# Conflict Management in Nepalese Organisations*

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## INTRODUCTION

Conflict has been an important element in organisations for a long time, but it is only recently that scholars are making attempts to show how it might be managed. Though in the Nepalese perspective, the literature on organisational conflict is little documented. The objective of this study is to provide the conceptual background and approaches to the organisational conflict. It also aims at identifying the attitudes of top-level executives of public enterprises regarding various aspects of conflict management practices in the Nepalese organisations. In this study, the perceptions of top-level executives in respect to the levels of conflict, its causes and consequences, and devices of managing it by their organisations have ben examined and analysed, finally the findings have been summarised and conclusions of the study are presented.

This study is particularly based on primary data. The information for the purpose was collected from 15 public enterprises which were randomly selected. Since this study is based on an opinion questionnaire survey which was distributed to 73 top-level executives of sample public enterprises. A total of 60 (82.15%) questionnaires were returned. For the analysis of data the percentage of the responses, mean-value and overall ranks that ranked by the respondents have been computed and used for the sake of this study.

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# CONFLICT IN ORGANISATIONS: A CONCEPTUAL DILEMMA

Generally, conflict has been regarded as the other side of the coin of the cooperation.[1] Joe Kelly has defined conflict as 'opposition or dispute between persons, groups or ideas.[2] Conflict, from an administrative perspective, consists of all kinds of opposition or antagonistic interaction. It is based on scarcity of power, resources or social position and differing value structures.[3]

Since conflict is a social phenomenon it is a reality in organisations, but generally viewed negatively by practising administrators and managers as well. Conflict, however, is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. It could serve as an important tool for the organisational health and development. However, it has both positive as well as negative effects. Thus, it has been stated:

"Conflict may connote animality, violence, destruction, barbarisation, loss of civilized control, irrationality. Alternatively, conflict may connote adventure, novelty, clarification, creation, growth, dialectal rationality".[4]

Conflict, indeed, is a part of organisational life and may occur between individuals, groups, units, departments or organisational levels. Organisational conflict has both functional (constructive) and dysfunctional (destructive) aspects. The dysfunctional form of conflict naturally hinders the organisational performance. On the other hand, the functional conflict supports the goals of the organisation and improves the organizational performances. Thus, functional conflict has to be stimulated and managed for the benefits of the organisation.

## APPROACHES TO ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICT

In order to review the historical development of views regarding conflict from an administrative perspective, three basic philosophies of the subject have been presented by the social scientists. They are:[5]

     i.    The Traditional Approach

     ii.    The Human Relations Approach

     iii.    The Modern Approach

**The Traditional approach.**

Traditionally, all conflicts were viewed negatively  so they had to be eliminated immediately when they occurs. All conflicts were bad and they were used synonymously with such term as violence, destruction and irrationality. In the period between 1890 and 1940, it was argued that conflict was a dysfunctional

outcome resulting from poor communication, a lack of openness and trust between people and the failure of managers to be responsive to the needs and aspirations of their employees. It has the adverse effects it could have on organisational productivity.

According to the traditional view, it was believed that conflict could be overcomed by recruiting people carefully who had appropriate skills and who were willing to accept authority. Relationships were then structured so as to clarify the chain of command and avoid conflict-producing interaction. This was achieved by an elaborate job description to support the structure and by the use of rewards and punishments to reinforce the  organisational norms for accepting the decision of those in the hierarchy.[6]

The basic weakness in the traditional approach is its inability to differentiate between functional and dysfunctional form of conflict.

## ii.  The Human Relations Approach

The traditional view was replaced in the late 1940's and early 1950's with a human relations approach. This view argued that conflict was a natural occurrence in all groups and organisations. Since it was inevitable, the human relations approach advocated acceptance of conflict.

This approach was also suffered from certain drawbacks. It does accept the fact that conflict is inevitable within the organisation, but those who advocate this view are concentrated with developing techniques for resolving conflict. This approach neither fully recognised the necessity of functional conflict and its value to the health of an organisation.

## iii.     The Modern Approach

Recently, however, a broader view of conflict is emerging which has accepted the functional aspects of conflict as well as the dysfunctional. The modern approach also known as 'the realistic view' or 'the interactionist philosophy' believes that conflict and disequilibrium generally may be beneficial to society over the long run, since conflict fights against routine and sparks innovation. In this respect Lewis A. Coser has aptly observed as, "Social conflict may cause several organisations to fail, but, in an evolutionary manner, the failure of the weak may give rise to new and stronger enterprises that benefit the whole industry.[7]

The modern approach differs from the human relations in that:

1. It recognizes the absolute necessary of functional conflict.

2. It explicitly encourages functional opposition.

3. It defines conflict management to include stimulation as well as resolution methods.

4. It considers the management of conflict as a major responsibility of all administrators.[8]

According to this approach, the administrator's and manager's job is not to suppress all conflicts in every occasion. It is to allow some optimal level of conflict to surface and to resolve conflicts in a way that enhances organisational effectiveness without creating further destructive behaviour. A more realistic view sees conflict as not only inevitable but potentially useful if managed correctly[9]. So management's challenge is to find ways to make conflict productive[10].

