

Managing Conflict in Organizations

THIRD EDITION

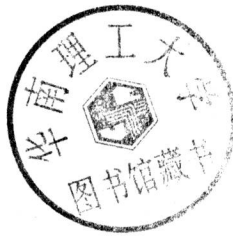
M. Afzalur Rahim

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Managing Conflict in Organizations

To Masuda and Sayeed

Preface

During the last decade, business organizations in the United States came under intense competition from abroad. The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) is now intensifying competition on a global scale. As a result, numerous organizations are faced with the challenge of introducing innovative changes to enhance their competitive position. The last decade has also seen big changes in the world with the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The introduction of the market economies would require managers in these countries to learn advanced management skills.

Organizations are constantly changing in order to improve their competitive position, but this does not, of course, mean that our organizations are learning to manage conflict more effectively. The previous two editions of this book mentioned that managers and administrators attempt not so much to understand and deal with conflict functionally as to find ways of reducing, avoiding, or terminating it. It appears that this state of affairs has remained unchanged. As a result, valuable resources are wasted as employees engage in dysfunctional conflict and miss the opportunity of utilizing functional conflict to improve their effectiveness.

In this edition, the major objective (i.e., to develop a design for the effective management of conflict at various levels in an organization) has remained unchanged. The thesis of this book continues to be that the management of organizational conflict involves the diagnosis of and intervention in conflict. A diagnosis is needed to determine whether and to what extent an intervention is needed to:

1. Minimize affective conflict;
2. Attain and maintain a moderate amount of substantive conflict; and

3. Enable the organizational members to learn and use the various styles of behavior, such as integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising, for handling different conflict situations effectively.

One of the goals is to present the reader with additional scientific studies on conflict and conflict management that appeared in professional journals and books after the second edition of this work was published in 1992. Chapters 3 (Measurement of Conflict), 4 (Organizational Learning and Effectiveness), and 10 (Ethics and Morality) have been added to strengthen the macro conflict-management model.

This edition can be used as a good supplement to courses on Organizational Behavior, Organizational and Industrial Psychology, Organizational Communication, and Organization Development. It will also be useful to the management practitioners and consultants on conflict management.

I wish to express my special gratitude to Karen Jehn, University of Pennsylvania, Clement Psenicka, Youngstown State University, Jan Edward Garrett and Nace Magner, Western Kentucky, and Robert Golembiewski, University of Georgia, for helping me to improve several parts of the book. I want to express my thanks to my management students of Youngstown State and Western Kentucky Universities, who provided the data for preparing the collegiate norms of conflict and conflict styles. I want to express my appreciation to several anonymous reviewers for making comments on several parts of the book. Their opinions were useful in refining some of my thoughts on conflict and conflict management, but I am fully responsible for the final product.

The price that an author's family pays for a book is enormous. I express my gratitude and indebtedness to my wife and son for their patience and supportiveness. My wife was very supportive during various stages of the revision. Without her help it would have been very difficult to accomplish this task.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Conflict is inevitable among humans. When two or more social entities (i.e., individuals, groups, organizations, and nations) come in contact with one another in attaining their objectives, their relationships may become incompatible or inconsistent. Relationships among such entities may become inconsistent when two or more of them desire a similar resource that is in short supply; when they have partially exclusive behavioral preferences regarding their joint action; or when they have different attitudes, values, beliefs, and skills. "Conflict is the perception of differences of interests among people" (Thompson, 1998, p. 4). Another definition of conflict would be

a process of social interaction involving a struggle over claims to resources, power and status, beliefs, and other preferences and desires. The aims of the parties in conflict may extend from simply attempting to gain acceptance of a preference, or securing a resource advantage, to the extremes of injuring or eliminating opponents. (Bisno, 1988, pp. 13–14; see also Coser, 1968, p. 232)

The theme of conflict has been with us and has influenced our thinking from time immemorial. It received different degrees of emphasis from social scientists during various periods of history. Over the years the phenomena relating to conflict have

fallen within the purview of the historian, the novelist, the philosopher, and the theologian, and [have] been treated systematically by authors in all of the biological and social sciences. Conflicts between nations, political parties, and ideologies have been examined by the political scientist; conflicts in the market place have been examined by the economist; group conflicts of various kinds—familial, racial, religious, and social class—

have been investigated by the sociologist; and the struggle for survival by species of differing genetic endowments has been studied by the biologist. (Nightingale, 1974, p. 141)

Scholars in organization theory became interested in studying conflict only in recent times. In recent years, there have been renewed interest and significant changes in the study of conflict in social and organizational contexts. The formation of the International Association for Conflict Management and Conflict Management Division of the Academy of Management to encourage research, teaching, and training and development on managing social and organizational conflicts and the publication of the *International Journal of Conflict Management* attest to this renewed interest. In recent years, a number of universities in the United States—Harvard, Northwestern, George Mason, for example—have shown great interest in teaching and research on social and organizational conflicts.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM VARIOUS DISCIPLINES

Most of the contributions to the theory of social conflict came from philosophy and sociology. A few contributions came from other disciplines, such as science. A brief review of the major classical positions in these disciplines on the concept of conflict would be helpful at this point.

