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A Brief Review on the Literatures of Conflict and Cooperation in Organizations

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Abstract: This paper reviews the literatures about organizational conflict in the last 30 years. The causes of organizational conflict and its management are discussed in this paper. Finally we suggest directions for future research.

Keywords: Organizational conflict, conflict management, communication, conflict escalation

1 INTRODUCTION

Conflict and cooperation as two abundant social phenomenon which exist in every organization, and also they are quite inevitable in reality, they have being as important research objects of politics, sociology, psychology and even economics since a very long time ago. Meanwhile, they also do look like twins of an organization, they were born at the same time as the organization's born and they disappeared when the organization broke up. Some organizations can made their conflicts became opportunities even cooperation, but some of them cannot, and even made conflicts became the lethal reason for their termination. In this paper, the cooperation and conflict in organization will be treated as two ends of one spectrum, and basically will put much stress on the researches of the organization's conflicts rather than the cooperation, because of the conflict and cooperation in organization are interchangeable, and the reasons for conflicts' occurrence always look like the reasons of why the cooperation cannot be effectively established. This does not mean the researches on conflict are important or better than the researches on cooperation, but only means that we hope we can find some useful answers and reasons for these two questions through one shoot.

2 A BRIEF SCAN ON THE RESEARCHES OF CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATIONS

In fact, the classic organization theories had already involved some thoughts on the conflict in organizations. For instance, Taylor believes one "mental revolution" is needed for both the employers and the employees, in order to change the intra-organizational confront into mutual-trust and change the conflict into cooperation and ultimately enhance the working efficiency of the organization [1]; Henry Fayol also put forward some arguments about conflict and cooperation in organization in his famous fourteen management principles, such as "personal interests should obey the collaborative interests", "remuneration should be fair and justice" and "Management should encourage harmony and general good feelings among employees" [2]; at the same time, Marx Weber emphasized that only the highly structured, formalized and dehumanized bureaucratic system is the best way to improve the production efficiency, and within this system, much attention should be paid on the organizational discipline and stability [3].

Although the classic theories have already noticed the existence of organization conflicts, but their researches were basically only focus on the issues about production efficiencies, and believed human beings as "economic entities" or "rational animals". Until Elton Mayo put forward his theory about "social men" after the historical Hawthorne

Experiment, the researches on informal organizations, individual emotions, values, psychological needs finally started to emerge.

From the 60s' in last century, many behavior research scholars, sociologists and management scientists started systematic researches on organization conflict, such as Mebber's Organization Management and Theories, Gary's Organization and Management. In 1967, Pondy provided a theory about five stages in organization conflict and built a model about conflict in organizations [4]. In 1976, Thomas put forward his research on the model of conflicts' dynamic processes and the model of conflicts' structure [5]. Putnam and Folger emphasized the importance of communication in conflict [6], and Van de Vliet focused on organization conflict's prevention and escalation [7].

Different scholar has different answer about the definition of the organization conflict. Thomas believes that the conflict is one process which starts from one side in an organization when it recognized the others are harming or intend to harm its interests; Fink considers that conflict is one kind of psychological phenomenon which related with hostility; Torner defined conflict as an interaction which in order to forbid the opposite side to achieve its goal; and Wall and Callister regard conflict as a procedure, and during this procedure one side can perceive its interest be negatively influenced by the opposite side [8]. Through these definitions, we can assume that the conflict in organization is related with psychological status and behavior process. Meanwhile, scholars also stratified organization conflict into five levels, they are personal conflict, interpersonal conflict, intergroup conflict, inter-organizational conflict and international conflict [9], and the researches on organization conflict are largely focus on the first three levels and the rests are take cared by sociologist, politicians, histories or economists in other research directions.

3 CAUSES OF CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATION

By now, there are already ample explanations on causes of conflict in organizations, Robbins categories them as communication element, structure element and individual element [10], meanwhile Wall and Callister classify them as personal element and inter-personal element [8]. In addition, Wall and Callister also consider that the inter-personal element is composed by recognition, communication, behavior, structure and prior interaction.

3.1 Personal Features – Personality, Values, Personal Objectives

Personality refers to one individual's stabilized characteristics. With the members' personality differences within an organization getting enlarged, the universal languages and common recognitions in this organization would get decreased, meanwhile, the possibility of inter-person cooperation would also get smaller [11, 12].