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NEPALESE ORGANISATIONS

Conflict in organisations can exist between individuals, groups, units, departments or organisational levels. In this relation Table 1 is presented to the responses of top-level executives with respect to the levels of conflict that exist in their organisations.

### Table 1

**Responses of Executives with Respect to the Levels of Conflict in Organisations**

| Levels | Mean Value | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| * Interpersonal | 2.50 | 2 |
| * Intragroup | 3.70 | 4 |
| * Inter-group | 2.70 | 3 |
| * Inra-departmental | 3.97 | 5 |
| * Inter-departmental | 2.28 | 1 |

The top-level executives of public enterprises perceive that conflict mostly occurs at inter-departmental level (2.28) followed by interpersonal (2.50), intergroup (2.70), intragroup (3.70) and intra departmental (3.97) levels respectively.

The causes of conflict may vary from situations to situations as well as from organisations to organisations, but some usual causes have been identified such as scarcity of resources, incompatible goals, clashes of values and interests, power and status differences, competition, unclear rules and regulations, introduction of new technologies, etc. The Table 2 shows the causes of conflict as perceived by the Nepalese executives.

## Table 2

### Responses of Executives with Respect to the Causes of Conflict

| Causes | Mean value | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| * Competition between individuals | 3.20 | 1 |
| * Competition between groups | 3.80 | 3 |
| * Competition between departments | 3.75 | 2 |
| * Scarcity of resources | 4.30 | 4 |
| * Introduction of new technologies | 4.93 | 7 |
| * Ambiguous rules & regulations | 4.48 | 5 |
| * Changes in organisational structure & system | 4.53 | 6 |

The top executives of the Nepalese public enterprises believe that main causes of conflict that exist in their organisations are competition between individuals followed by competition between departments, between groups, scarcity of resources, ambiguous rules and regulations, changes in organisational structure and system, and introduction of new technologies, respectively.

*It is noteworthy that the top executives express their conflicting views with* respect to the causes of conflict from that of levels of conflict existed in their organisations. They indicate that the main cause of conflict, usually appear in organisations, is the competition and challenges among employees on individual basis. From the analysis, it can be concluded that the executives either failed to identify an appropriate levels of conflict or its proximate causes.

About the consequences of conflict, two alternatives of resolving them have been identified. For positive consequences, the identified causes such as better performance, good communication, better coordination, effective decision-making and goal-setting etc, were included. On the other hand, duplication of efforts, poor performance and coordination, poor and ambiguous communication etc. were identified as negative consequences of conflict.

No one top executive of public enterprises perceives that conflict has positive value to the organisation and supports to achieve better organisational performance in the Nepalese context. They think that all conflict is a dysfunctional and it hinders the organisational performance. Their view on conflict is based on traditional approach.

### Table 3
### Responses of Executives to the Consequences of Conflict

|   | Consequences | Mean value | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| * | Duplication of efforts | 2.52 | 2 |
| * | Poor performance | 2.83 | 3 |
| * | Poor coordination | 2.21 | 1 |
| * | Wrong communication | 3.00 | 4 |

The top executives believe that conflict creates poor coordination, duplication of efforts, poor performance, and wrong communication. As stated earlier conflict, in general, is viewed negatively. But in actual practices, consequences of conflict may not always be harmful to an organisation. Joe Kelly has rightly observed that, "the consequences of conflict are neither intrinsically good nor bad. The conciliation of conflict is concerned to make conflicts productive, creative and useful.[11]

Since conflict has both constructive as well as destructive consequences, it must be identified properly, analysed carefully and managed tactfully. In some

cases, constructive conflict should be created and stimulated by the administrators and the managers, whereas destructive conflict must be resolved.

**Table 4**

**Responses of Executives with Respect to the Conflict Management**

| Alternative | Response | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| * Yes | 26 | 43.33 |
| * No | 34 | 56.67 |
| Total | 60 | 100.00 |

Among the top executive of sampled public enterprises, 56.67 percent responded that they never try to manage conflict and have not adopted any devices of managing it. Only few enterprises have used some methods of conflict management.

