

# **SOCI 324**

# **GROUPS, ORGANISATIONS AND**

# **THE INDIVIDUAL**

## **Session 14 – Group Conflict**

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**2014/2015 – 2016/2017**

# Session Overview

- As people interact in group settings, two things are likely namely, cooperation and conflict. Groups have achieved their goals in many instances through cooperation.
- However, though cooperation is desired, it is not always achieved by groups. Rather, group interactions are often fraught with conflicts of many kinds. The uniqueness of group member's personalities and attitudes makes conflict an inevitable, unavoidable and perhaps necessary consequence of group interaction.
- Conflict may hold some benefits for a group but it also has the potential to destroy the group if it is not properly managed by either disputant and or a third party. In this session, I shall explain the nature and causes, effects and the measures needed to prevent or manage conflict when it occurs.

# Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Definition of conflict
- The difference between dysfunctional and functional conflict
- The stages of conflict development
- The types of conflict
- The approaches for resolving conflicts
- Sample Question
- Session Summary
- References

# Reading List

- Read Chapter 11 of the required text and the article on this session posted on Sakai.



Topic One

# DEFINING CONFLICT



# What is Conflict

- (Rue & Byars, 2005), define conflict as **“Overt behavior that results when an individual or a group of individuals thinks a perceived need of the individual or the group has been blocked or is about to be blocked”**.
- Kanopaske & Ivanvich (2004) indicate that conflict occurs when **“one party perceives that another party has frustrated or is about to frustrate the accomplishment of a goal”**.
- (Wall and Callister, 1995) also define conflict as **“the process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party”**.
- Psychologists Baron, Byrne and Branscombe (2006) say conflict is **“a process in which one individual or a group perceives that others have taken or will soon take actions that are incompatible with their interests”**



# Key Elements in the Definition

- **Some key elements ran through all these definitions namely:**
- The notion of 'perceive' which suggests that conflict can be real or imagined
- That conflict results from opposing interests between groups and or individuals.
- The belief by each side that other sides will interfere (overtly or covertly) with such interests.

Topic Two

# FORMS OF CONFLICT





# Forms of Conflict

- **Intrapersonal Conflict:** This is conflict internal to the individual. It occurs when there are barriers to an individuals' goals and aspirations, and is the most difficult to analyze.
- **Interpersonal Conflict:** This is conflict between two or more individuals resulting from many factors such as personality clashes (e.g. one person being introvert and another extrovert; one being impulsive and another being deliberate; one being optimistic and another pessimistic etc.). When it occurs between people within a group, it may be termed **intragroup conflict**.



# Forms of Conflict

- **Intergroup Conflict:** these are those that result from the organizational structure, and may be relatively independent of the individuals occupying the roles within the structure (conflict between production and marketing departments).
- **Organizational Conflict:** These occur between employees and an organization itself. It often results from changes in organizations that negatively affect employees such as lay-offs, cutbacks in benefits etc.
- **Political/Strategic Conflict:** These are planned and deliberate forms of conflict that results from the promotion of self interests on the part of a group or organization.

Topic Three

# THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT



# Causes of Conflict

- **Faulty Attributions:** these refer to the errors we make when trying to attribute cause or explanations to others behavior. Often, when people observe that their interests have or are in the process of being jeopardized- they try to examine why it occurred. In the process some may erroneously attribute their mishap to people who indeed had nothing to do with it. In other words they just 'perceive' or 'imagine' that others had something to do with frustrating their interests when this may not be so.
- **Poor/Inadequate Communication:** refers to such situations as when people communicate to others in a way they annoys them (be it consciously/ unconsciously) conflict may occur. Thus, criticism, ridicule, incivility (ethnic and racial slurs, harassments etc) can easily incite conflict.



# Causes of Conflict

- **Personal Traits and Characteristics:** The evidence available from research indicates that people with a type A personality (competitive, irritable, always in a hurry etc) are more prone to conflict than type B personality types.
- **Lack of clarity about responsibilities** (Unclear or overlapping job boundaries): when there is ambiguity in what one's clear duties and roles are, or the completion of one's task is tied to others such that you can only complete your task only when others have done theirs, conflict can erupt when others are doing what they should do.

# Causes of Conflict

- **Incompatible personalities:** Groups consists of people with different values. Attitudes, interests and ways of behavior. Often these personalities clash, which result in conflict.
- **Poor performance by a group** can result in conflict as group members tend to blame each other for the groups poor performance of whatever task.
- **Organizational factors:** these may be unreasonable or unclear rules and policies, unreasonable deadlines and time pressure, unrealistic or unmet expectations about job assignments, pay, promotions, etc can all contribute to conflict within groups.

# Causes of Conflict

- The tendency to perceive our views as objective reflections of reality but those of others as biased is yet another determinant of conflict. This leads to the '**status quo bias**'-the tendency for powerful groups defending a prevailing status quo (e.g. those who support four years of senior high school in Ghana) to think that their opinions are more objective than those opposing it (those suggesting a three year duration).
- Finally, conflict can result from ignored, unresolved and /or suppressed conflict.