Philosophy

Plato and Aristotle

Although among the classical philosophers neither Plato (427–347 B.C.) nor Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) wrote a separate treatise on social conflict; both of them discussed in detail the need for order in a society.

Plato was of the opinion that tension within society is natural, and therefore some conflict is inevitable. “However, he felt that if a proper balance of the parts could be obtained, social conflict would be at a minimum. Each segment of society must know the part it must play and be guided in such a fashion that all segments work together in harmony” (Schellenberg, 1996, p. 89). Plato suggested that such a balance of the parts could be obtained only with appropriate leadership.

In *The Republic*, Plato suggested that the needs of the society could be satisfied if private property was eliminated. To satisfy the needs of society, he particularly felt the necessity for eliminating private property for those who would provide political leadership. Plato believed that the leaders could not do their job properly if they were motivated by private interests.

Aristotle, however, believed that Plato’s philosophy called for “extreme uni-

fication" or communism and that this was neither practical nor possible. This is not to say that Aristotle saw much usefulness of social conflict. On the contrary, although he disagreed with Plato on the form of the government, he shared Plato's sympathy for the need of order in the state. Plato and Aristotle stressed that an absence of conflict is a *sine qua non* for the attainment of the just form of life in the city-state. To them, "strife is a sign of imperfection and unhappiness. Order marks the good life and disorders the opposite. Conflict is a threat to the success of the state and should be kept at an absolute minimum, and removed altogether if possible" (Sipka, 1969, p. 7). The conclusion is that both classical philosophers assigned social conflict a pathological status.

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke

The seventeenth-century social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) suggested that the purpose of the government is to establish order in social relations, without which there would be constant violence between human beings. Hobbes considered "human beings as egotistical, the dupes of error, the slaves of sin, of passion, and of fear. Persons are their own enemies, or the enemies of others, or both" (Lourenco & Glide-well, 1975, p. 489). He took the position that the Sovereign (i.e., a monarch who is granted absolute and permanent power to control social conflict) should control human beings. Whatever the Sovereign decides becomes the law, and all the citizens must abide by it. Since they have given him the right and power to make them, they cannot object to his laws. This is the only way to control social conflict effectively.

Locke was critical of Hobbes's disposition for the political order, the *Leviathan*, which is empowered with absolute control. According to Locke, government is to be organized by the people through their common consent and its duty was the preservation of lives, liberties, and estates. Although Locke disagreed with Hobbes on the type of government he considered appropriate, he concluded that government should control conflict.

While there are some differences in their approaches to social theory, those differences are at times not so great. Both

Hobbes and Locke had an extraordinary sensitivity to the dangers of social conflict and sought, through government, to control it as much as possible. . . . not only did these men not see a growth or re-constructive potential in social conflict, but they considered it a flaw in the body politic. . . . Though neither man insists that all conflict is to be removed, it is clear that this is their intention. (Sipka, 1969, pp. 15–16)

G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx

A distinct shift of views on conflict in philosophy occurred during the nineteenth century. It is not possible to review all of the major philosophical contributions that held to a functional view of conflict, but it would be useful to

review the works of intellectual giants like G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) and Karl Marx (1818–1883).

Hegel's philosophy is dominated by the notion of the dialectic, which has, over the years, developed four different meanings: (1) arriving at the truth, (2) dialogue or debate, (3) process of ascertaining the unrestricted truth, and (4) process of change through the conflict of opposing forces (Reese, 1982). Hegel's dialectic asserts that every finite concept (*thesis*, or the first doctrine) bears within itself its own opposite (*antithesis*, or the second doctrine). To overcome the opposition, one must reconcile the opposing concepts by coming to a third position (*synthesis*, or the third doctrine). The dialectical method thus effects a synthesis of opposites. The synthesis in turn becomes a new thesis, and the dialectical process continues until a fully developed synthesis (the Absolute Idea) is reached. Each stage in this process relates back to the previous idea but results in broadened knowledge.

The dialectics of Marx and Hegel are different. Marx saw human history as full of conflict between classes—bourgeoisie (business class) and proletariat (working class)—which is the mechanism of change and development. Marx was a revolutionary who wanted the capitalists to relinquish their power. He and his associate Engel were quite candid about their opinion on revolution. They closed *The Communist Manifesto* with the following words: "The Communists . . . openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletariats have nothing to lose but their chains. Workingmen of all countries, unite!"

The key to Marx's dialectic, therefore, is associated with class conflict rooted in economic disparities. Marx believed that this class struggle (between haves and have-nots) would ultimately lead to a classless society devoid of repression where human beings are, for the first time, truly free. This new society would be free from conflict, and the individuals would be perfectly reconciled to themselves and their fellows.

