CONFLICT IN WORK ENVIRONMENT – ITS CAUSES, PREVENTION, METHODS OF SOLVING

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Purpose: This paper attempts to present the essence of the problem of conflicts in the work environment, as well as their most important causes and methods of solving them. Attention was also drawn to the possibility of creative resolution of the disputed issues. The essence of conflict is problematic, due to various definitions and concepts assigned to the term. In the presented paper, conflict will be defined in a way that enables consideration of its constructive, as well as functional aspects.

Design/methodology/approach: Empirical research was conducted in the form of a questionnaire addressed to employees. Literature research of the subject was carried out.

Findings: When several or a dozen or so people are to cooperate, conflicts are inevitable and even useful, they occur in all teams, regardless of their nature. Teams that are aware that constructive conflicts are needed and are prepared to resolve them work effectively, even when difficult or crisis situations arise. Members of such teams are not surprised by them, they know how to act in such situations and what behaviors of other participants of the conflict they can expect. Therefore, constructive conflicts do not deteriorate employees' efficiency, atmosphere or relations in the team.

Practical implications: The issues discussed in this paper significantly affect the improvement of methods related to work environment management and the desired shaping of attitudes and behavior of employees regarding a constructive approach to the issue of conflict at work.

Originality/value In company management, the greatest attention should be paid to people as the subjects of all activities. Therefore, it is worth considering and asking the question what to do in a conflict situation, what actions to take, so that the conflict is not only a destructive phenomenon, but so that by searching for its multifaceted solutions, it becomes an instrument of organizational innovation and can lead to constructive solutions and creative changes in the company.

Keywords: company management, conflict in work environment, human factor.

Category of the paper: General review.

1. Introduction

Conflicts are an integral part of the life of every company. They are a natural phenomenon at work and occur even in the best teams. They create tension between employees and have a significant impact on the efficiency of their work, which, in turn, translates into the success or failure of the entire company. The key issue of the problem is the identification of the basis of a conflict situation and the selection of appropriate methods to solve it. Constructive conflict resolution should, first of all, lead to the integration of the team and cooperation of its members. The worst attitude that can be adopted in a situation, where things go wrong in the company, is pretending that the problem does not exist, trying to downplay it, or the so-called "sweeping it under the rug". This paper attempts to present the essence of the problem of conflicts at work, as well as their most important causes and methods of solving them. Attention was also drawn to the possibility of creative resolution of the disputed issues.

2. Conflict, competition and cooperation – concepts and definitions

The word conflict comes from Latin – *conflictus* meaning *a clash*. A conflict can be understood as a human conflict of interests, attitudes or aspirations. Each conflict has the parties involved and its subject matter. In a company, the parties are most often specific groups of people and the subject matter may be views, attitudes, expectations or material goods (Ostrowska, 2017; Lakis, 2010; Breet et al., 2010; Hobfoll, 2010; Taylor et al., 2010).

The essence of conflict is problematic, due to various definitions and concepts assigned to the term. In the presented paper, conflict will be defined in a way that enables consideration of its constructive, as well as functional aspects.

"Conflict in an organization means a dispute between two or more members or groups, resulting from the necessity to share limited resources or work, or having a different position, different goals, values or observations. When in dispute, members or departments of the organization try to make their case or point of view prevail over the case or point of view of others" (Stoner and Wankel, 1997).

The above definition is general on purpose, it does not specify the intensity of the dispute, how individual parties want to win, how the conflict is managed or what is its result. In any case, these factors determine whether the conflict is functional or dysfunctional for the organization and to what extent.

One of the many semantic difficulties associated with organizational conflict is the distinction between conflict and competition. You can distinguish between these concepts by asking whether one party may prevent the other from achieving its goals. Competition occurs

when the goals of the parties cannot be reconciled, but the parties cannot interfere with each other. An example would be two production teams competing to be the first to perform a planned task (both cannot be first). If there is no possibility to prevent the other team from achieving their goal, we speak about competition; however, if there is such a possibility and it is used, we deal with a conflict.

We talk of cooperation, on the other hand, when two or more parties work together to achieve common goals. Conflict and cooperation can coexist. The opposite of cooperation is not conflict, but lack of cooperation. An example would be two parties, who agree on the goals, but firmly disagree on how to achieve them. Conflict management means that managers should look for ways to balance it and cooperate (Stoner and Wankel, 1997; Jensen et al., 2015; Lohman et al., 2010; Weeks et al., 2009).