**Table 5**

**Responses of Executives with Respect to the Approaches for Resolution & Management of Conflict**

| Approach | Total Responses | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| * Group meeting | 21 | 52.50 |
| * Laboratory training | 0 | 00.00 |
| * Job enlargement & job enrichment | 8 | 20.00 |
| * Process consultation | 4 | 10.00 |
| * Confrontation meeting | 4 | 10.00 |
| * Management by objective | 3 | 7.50 |
| Total | 40 | 100.00 |

As shown in the Table 5, majority of the respondents (i.e. 52.5%) viewed that the group meeting, popularly known as staff-meeting, is used as a means of

conflict resolution and management. The *job enlargement* and *job enrichment*,

the process consultation, the confrontation meeting and the management by objective approaches have also been introduced in few enterprises. But no enterprises have organised the laboratory training and initiated the structural change for managing conflict.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Conflict has been an important element in organisations for a long time, but only recently scholars are found to be devoted towards its management. Traditionally, conflict was viewed negatively so it had to be eliminated immediately when it occurs in the organisation. The basic weakness of this traditional approach was its failure to differentiate between the functional and the dysfunctional conflict.

The human relations approach believed that conflict was a natural occurrence in all groups and organisations. Since it was inevitable, this approach advocated acceptance of conflict. The human relations approach was limited to developing techniques for resolving conflict.

More recently, however, a broader view of conflict has been emerging, a realistic view that fully recognises the functional aspects of conflict as well as the dysfunctional. This modern approach argued that the functional conflict supports the goals of the organisation and improves its performance. The functional conflict, thus, has to be stimulated and managed for the benefits of the organisation. On the other hand, the dysfunctional conflict should possibly be minimised and resolved carefully.

Conflict is viewed negatively by the Nepalese managers. They believe that conflict creates trouble and hinders organisational performance so it has to be avoided in the organisation. On the basis of analysis of information in the previous section, the major findings of the study are summarised as:

1. With respect to the levels of conflict that exist in the Nepalese public enterprises, conflict mostly occurs at interdepartmental and interpersonal levels.

2. The main causes of conflict in public enterprises are competition between individuals as well as departments. The other identified reasons are competition between groups, scarcity of resources, ambiguous rules and

regulations, change in organisational structure and introduction of new technologies, respectively.

3. No executives believe that conflict has positive value to the organisation. Their view is based on traditional approach and regarded all conflict is dysfunctional as well as destructive.

4. Regarding the consequences of conflict, the executives perceive that conflict leads to poor coordination, duplication of efforts, poor performance and wrong communication.

5. More than 56 percent respondents answered that they have never tried to manage conflict and have not adopted any devices of managing it. Only few enterprises have used some devices of conflict management. The common method of resolving conflict in the Nepalese enterprises is staff meeting. Only few public enterprises have introduced job enlargement and job enrichment, process consultation and confrontation meeting,MBO concept, etc. But no enterprises have organised the laboratory training and initiated structural change for stimulating functional conflict.

From the above findings, it can be concluded that the attitudinal change of the Nepalese managers with respect to conflict management is very essential. Otherwise survival of their organisations in changing environment particularly in the present context would be very difficult. Organisational growth and stability in the changing environmental milieu is possible only through change, and change is stimulated by conflict. Conflict, thus, can be a catalyst for change. It can force organisations to re-examine corporate goals or reset its plans, policies, and priorities. It can force managers to face important issues to which they are ignoring and thus initiating them to realise prudent decisions on those issues.

In the changed political context, the Nepalese administrators and executives must play an active role in smooth functioning of their respective organisations and thus bear the role of conflict manager. They should realise that conflict may be a productive instrument on stimulating functional conflict.

The Nepalese managers should indeed realise that the challenge for today's manager is not to eliminate conflict, but to manage it tactfully so as to contribute to accomplish the established objectives of the organisation. It is the conflict diagnosis and management skills on the part of managers that should be recognised and rewarded.

# FOOTNOTES

1. Simmel, (1968), Organizations and their Managing. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 14.

2. Joe Kelly, (1974), Organisational Behaviour. Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, p. 543.

3. Stephen P. Robbins, (1974), **Managing Organisational Conflict: A Non-traditional Approach.** Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 23.

4. Warren g. Bennis, Kenneth D. Banne, and Robert Chin (eds), (1969), The Planning of Change. (New York: Halt, Rinehard & Wiston, p. 150.

5. Stephen P. Robbins, Op. cit. p. 103.

6. C.B. Derr, (1972), A Historical review of Managing Organisation Conflict. Boston: Harvard University, Graduate School of Educational, pp. 1-22.

7. Lewis A. Coser, (1954), The functions of Social Conflict. New York, Free Press, p. 21.

8. Stephen P. Robbins, Op. cit., pp. 13-14.

9. K.W. Thomas and W.H. Schmidt, (1976), A Survey of Managerial Interests with Respect to Conflict. Academy of Management Journal 19: 315-318.

10. Stephen P. Robbins, (1978), Conflict Management and Conflict Resolution Are Not Synonymous Terms California Management Review XXI Winter, 67-69.

11. Joe Kelly, Op. Cit., p. 548.