

Managing and Resolving Conflict in Project Environment

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Abstract

Conflict is a part of project life; therefore conflict is inevitable in any organizations, primarily due to the ever-increasing complexity of our modern society, the innate nature of human beings and the interaction of the two. As the complexity of society increasing the classical, tradition organization styles are becoming more relevant to today's business and government environments. Inherent in these never organization styles are the high incident of rapid change and in congruent by the nature of the project work. The project manager, the person with the key responsibility to make the project successful, has no choice but to deal with this high level of conflict. Project management is in fact management in a highly conflictive situation and in many ways can be considered almost synonymous with conflict management. The main objective of this paper is to examine the main causes of conflict in project environment, and suggest the best way of handling as well as solving them.

Key words

Conflict management, project environment, intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict, intragroup conflict

1. Introduction

Conflict is generally defined as “a clash between hostile or opposing elements or ideas” A Adams (1996). As applied to human behavior it is a disagreement between individuals, which can vary from a mild disagreement to a win/lose, emotion-packed confrontation. Conflict of interest among project

participants can often be resolved through negotiation, but first of all, one must analyze how and why conflict occurs. To understand conflict situation it is necessary to define the following, which are mostly courses of conflict. (Eschman and Lee 1977)

- Wants
- Needs
- Goals

Wants are a desire for something; everyone has a unique set of wants. Needs are necessary for survival, needs are more universal; Goals are an ideal set of affairs that basis of our wants and needs; interests are the potential benefit to be gained by achieving our goals.

A co-operative relationship exists among project participants when their goals are mutual and compatible with each other. However, when their goals are opposite, they are in a competitive relationship and their interest comes into conflict.

Conflict occurs when individuals or groups have incompatible goals, and when they block each other's efforts to attain those goals.

1.1 Views of Conflicts

There are three basic views of conflict in projects and organization. (Vijay K. Verma 1996)

- Traditional views
- Contemporary view or modern view
- Interactions view

1.2 The Traditional View

The traditional view sees conflict as being primarily negative. In this view conflict is caused by troublemakers, it is bad; and it should be avoided. The manager who views conflict in this way avoids admitting its existence, they normally keep it under cover and try to suppress it.

1.3 Contemporary View or Modern View

The contemporary view argues that conflict is natural and inevitable in all organizations and that it may have either a positive or negative effect. This approach advocates acceptance of conflict and rationalizes its existence. Since projects may sometimes benefit from conflict, project managers should focus on managing conflict effectively rather than simply suppressing it or eliminating it.

1.4 Interactionist-view

The Interactionist view is the current theoretical perspective on conflict and assumes that conflict is necessary to increase performance. While the modern view approach accepts conflict, the Interactionist

view encourages conflict on the basis that a harmonious, peaceful tranquil, too-cooperative project organizations is likely to become static, apathetic, stagnant and non-responsive to meet the challenges of change and innovation.

2. Four Levels of Conflict

Conflict can be viewed differently at different levels and should be analyzed from various perspectives, ranging from individuals to that of the group. Conflict can occur at the following four levels in a project.(Ritzer George 1977)

- Intrapersonal conflict.
- Interpersonal conflict.
- Intragroup conflict.
- Intergroup conflict.

2.1 Intrapersonal Conflict

This type of conflict is also known as role conflict, stems from unmet personal or professional expectations within the individual. The level of conflict may not affect the project, as long as it does not influence other project participants negatively. However, it can reduce the motivation and productivity of that particular individual.

2.2 Interpersonal Conflict

The type of conflict can occur between specific team members or between one person and the entire group. Interpersonal conflict is most often caused by difference in personality, communication skill, or competing personal ambitions.

2.3 Intragroup Conflict

This refers to a conflict between a single person and a group of people (such as his and her project team). Sometimes, this type of conflict between a project managers and project team members about achieving targets which are not reasonable to project team members.

2.4 Intergroup Conflict

These types of conflict normally arise between groups of people with in the project team or between the project team and groups outside the project. Intergroup conflict occurs when one team or group is pitted against another and are normally caused by the interpersonal friction between individual group members or between influential project leaders.

3. Reasons/ Sources of Conflict in Project Environment

Although conflicts occur in everyday life in all human relations, project environment are particularly vulnerable to generating conflict. The reasons for conflict in a project environment, whether –group-oriented or interpersonal are many. But for seek of identifying them and have effective solutions to them, here are few to be dealt with.