3. Conflict and changing approach to its perception

Over the past thirty years, the approach to organizational conflict has changed significantly. Stephen P. Robbins traced this evolution, paying special attention to the difference between the traditional view of conflict and the present one, which he calls interactive.

The traditional approach viewed conflict as redundant and very harmful. Initially, managers and management authors believed that the emergence of a conflict was a clear signal of something wrong with the organization. They believed that a conflict arises only when managers do not rely on healthy management principles in running an organization, or fail to make employees aware of the common interests between management and staff. According to the traditional approach, removing such problems should allow the organization to function as an integrated whole. One of the supporters of such views is F. Taylor, who believed that having applied the principles of scientific organization, permanent conflict between workers and management would disappear (Stoner and Wankel, 1997; Auster et al., 2005; Killoren et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2010).

The traditional approach to conflict has evolved as behaviorists and other management professionals began to see the causes of conflict in organizations that arise regardless of mistakes made by managers. This shift was accelerated when the advantages of conflicts that were managed effectively were noticed.

The dominant approach today is that organizational conflicts are inevitable and even necessary, regardless of how organizations are designed and handled. Of course, many conflicts are still considered to be dysfunctional: they can harm individuals and be a significant obstacle to the achievement of the organization's goals. However, it should always be remembered that some of them are also functional, as they contribute to greater efficiency of the organization.

It is currently believed that conflicts can lead to the search for solutions, and therefore are often an instrument of organizational innovation and change. From this point of view, the task of managers is not to extinguish or resolve all conflicts, but to guide them in such a way, as to minimize their harmful aspects and maximize positive ones. Such management may, even in certain specific situations, stimulate a conflict, if its lack or suppression may harm the effectiveness, creativity or innovation in the organization (Gembalska-Kwiecień, 2017; Stoner and Wankel, 1997; Knight et al., 2010; Lazarus, 1991).

According to the survey conducted in several companies from various industries, the majority of the survey participants assessed the conflict as a negative phenomenon of a dysfunctional nature.

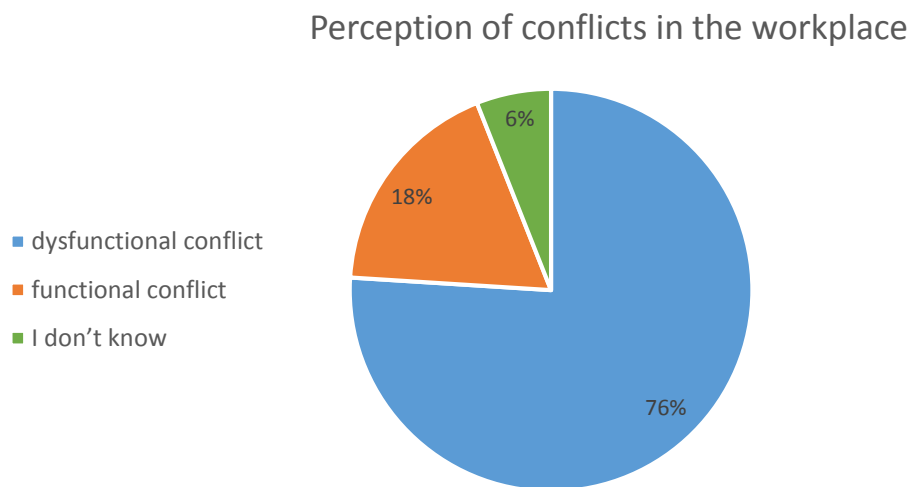### Perception of conflicts in the workplace

Fig. 1. Perception of conflicts at work. Source: own research.

Therefore, it is worth considering and asking the question what to do in a conflict situation, what actions to take, so that the conflict is not only a destructive phenomenon, but so that by searching for its multifaceted solutions, it becomes an instrument of organizational innovation and can lead to constructive solutions and creative changes in the company.

Summing up what has been presented above about the role that a conflict can play in an organization, we can distinguish:

Destructive (dysfunctional) conflict – which leads to mutual antagonisms, hostility and even sometimes aggression, arouses fear, anxiety and frustration; there is a negative attitude "against someone", someone always has to win; its effects may be:

- ✓ destructive stress,
- ✓ a sense of threat through social disapproval, and even potential exclusion,
- ✓ negative emotions, often even aggression,
- ✓ significant deterioration of the already bad relations between the parties to the conflict,
- ✓ lack of constructive communication between the parties,
- ✓ waste of time and resources of the parties to the conflict,

    ✓ hindered or impossible teamwork,

    ✓ significant decrease in work performance,

    ✓ higher operating costs of the organization.

