

PLS 308 – Public Administration

Topic: Managing Conflict

Conflict

- *Conflict* is defined as a process in which an effort is purposefully made by A to offset the efforts of B by some form of blocking that will result in frustrating B in attaining their goals or furthering their interests
 - Whether conflict exists is a question of perception. If no one is aware that a conflict exists, then no conflict exists
 - Common elements of most definitions of conflict are the concepts of opposition, scarcity, and blockage – parties are in conflict when one blocks another's means to a goal
 - Incompatible interests is another common component of many definitions
- Transitions in how conflict is viewed
 - Traditional view assumed conflict was bad
 - Used synonymously with terms such as violence, destruction, and irrationality
 - Viewed as a dysfunctional outcome resulting from poor communication, lack of openness and trust, and the failure of managers to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of their employees
 - Human relations view argued that conflict is a natural occurrence in all groups and organizations
 - Advocates accepting conflict
 - Interactionist view actually encourages conflict
 - Group leaders are encouraged to maintain an ongoing minimal level of conflict
 - Whether conflict is good or bad depends on the type of conflict

Functional vs. Dysfunctional Conflict

- Demarcation between functional and dysfunctional conflict is neither clear nor precise
 - Important criterion is group performance in that it is the impact of conflict on the group rather than any one individual that defines its functionality
 - Whether individual group members perceive conflict as good or bad is irrelevant
- Functional conflict
 - Improves the quality of decisions, stimulates creativity and innovation, encourages interest and curiosity among group members, provides the medium through which problems can be aired and tensions released and fosters an environment of self-evaluation and improvement
 - Conflict can further the creation of new ideas
 - Conflict can reduce the chances of groupthink
 - Conflict can be related positively to productivity
 - Heterogeneous groups produce high-quality solutions
- Dysfunctional conflict
 - Uncontrolled opposition breeds discontent which can dissolve common ties and destroy the group
 - Conflict retards communication, reduces group cohesiveness, and subordinates group goals

- Extreme levels of conflict are rarely functional
- More creative and unprogrammed the decision making process, the greater the probability that internal conflict will be constructive

Conflict Process

- Stage 1: Potential opposition
 - Conditions often exist that can give rise to conflict including:
 - Communication: semantic difficulties, misunderstandings, or “noise” in the communication channels
 - Structure: size, degree of routinization, specialization, and standardization in the tasks assigned to group members, heterogeneity of the group, leadership styles, reward systems, and the degree of dependence between groups. Potential for conflict also appears greater when group members are younger and turnover is high.
 - Personal variables: individual value systems, individual idiosyncrasies and differences. Certain personality types such as highly authoritarian, dogmatic, and demonstrate low self-esteem can lead to conflict
- Stage 2: Cognition and personalization
 - Conflict is felt when you become aware that you and a co-worker are in disagreement and both parties begin to experience anxiety, tension, frustration, hostility, and you become emotionally involved
- Stage 3: Behavior
 - The third stage begins when a member takes action that frustrates the attainment of another’s goals or prevents others from furthering their interests.
 - Overt conflict covers a wide range of behaviors from subtle and indirect to a direct, aggressive, violent, and perhaps uncontrollable struggle
 - Common conflict-handling behaviors that occur at this stage include:
 - *Competition* -- win-lose struggles. You attempt to achieve certain goals regardless of the impact on the other parties to the conflict – your goal is to win
 - *Collaboration* -- win-win approach. You try to satisfy the concerns of all parties to the dispute. Thus, cooperation is used to search for a mutually beneficial solution.
 - *Avoidance* -- withdrawal from or suppression of conflict. A party may recognize a conflict exists by withdraw from or suppress the conflict
 - *Accommodation* -- Self sacrifice. A party may choose to appease their opponent by placing their opponents interests above their own
 - *Compromise* -- each party gives up something and there is no clear winner or loser
 - Important to remember that an individual’s approach to handling conflict may depend on their cultural background
- Stage 4: Outcomes
 - Outcomes may be functional and improve the group’s performance by improving the quality of decisions, stimulating creativity and innovation, encouraging interest and curiosity among group members, fostering an environment for airing problems, self evaluation, and improvement
 - Outcomes may be dysfunctional and hinder the group’s performance by dissolving common ties, creating discontent, destroying group cohesion, creating communication

problems, raising individual goals above group goals, and even threatening the group's survival

Managing Conflict

- Some suggestions for when managers should use different conflict management strategies
 - Use *competition* when quick decisive action is needed (e.g., crisis situation), on important issues where unpopular actions are needed (e.g., budget cutbacks), on issues vital to an organization's welfare when you know you are right, and against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior
 - Use *collaboration* to find integrative solutions, when your objective is to learn, to merge insights from people with different perspectives, to gain commitment or consensus, to work through feelings that are interfering with a relationship (resolve old problems and move on)
 - Use *avoidance* when the issue is trivial, more important issues need addressing, there is no chance of satisfying your concerns, the potential disruption outweighs the benefits associated with resolving the conflict, you want to let people cool down and regain perspective, when others can resolve conflict more effectively, when issues are symptoms of other problems
 - Use *accommodation* when you find you are wrong, you want to allow a better position to be heard, to show you are reasonable, when issues are more important to others, to maintain cooperation, to minimize loss when overmatched, when harmony and stability are important, to allow employees to learn from their mistakes
 - Use *compromise* when goals are important but not worth the disruption associated with other approaches, opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals, to reach temporary agreement on complex issues, to reach agreement under time pressure, when collaboration or competition are unsuccessful