People's behaviors are guided by their values, and the values are based on the recognitions of the past, the social-economical status, culture and so on. Because of no one have an exactly same living environment and history with the other, so the value conflicts are pervasively existed. Different with the pure economic conflict, the value conflict always is non-negotiable [13].

Every organization has its objectives or missions, as well as individual within these organizations, when the personal objective does not match with or even contrary with the organizational objectives or others' personal objectives, the conflict occurs [14]. In addition, the more intense the one's personal objective, the more important of personal objective for him/herself, the easier the conflicts occur [15].

3.2 Communication

Communication is one process which delivery information and the low level communication always create different kinds of difficulties to cooperation, even directly causes conflict [4]. There are several reasons which can lead to communication problems, first, the communicators are lacking of a real recognition or understanding about the information; second, the same information be understood in different ways by the sender and the receiver because of their different recognitions or backgrounds (both sides have a clear understanding of the information, but clearly understand it in clearly different way); third, the receiver and the sender do not trust each other; fourth, information distortion during the endless communication processes, this happens especially in bureaucratic organizations. Further, during the communication, the information sender's and receiver's words, face expressions, and the body languages all have the capacity to influence the result of this communication [16], especially under the circumstance of lacking of mutual trust. In addition, the communication between people who came from different cultures will be especially problematic.

3.3 Structure

On one hand, the structure builds a framework for organization; on the other hand, the structure of the

organization also establishes the interdependence relationship between different departments, individuals within this organization. Different department and different individual have different functions, priorities and also different recognitions, and of course conflict can be cultivated through these so many differences [8].

3.4 Benefit

One crucial job for an organization is to adjust the relationships between different kinds of benefit within it, such as individual benefit, group benefit, and department benefit and so on. The conflicts which have been caused by this reason are largely related with the economic issues, but also related with prestige or social status in sometimes either. The benefits' contradiction between different people or groups often became the fundamental reason for organization conflict. In the early days of the study of organization conflict, scholars always focus on the labor dispute issues, when one side of an organization felt or recognized its benefits are contradict with the others, or the opposite side's behavior harmed its benefits, or even one side believes the opposite side violated the basic principles of justice and equity, the conflict occurs [17, 18]. Benefits like some resources, always be scarce, and at the same time there doesn't exist an absolute standard for the allocating of the benefits within one organization, therefore the conflicts caused by the benefit are objectively exist and also inevitable.

4 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE QUESTIONS

Previous researches and scholars have provided huge amount of information and knowledge about organization conflict and they also demonstrated the beauties of this study field. Through the change of time, through the development of society, through the deepen of the recognition of organizations and also through the continuous works on the study of human beings, we can get different answers to the questions of what make the organization conflicts happen, what kind of consequence would the conflict bring to us, what's mechanism make the organization conflicts change and which direction will it go, etc. The interesting part is that both the internal and external environments of organization are and will keep changing in the foreseeable future, so it means the answers to these questions also will change and even the question itself will change too. According to the former studies, some additional questions will be provided as below, and hope they can arouse some future interests in this area.

First, scholars have already recognized the positive and negative effects of the organization conflicts,

and trying to distinguish constructive and destructive conflicts as well as acceptable and unacceptable conflicts. But whether an appropriate level of conflict exist or what is the appropriate level of it still need time and energies to find out.

Second, how does a conflict evolve after it occurred and what is the real reason for conflict escalation or de-escalation? Whether we can control a conflict's developing direction?

Third, can we establish a forecast system, and use it to identify potential elements in the organization's environment which will cause organization conflict, and making the conflict management more active and more future oriented?

Fourth, with the development of information technology which started from the second half of last century, the world environment became much more complex than any time before, meanwhile, the communication and even the form of organization also have changed tremendously, whether the existed theories can be applied to newly emerged organizations? Or whether the newly emerged organizations can provide us new theories? Moreover, human beings are no longer considered as pure "tools" any more, more and more organizations have recognized the values of its members as a human being, more and more organizations started to apply some management method which holds the idea of "People First", under this circumstance, in the field of organization conflict research, what will happen next?

Fifth, people's behaviors are greatly influenced by external environment, personal history, and cultural background and so on. We all know that oriental culture is different from the western one, but when we facing organization conflict which based on two different cultures, what should we do?

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