Constructive (functional) conflict – which does not lead to mutual antagonisms, teaches respect for others, fosters the search for creative solutions and meeting the needs of all parties to the conflict; its effects may be:

    ✓ a significant increase in energy and motivation to undertake a new type of action,

    ✓ positive emotions, including increased trust between the parties,

    ✓ perceiving others in a kind and open way,

    ✓ the emergence of a sense of justice,

    ✓ focus on a common goal,

    ✓ finding more creative solutions to the conflict,

    ✓ the emergence of innovations (Stoner and Wankel, 1997; ; Lazarus,1991 Telzer at al., 2001).

4. Types of conflict

In the literature on the subject, there are several classifications of conflicts, according to various criteria. According to J. A. F. Stoner and Ch. Wankel, there are five types of conflict in an organization:

1. A person's internal conflict occurs when they do not know what work is expected of them, when some job requirements conflict with others, or when they are expected to do more than they think they can do. This type of conflict often affects how an individual responds to other types of conflict in the organization.

2. Conflict between individuals within an organization is often attributed to personality differences. Usually, however, such conflicts arise as a result of pressure related to the roles played (e.g. between a manager and a subordinate) or as a result of the personalization of conflict between groups.

3. Conflict between the individual and the group is often caused by the way individuals respond to pressure exerted by the working group, intended to enforce conformism. An individual may be penalized by a group for exceeding or failing to meet their performance standards.

4. Conflict between groups within an organization; most often inter-group conflicts arise between the line and staff, and between workers and management.

5. Conflict between organizations is considered inherent and desirable economically; most often it is referred to as competition. This type of conflict has been shown to lead to the development of new products, technologies and services, as well as to lower prices and a more efficient use of resources. Laws and state institutions try to encourage functional conflicts (e.g. through antitrust legislation) and limit their dysfunctional aspects (e.g. false advertising or espionage), (Stoner and Wankel, 1997 Bridges, 2008;).

5. The causes of conflict at work

The main causes of conflict include, among others:
- ✓ the need to share limited resources,
- ✓ differences in goals of individual units or teams,
- ✓ the interdependence of work in the company,
- ✓ differences in values or views,
- ✓ perception differences between individual teams.
- ✓ The conflict usually concerns material goods, which are often limited, or values and views. It is often also related to power, prestige or career. The reasons for its appearance may be various, sometimes contradictory team or personal interests. The source of conflict may also lie in hurt pride, passivity, failure to keep promises, jealousy, unspoken criticism or failure to fulfill official duties (Ostrowska, 2017; Stoner and Wankel, 1997; Auster at al., 2005 Heimpel at al., 2006).

There are many causes of conflict in work environment. First of all, it results from the specificity of a given organization, in particular, its defective structure, incorrect formal solutions (e.g. inadequate internal regulations) or inadequate organization of work.

The following causes of conflict in work environment are often presented in the literature on the subject:
- ✓ Shared resources. Assuming that each cell of the organization had access to an unlimited number of employees, money, materials, equipment and work space, there would be no problem with the distribution of these resources. The possibility of conflict occurs because the resources listed above are limited. They have to be allocated, so it is inevitable that certain groups receive less than they want or need. As individual groups compete for the greatest possible share of the available resources, a conflict or loss of cooperation may arise.
- ✓ Interdependence. The greater it is, the bigger the problems with its coordination may be. In the case of sequential work, conflict may be caused by one group producing too

many or too few products, with the consequent failure of the other group to meet its deadlines or goals. Sometimes conflict arises when there are too many tasks to be performed by all groups. Tension will build up between members of different groups, who may accuse each other of evading their duties. Conflict may also break out when work is distributed evenly, but the remuneration for it is different for the teams or individual members performing it. The greatest probability of occurrence of conflict is where one team cannot start working until another team completes a task.

✓ Different or conflicting goals. Different departments in a company specialize and differentiate as they adopt different goals, tasks and employees. Such differentiation often leads to a conflict of interest or priorities, even when there is agreement about the overall goals of the organization.

✓ Differences in attitudes, values and views. The differing goals of members of different departments are often accompanied by differences in attitudes, values and views, that can also lead to conflict.