Topic Four

# **STAGES OF CONFLICT DEVELOPMENT**





# Stages of Conflict Development

As the definition suggests, conflict is a process and not an event. It is a phenomenon that does not appear suddenly but develops through a series of stages identified to include:

- **Latent Conflict Stage:** Here the basic conditions for conflict exist (e.g. two groups competing) for resources even though they may not have been recognized.
- **Perceived Conflict Stage:** Here, one or both participants recognize the cause of a conflict-e.g. a wife begins to complain that husband no longer loves her and treats her badly.
- **Felt Conflict Stage:** Here, tension begins to develop and anxiety develops between parties although no real struggle has began-e.g. when parties become easily irritable/short tempered with each other.



# Stages of Conflict Development

- **Manifest Conflict Stage:** Here, conflict becomes obvious as the behaviors of members show that an individual or a group has, or is attempting to frustrate another individual or group. Arguments and violent disruptions may occur in public at this stage.
- **Conflict Aftermath:** this refers to the stage after the conflict has minimized or has been eliminated either through resolution or suppression. New conditions that may lead to improved relationships and cooperation may evolve or the conflict can erupt again, worse than the previous if it was not properly managed. At this stage too, either or both parties may receive some punishment for their conduct.

It is important to note that conflict does not always pass through these stages. Also parties may not be at the same stage simultaneously-e.g. one may be at the manifest stage and the other at the perceived stage. In other words, it is possible for you to think you are in conflict with somebody who may not have recognized that you have anything against them all.

Topic Five

# THE EFFECTS OF CONFLICT



# The Pros and Cons of Conflict

- Conflict energizes people and gets them moving. It is an avenue through which people in organizations make improvements in their areas of responsibility to the ultimate benefit of the group or organization.
- Conflict is a form of communication-which when resolved can open and develop new and lasting channels of communication.
- Conflict provides an opportunity to let out pent-up feelings- a form of catharsis-after which disputants can concentrate on their primary organizational responsibilities.
- Conflict can make people aware or more sensitive to others feelings; or to problems with others which they must learn to cope with etc. Thus, conflict tends to serve as an educator/enlightener-promoting greater self awareness and creative problem solving. Thus as people engage in conflict, they learn in the process, how to manage conflict.
- Conflict can result in organizational changes and restructuring.

Despite these benefits that conflict may provide, it can arouse emotions and create anxiety in people. Conflict can also lower satisfaction and decrease performance problem solving effectiveness in individuals.



Topic Five

# TECHNIQUES FOR MANAGING CONFLICT



# Conflict Management Techniques

- Bargaining/Negotiation: This is a process of exchanging offers and concessions directly or indirectly through third parties (Baron, Byrne and Branscombe, 2006). Whether bargaining will lead to conflict resolution or not depend on the tactics adopted by bargainers. The tactics may include:
  - Starting with an extreme initial offer (one that is favorable to the other side)
  - Adopting the 'big lie' technique (where you seek to convince the other side that you will lose if you compromise)
  - Convincing the other side that you have an alternative (that if they do not agree to your terms, you have better other options)

# The Ethics of Bargaining

Bargaining is also effective when ethical principles are followed. Examples of bargaining ethics include:

- **the need to avoid false promises and or lying about future commitments and**
- **the need to avoid misrepresentation-i.e. providing misleading information to opponent.**

# Conflict Management Techniques

- **Compromising-** is when both sides in a conflict give some of what they want. This technique is often used when the issue is not important and when people seek to hasten solutions to the conflict. It is a technique that only resolves conflict temporarily as the real cause of the conflict remains unresolved.
- **Smoothing Over:** is when parties in a conflict act like the conflict does not exist or pretend to be 'one happy big family' when indeed people are offended and harboring hurts. This technique is also temporary, as it may lead to more intense conflict at the least provocation.
- **Withdrawal:** this is when one of the parties to the conflict is withdrawn from the group through transfers, dismissals, resignations etc. it also refers to the situation when one party refuses to discuss the conflict.



# Conflict Management Techniques

- **Forcing a solution:** this occurs when a third party forces a solution on the participants-telling them what is going to be without giving them an opportunity to express how they feel. For example, an employer may deny two employees engaged in a conflict the opportunity to discuss the conflict, when say s/he tell them to stop being childish, or warns them that he does not want to hear anything about the conflict but that they should go and work together as a team.
- **Confrontation:** occurs when both sides confront each other with what bothers them. Thus people are made to freely express their hurts and grievances and deal with them. It is considered the most effective method at resolving conflict-providing more lasting consequences than any of the techniques mentioned above.

# Sample Question



# Session Summary

- We have read about one important subject that can make or unmake any group or organization namely conflict. I have explained that conflicts are inevitable in group settings. They can take many forms and are caused by several factors such as faulty attributions and poor and or inadequate communication.
- Conflicts can destroy a group if not properly managed. Though on the surface conflict seem detrimental to a group harmony and effective working, it indeed has some benefits for the group.
- Conflict provides an opportunity for people to express their pent-up feelings of anger in order to bring issues to the fore and get them resolved.



# References

- Robert, B. and Branscombe, N. (2012). Social Psychology. 13<sup>th</sup> Edition. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. (2007) Social Psychology. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. Pearson Education Inc.
- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. & Akert, R. (2010) Social Psychology. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. Pearson Education Inc.