departments. Steve worked in shipping and Doug worked in the order-filling department. Several of their co-workers heard about the incident and began to take sides. If Dora did not take immediate action, the conflict had the potential to spread rapidly throughout both departments and eventually to other parts of the organization. Therefore, her analysis of the situation indicated that the rate of speed of the conflict's spread was great and she needed to take quick action.

The conflict between the department head and the dean, also described above, had the potential to spread but was mainly confined to the two parties. Therefore, unlike Doug and Steve's situation, there was time to take calculated action because the speed of the conflict was much slower. In our consulting and teaching experience, we have found

that managers are often pressed for time and must prioritize the issues they must address. Consequently, the analysis of the potential speed of conflict spread is critical in allowing the manager to determine how quickly and in what order he or she should take action.

Direction of spread. Along with speed, managers must understand the direction in which the conflict is likely to spread (Smith, 1989). The likely direction of conflict spread is based on the degree of interdependence among people or departments (McCann & Galbraith, 1981). Organizations can exhibit pooled, sequential, and reciprocal types of interdependence (Thompson, 1967). Reciprocal interdependence requires more coordination and interaction than pooled or sequential interdependence. Consequently, the direction of conflict spread is more likely to be first toward those areas of reciprocal interdependence, second toward areas of sequential interdependence, and lastly, toward those areas of pooled interdependence (McCann & Galbraith, 1981).

In reality, speed and direction of conflict spread are closely intertwined. For example, where several core organizational activities are bound together by reciprocal interdependence, conflict not only spreads quickly but it moves in the direction of all activities and people who are bound by the reciprocal nature of their work.

III. GRAPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF A CONFLICT SITUATION

Before beginning Step 3 of the 3-D model, practitioners and students are asked to summarize the results of their analysis of a conflict situation from steps 1 and 2. To aid their understanding of their analysis, we have developed a diagram on which they plot (a) the source of the conflict, (b) scope of the conflict, (c) type of conflict, (d) dynamics of speed, and (e) the direction of spread (see Figure 2).

For example, Figure 2 represents the conflict situation faced by Dora resulting from the fight between Steve and Doug. The conflict emanated from a source that was external to the organization (see dashed line). Initially its impact was confined to two individuals who personally disliked one another (lower right cell). Because the shipping department (where Steve worked) was sequentially dependent upon order processing (where Doug worked), conflict quickly spread between the two departments when co-workers started taking sides, ultimately impacting the quality of the work of each department (see solid line).

In a consulting or classroom setting, we ask groups of managers to generate conflict situations from work. Each group is then asked to demonstrate their analysis of steps 1 and 2 using the framework from Figure 1 and the graph from Figure 2. This exercise allows the participants to clarify their thinking about the conflict situation by

incorporating a variety of perspectives generated by the participants. Clarification of steps 1 and 2 of the 3-D framework is critical before moving to step 3.

3. STEP 3: DETERMINE WHETHER TO MANAGE OR RESOLVE THE CONFLICT

In this final step, the manager must ask two fundamental questions. First, can the conflict be resolved or does it have to be managed? In others words, is there a viable solution that will eliminate conflict at its source? Or second, is it an issue that lacks resolution and needs to be effectively and smartly managed? We are suggesting that there are issues so complex that they are beyond the power of the manager or an organization to be effectively resolved (Robbins, 1978). For example, in Dora's case, the source of the conflict emanated from social behaviors that are beyond an organization's ability to control. As a result, she could only manage and not solve the underlying problem that caused the conflict.

On the other hand, there may be situations that can be resolved as illustrated by the following example where the conflict was caused by cultural differences, a common organizational problem (e.g., Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Gilbert & Ivancevich, 1999; Kozan & Ergin, 1999).

A warehouse located in the southeast United States employed several employees who spoke a variety of languages other than English. The supervisors who spoke only English had difficulty communicating task requirements to these non-English speaking employees. This scenario resulted in conflict, frustration, and low productivity as measured in units per hour.

Linguistic differences were overcome by devising a unique solution. Managers created drawings and diagrams that illustrated how the work was to be done. Non-English speaking employees quickly learned from the pictures and diagrams and were able to increase their productivity to acceptable levels. In this case, the conflict was resolved.

The manager must also decide the extent to involve others. For certain issues, a manager may be able to either resolve or manage the conflict by himself or herself. In other situations, it is best for the manager to seek help from peers, upper management, or even employees, as needed. In the scenario where supervisors had to manage non-English speaking employees, the scope of the problem involved several departments and affected hundreds of people. To solve the communication problem, managers and concerned employees worked together and helped each other develop a warehouse wide system that effectively addressed the issue.

We recommend that managers use the matrix presented in Figure 3 to determine which of the four cells best describes their situation. The conflict situation that arose due to language differences would fall into the top right hand cell, ASolve with help.@ Whereas Dora's situation fits the AManage without help@ cell (lower left). Accordingly, managers may decide to embark upon a future course of action based on cell placement.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our objective was to provide a conflict management/resolution framework that enables managers and students to systematically analyze organizational conflict. While most conflict management frameworks selectively address one or two issues such as diagnosis or types of conflict, the 3-D approach is comprehensive since it incorporates multiple issues including source, scope, type, dynamics of speed, direction, and whether to resolve or to manage. Educators and management trainers will find the 3-D model useful because it:

- enables managers to understand the dynamics of conflict by assessing the speed and direction of its movement throughout the organization.
- helps managers to understand when to seek help in managing or resolving a conflict
- is a pragmatic framework that is useful in group discussions of conflict because multiple perspectives concerning the conflict emerge from the discussions.
- allows the parties involved in the discussion to generate multiple and creative plans of action.

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