Advice for Handling Employees With Grievances or Those Requiring Disciplinary Action

- Watch for signs of dissatisfaction and act before problems become serious
- Get all of the facts - Hear both sides of the story
- Remain calm and courteous
- Be positive - Not punitive
- Be firm when necessary
- Be consistent
- Stay informed about the quality of your employees' work

Negotiation

- *Negotiation* (also called *bargaining*) is the process in which two or more parties exchange goods or services and attempt to agree on the exchange rate for them
- *Distributive bargaining* operates under zero-sum conditions
 - Essence is negotiating over who gets what share of a fixed pie
 - *Target point* determines what the negotiator hopes to achieve
 - *Resistance point* marks the lowest outcome that is acceptable
 - Area between the target point and resistance point is the *settlement range*
 - Example: labor-management negotiations over wages

- *Integrative bargaining* occurs when two negotiators agree on a solution that meets both their needs
 - Operates under the assumption that there is a settlement that creates a win-win solution
 - All things being equal, integrative bargaining is preferable to distributive bargaining
 - Most organizational cultures do not support integrative bargaining

Obstacles to Effective Negotiation

- Decision-making biases can hinder effective negotiation
 - *Irrational escalation of commitment* -- People tend to continue a previously selected course of action beyond what rational analysis would recommend
 - *Mythical fixed pie* -- Bargainers assume a zero-sum game
 - *Anchoring and adjustments* -- People have a tendency to anchor their judgments on irrelevant information
 - *Framing negotiations* -- People tend to be overly affected by the way information is presented to them
 - *Availability of information* -- Negotiators rely too much on readily available information while ignoring more relevant data
 - *The winner's curse* -- Winners sometimes have a post-negotiation anxiety that they could have been more successful
 - *Overconfidence* -- Many of the previous biases can combine to inflate a person's confidence in their judgment and choices
- Personality traits appear to have no significant direct effect on either the bargaining process or negotiation outcomes
- Negotiating styles vary among national cultures
 - French like conflict
 - Americans are known for their impatience and tend to treat deadlines as important
 - Russians tend to ignore deadlines
 - Japanese and Chinese negotiate to develop a relationship

Ways to improve your negotiation skills

- Research your opponent
 - Learn as much as you can about their interests, goals, which constituencies they must appease, their strategies. This will help you predict their behavior and responses to your offers
- Begin with a positive overture
 - Concession tends to be reciprocated in a tit for tat fashion
- Address the problem, not personalities
 - Concentrate on the negotiation issues and not the personality of your opponent. When things get rough, avoid the tendency to attack your opponent personally. Separate people from the problem
- Pay little attention to initial offers
 - Treat initial offers as a point of departure. Everyone has to have an initial position and they tend to be extreme and idealistic
- Emphasize win-win solutions

- Look for integrative solutions and frame options in terms of your opponent’s interests.
Try to find solutions that allow you and your opponent to declare victory
- Create and open and trusting climate
 - Be a good listener, ask questions, focus arguments, don’t be defensive, and avoid words and phrases that irritate your opponent.

Legal Environment Surrounding Human Resource Management

- Civil Rights Act 1964
 - Title VII
 - Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC)
 - Requires equal opportunity for all workers
 - Affirmative action plans
 - Prohibits sexual harassment
- Age Discrimination Act of 1975
 - Illegal to discriminate based on age in the workplace if between 40 - 70
- Equal Pay Act of 1963
 - Equal pay for equal work
- Civil Service Reform Act of 1978
 - Office of personnel management
 - Merit systems protection board
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1989
 - Establishments and offices accessible to the disabled
 - Reasonable accommodations unless undue hardships
- Hatch Act of 1939
 - Forbids bribery or intimidation of voters and limits political campaign activities among federal employees
- Intergovernmental Personnel Act of 1970
 - Sharing personnel for fixed periods of time among levels of government

Sexual Harassment

- Unwelcome advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct, whether overt or subtle, of a sexual nature
 - Key element is that actions are “Repeated” and “Unwanted”
 - Some disagreement over what specifically constitutes sexual harassment
 - Many of the trickier problems facing managers concern the more subtle forms of sexual harassment
- The concept of power is central to understanding sexual harassment
 - Supervisor-employee relationship best characterizes unequal power relationship because of the supervisor’s power to reward and coerce
 - Individuals who occupy high-status roles sometimes believe that sexually harassing subordinates is merely an extension of their right to make demands on lower-status individuals
 - It is an important problem because it negatively affects an individual’s experience of equality in his/her workforce
- Disproportionate number of women

- 80% of women have experienced sexual harassment
- 21% of female workers have experienced sexual harassment
- Number of complaints filed by men is much lower (between 4 and 16%)
- Coworkers are the most frequent perpetrators of sexual harassment in organizations