✓ Excessive competition. Not all employees achieve their goals well in an atmosphere of permanent or excessive competition. Sometimes, they do not have the will or predisposition to compete, but the ubiquitous "rat race" eventually captivates them. However, it should be remembered that this does not have a positive effect on the atmosphere of teamwork and the work of individual employees (Stoner and Wankel, 1997; Stoffregen;at al., 2019; Lakis, 2010; Telzer at al., 2009).

Other causes of conflict observed in practice and described in the literature on the subject include: individual styles and organizational ambiguity. Some people like conflict, polemics and disagreement, and if these situations are under control, moderate disagreement can stimulate the activity of team members and increase their effectiveness. Some, however, exacerbate their conflicts, polemics and disagreements to the level of a "full-scale battle". Examples here include workers, who are highly authoritarian or have low self-esteem and often anger their colleagues by reacting too sharply to minor misunderstandings.

Conflict at work can arise on various levels – between colleagues, between a supervisor and an employee, during teamwork. Generational conflict is also quite common. At work, we usually do not choose our colleagues, but we must learn to function with them, and preferably cooperate constructively. Not everyone is able to find understanding right away. That is why the role of the manager skillfully leading their team is very important.

Other causes of conflict occurring at work are: overload, lack of proper communication between superiors and subordinates or co-workers, difficult contact with the supervisor, unclear rules for granting promotions or periodic performance review, lack of employee participation in decision making, bias, constant criticism, refusing a raise or holiday leave, especially when it is really important to the employee. Vague scopes of duties of individual employees, favoring one or more employees with a large bonus or prestigious training, which causes a negative

attitude of the rest of colleagues towards the distinguished person, unfair or unclear division of duties (Ostrowska, 2017 Zimmerman at al., 2015).

Summing up, the potential for inter-group conflict is greatest when there are significant differences between group members in terms of work attitude, age and education. Very often in such groups employees do not trust each other, cannot communicate with each other or simply dislike each other (Gembalska-Kwiecień, 2017; Ostrowska, 2017; Stoner and Wankel, 1997; Reiman at al., 2019).

6. Prevention of conflict at work

As discussed above, conflict at work is inevitable and even necessary, and it occurs in all teams, regardless of their nature. Team members, who agree on everything, do not question the assumptions, do not come up with new ideas, do not indicate mistakes made at work, which, in turn, will lower the performance of the entire company. Of course, not all conflicts are useful. Personal reluctance between employees or clashes related to the awaiting task may lead to a toxic atmosphere and, as a result, failure.

Pretending that nothing happened – the proverbial "sweeping the problem under the rug" is never a good way to resolve conflicts, especially in the workplace. Suppressing your aggression, fears, mutual grievances and resentments is a purely self-destructive phenomenon. Such attitude leads to a significant increase in the level of stress, a decrease in motivation and the quality of work performed (https.://www.praca.pl/;2021 Stoffregen;at al., 2019; De Drue at al., 2008; Villarreal at al., 2005).

To resolve a conflict, cooperation between all parties is necessary. Let's not try to delude ourselves – it is impossible to resolve a conflict with a few or a dozen e-mails sent, and think that something was done in the contentious matter and that will be enough. We should make it clear to ourselves and others that it is not enough. In such a situation, it is best to talk face to face. It is worth having such a conversation coolly, without violent emotions, in order not to regret what has already been said when the emotions subside. We must not forget about respect for our interlocutors, even if we do not agree with them in the dispute and we have a different opinion. We should let others present their opinion first and then make our views known.

Before having the conversation, it is advisable to analyze the situation and consider whether there is any alternative solution or compromise that could be achieved in this situation and propose it during the negotiations.

It is certain that some agreement can be reached, because there is no conflict that cannot be resolved. The main obstacle in solving it is the unwillingness of either party to cooperate. A good manager will certainly want to cooperate. Only as a result of constructive conversation with employees can they get to know their skills, ideas and needs better. In the future, this will

allow for the development of a more flexible work environment, in which tension does not build up, or builds up on a smaller scale, and there are no sudden outbreaks of conflict. This, in turn, will translate into better motivation to work and will significantly improve atmosphere and interpersonal relations (https://leadersheep.com.pl/blog/,2021; https://poradnikprzedsiebiorcy.pl; 2021, Reiman at al., 2019; Bridges, 2008 De Drue at al., 2008;).