John Dewey

Among the philosophers who made significant contributions to the study of social conflict during the twentieth century is John Dewey. He was profoundly influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution and Hegel's dialectic process. For Dewey (1922/1957), "Conflict is the gadfly to thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates us to invention. It shocks us out to sheep-like passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving" (p. 300). He observed that when the relationship between human beings and environment is interrupted by obstacles or conflict, individuals must use their intelligence to readapt through a change in their accustomed modes of conduct and belief. In other words, an individual should examine a conflict situation to discover the various actions possible and choose the one that is most effective.

Biological Science

Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin (1809–1882), a naturalist, formulated the “theory of evolution,” which indicated that biological species survive and grow by confronting environmental challenges. He indicated that “all nature is at war, one organism with another, or with external nature. Seeing the contented face of nature, this may at first be well doubted; but reflection will inevitably prove it is true” (quoted in Hyman, 1966, p. 29). This called for a reexamination of the classical views of the role of social conflict in human development. Darwin (1871) and his followers (the social Darwinists) recognized the role that environmental conflict plays in human growth, which led to the development of the doctrine of “the survival of the fittest.” Darwin said:

Man . . . has no doubt advanced to his present high condition through a struggle for existence consequent on his rapid multiplication; and if he is to advance still higher, it is to be feared that he must remain subject to a severe struggle. Otherwise, he would sink into indolence, and the more gifted men would not be more successful in the battle of life than the less gifted (quoted in Sipka, 1969, p. 16)

Darwin believed that the growth of human beings is a function of their response to conflict with the environment. If conflict were altogether absent—as appears to be the ideal in much of classical philosophy—the progress of human beings would be retarded. The evolutionary emphasis on the essential role of conflict in human development is a pennant of the nineteenth century. Through Darwin, it found its way into virtually all facets of science.

Sociology

Georg Simmel

Among the classical sociologists who made a significant contribution to the study of the various forms of conflict was Georg Simmel. His general hypothesis was that a certain amount of conflict is as essential to the proper functioning of groups, as are stability and order. He believed that in small groups such as the marital couple, “a certain amount of discord, inner divergence and outer controversy, is organically tied up with very elements that ultimately hold the group together; it cannot be separated from the unity of the sociological structure” (Simmel, 1908/1955, pp. 17–18).

At the beginning of this century, there was considerable interest among the American sociologists in the study of social conflict. They generally agreed with Park and Burgess (1921/1929): “Only where there is conflict is behavior conscious and self-conscious; only here are the conditions for rational conduct” (p. 578).

Elton Mayo

Beginning in the late 1930s, the study of social conflict began to be neglected with the publication of Elton Mayo's (1933) and Talcott Parsons's (1949) works. Mayo's studies, which led to the human relations movement, emphasized the need for cooperation for enhancing organizational effectiveness. To him, conflict was an evil and should be minimized or, if possible, eliminated from organizations altogether. Child (1995) concluded that Mayo had a

deep abhorrence of conflict in any form. . . . Mayo and his colleagues . . . assumed that ordinary employees were largely governed by a "logic of sentiment," which was of a different order from managers' rational appraisal of the situation in terms of costs and efficiency. Conflict with management was thus an aberration that threatened the effectiveness of organizations. (pp. 88–89)

Talcott Parsons

Talcott Parsons's (1949) formulation of the structural-functional theory considerably influenced social science thought following World War II. His theory is based on the assumption that society is inherently stable, integrated, and functional, and, as a result, conflict is viewed to be abnormal and dysfunctional. "His model is through and through an equilibrium model and the dynamics of conflict are relegated to the level of 'deviation.' All this stems, perhaps, from Parsons's extraordinary, Hobbesian preoccupation with the natural tendency of men to hostility, and the difficulty of controlling them adequately" (Sipka, 1969, p. 70).

Lewis Coser

During the 1950s a number of theorists (Mills, 1959; Dahrendorf, 1959; Bernard, 1957; Coser, 1956) presented viewpoints opposing Parsons's analysis. Consequently, the interest in the study of the social phenomena of conflict began to grow. The publication of *The Functions of Social Conflict* by Lewis Coser (1956), which focused on the productive potential of conflict, had much to do with this renewal of interest. Coser (1956) interpreted and expanded Simmel's essay in considerable detail. He

reminded his fellow social scientists of the key role that conflict always plays for society. His book was highly influential in reminding sociologists of ideas that had been central earlier in the century (in writings such as those of Park and Burgess and of Simmel), thus setting the stage for a remarkable rise in sociological attention to conflict in the period since then. (Schellenberg, 1996, p. 66)

Two opposing viewpoints on the outcome of conflict were presented. A synthesis of these viewpoints regarding the usefulness of conflict is necessary. A realistic view of conflict is that it has productive as well as destructive potentials (Assael, 1969; Deutsch, 1969; Jehn, 1997a; de Dreu & van de Vliert, 1997;