- Project goals not well defined.
- Administrative procedures
- Schedules
- Communication problems
- Resource allocation.

3.1 Project Goals

Not well defined: goals conflicts involve differences in project-priorities and criteria for evaluating results. Goals conflicts also refer to differing views on the necessary sequence of tasks or event. There may be considerable difference between the goals expectations and performance criteria perceived by project managers and function managers, leading to conflict

3.2 Administrative Procedures

They refer to difference regarding how the project will be managed. They include over reporting systems (e.g., recipients, frequency, number and contents of reports and forms) and how reports should be used in managing the projects.

3.3 Schedules

Disagreements concerning the timing, sequencing, and scheduling of project-related tasks, and since there is no single “best” way for any project to be scheduled, it is of little surprise that schedules are perceived as the most significant source of conflict.

3.4 Communication Problems

Break down in communication is the most common and obvious source of conflict. A lack of trust respect, and effective listening skills can develop into serious communication problems. People may misinterpret messages leading to conflict; managers and their project team members must possess effective communication skill in resolving conflicts completely.

3.5 Resource Allocation

Other project or groups in the organization may need to utilize the same people, equipment or facilities, causing conflicts, especially if resources are in short supply, such situation force top management to make tough priority decision and the “losing” party may feel unhappy and

disappointed and lose status and positional power in the eyes of others, conflicts over resource can be minimized by proper planning and monitoring, providing required training to both technical expert and project management staff, selecting support staff early and above all, by motivating project team members or participants to give up their best.

4. Five Main Conflict Resolution Modes

From the management perspective, there are five distinct methods of dealing with conflicts. The project manager must carefully select the appropriate mode for handling conflict within his or her organization so that an atmosphere conducive to constructive results is developed (Richard H. Clough 2000). The conflict resolution modes are as follows;

- Withdrawal
 - Smoothing
 - Forcing
 - Compromising
 - Collaborating | Confrontation | Problem solving
- } Temporary only fails to resolve conflict
- } Provides resolutions to conflict

4.1 Withdrawing

This can be (avoided, denial or retreat) involves giving up, pulling out or retreating. It also refers to deal with the conflict. It involves ignoring conflict as much as possible, this style is appropriate when a “cooling off” period is needed to gain better understanding of the conflict situation and also when the other party involved in the conflict is both unassertive and uncooperative withdrawal is a passive, stop gap way of handling conflict and its generally fail to solve the problem, therefore, this style should not be used if the conflict deals with an issue that is of immediate concern or is important to the successful completion of the project.

4.2 Smoothing

This is an appeasing approach; it involves emphasizing areas of agreement while avoiding points of disagreement. Smoothing is appropriate to keep how money and avoid outwardly conflictive situations. It works when the issues are more important than personal position and aspirations of the parties involved since smoothing tends to keep peace only in the short term; it fails to provide a permanent long-term solution to the underlying conflict.

4.3 Forcing (Using Power or Dominance Implies)

The use of position power to resolve the conflict. It involves imposing one viewpoint at the expense of another and is characterized by win-lose outcome in which one party overwhelms the other. Forcing is used when there is no common ground on which to bargain or negotiate, and when both Parties are uncooperative and strong-willed.

4.4 Compromising

This is primarily “bargaining” – receiving something in exchange for something else. It involves considering various issue, bargaining, using trade off negotiations and searching for solutions that bring some degree of satisfaction to both parties involved in the conflict.

4.5 Collaborating

This is an effective technique to manage conflict when a project situation is too important to be compromised. It involves incorporating multiple ideas and viewpoints from people with different perspectives. It offers a good opportunity to learn from others. Active collaboration by both parties in contributing to the resolution makes it easier to get their consensus and commitment.

4.6 Confronting/Problem Solving (Negotiating)

Implies a direct-confrontation where disagreement is addressed directly. Conflict is treated as a problem in this process and both parties are interested in finding a mutually acceptable solution.

5. Conclusion

The project manager is a conflict manager. In many organizations, the project manager uses much of his or her time dealing with one form of conflict or another as the project progresses through the inevitably problem-filled life cycle. The ability to handle conflicts requires an understanding of why conflicts occur, in some situations conflicts can be meaningful in that it results in beneficial outcomes. These meaningful conflicts should be allowed to continue as long as project constraints are not violated and beneficial results accrue. The choice of an appropriate style for resolving conflict depends upon factors such as the situation, relative important and intensity of conflict, and position of the players’ involved and relative emphasis on achieving goals versus maintaining relationship.

6. References

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