According to surveys conducted in several companies from various industries, the participants indicated ways of conflict resolution in their workplace.
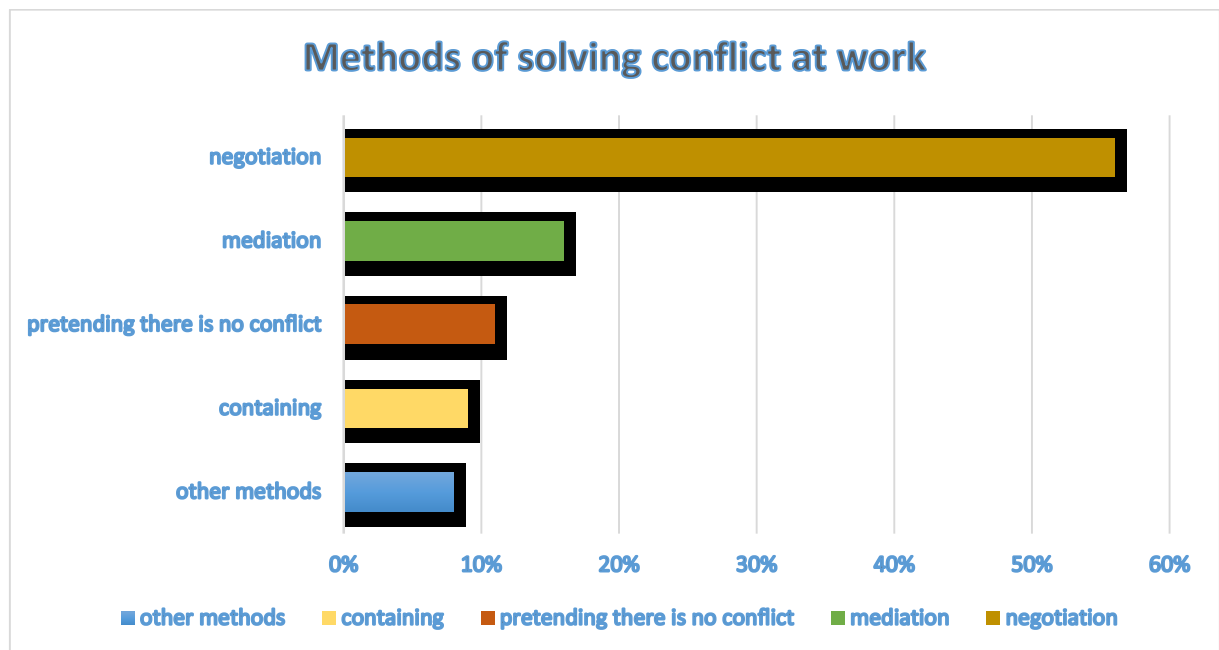

Fig.2 Methods of solving conflict at work

Source: own research

Below, there are some tips on what to do if there is a conflict in the workplace, how to convince staff that constructive conflicts play an important role in teamwork.

7. Conflict resolution at work – practical tips

1. Constructive conflict:

- ✓ At the team building phase, talk to the team members that conflicts are a natural phenomenon in teamwork.
- ✓ It is also worth emphasizing that thanks to their occurrence, the team can avoid making mistakes, because if they are constructively resolved, they can contribute to building a better atmosphere and strengthening interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

2. Before a major conflict or its escalation occurs, make your expectations clear and specific to the team.

Make sure to introduce the following rules to the team:

✓ Establish the ground rules. At the team building stage, identify acceptable and unacceptable behavior during conflict. This will prevent it from getting out of control. Each company, each team has its own specifics, and the people who create it are also different, so it is difficult to define rules that will suit everyone. However, one rule applies everywhere and always – a conflict should always be spoken about openly.

✓ Introduce a collaborative conflict resolution process. If team members know what to do when tension occurs, they will not be afraid of disagreement between them and will often successfully solve their own problems. A team should have specific, written, step-by-step rules of conflict resolution.

8. Summary

When several or a dozen or so people are to cooperate, conflicts are inevitable and even useful, they occur in all teams, regardless of their nature.

Teams that are aware that constructive conflicts are needed and are prepared to resolve them work effectively, even when difficult or crisis situations arise.

Members of such teams are not surprised by them; they know how to act in such situations and what behaviors of other participants of the conflict they can expect.

Therefore, constructive conflicts do not deteriorate employees' efficiency, atmosphere or relations in the team.

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