

Managing Inter-group Conflict

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Abstract— One of the most important aspects of organizational life concerns relations among groups within the organization. The symptoms of bad relations are often somewhat easy to recognize. A breakdown in the flow of work or lack of coordination between groups usually stands out. This study indicates that poor communication or a failure to exchange information adequately may be a symptom that accompanies lack of coordination. This study also points out that delays and mistakes often lead to tensions and negative feelings. If groups must rely on one another to get their work done, the symptoms are often more dramatic.

Index Terms— Inter-personal Conflict, Inter-group Conflict, Authoritarian Leadership, Collaborative Effort, Organizational Operations, Cycle of Frustration, and Negotiation.

1 INTRODUCTION

“Criticisms, bickering, snide remarks, and intentional ignoring of others are clear indicators of difficult relations, just as the opposites indicate satisfying ones” (Coffey et al., 1975). Conflict between groups is expressed in much the same way that inter-personal conflict is. When several groups feel frustrated because they are being kept from accomplishing their goals, inter-group conflict occurs. Some groups look for the source of frustration inside their group—their own skills, methods, equipment, and procedures. Other groups look for the source of their frustrations outside their group. When they think they have found the source of their frustrations in some other group, a downward spiral of conflict develops. In this study inter-group conflict has been examined. A seven-stage cycle of frustration leading to inter-group conflict has been discussed. Finally, the effects on groups of winning and losing in competition and five ways of reducing inter-group conflict have been offered.

2 A SEVEN STAGE CYCLE OF FRUSTRATION

Coffey et al. (1975), suggest that the seven stages seem to characterize the cycle of frustration:

1. Beginnings of doubt and distrust appear, and the climate between the groups deteriorates.
2. Perceptions of the outside group become distorted or stereotyped and polarized, with verbal comments dividing the “good” groups from the “bad” ones.
3. Cohesiveness and related feelings such as friendliness, attractiveness, closeness, and importance within each group increase.
4. Adherence to group norms and conformity also increase in each group.
5. Groups ready themselves for more authoritarian leadership and direction.
6. Hostile behaviors, reduced communicative contacts, and other signs of negative inter-group relations become apparent.
7. Complete separation is mutually desired, and any form of positive collaborative effort ceases.

What happens to the competing groups when a decision is made and one is the winner and the other is the loser? Schein (1969) says that the winning group retains its cohesiveness and may even increase in that area. It also experiences a let-down and becomes complacent and casual. Along with the loss of its fighting spirit, the winning group experiences higher intra-group cooperation and concern for its members with an accompanying decrease in concern for task accomplishment. The winning group tends to feel that its positive image and the negative stereotype of the other group have been confirmed (Schein, 1969).

Conversely, the losing group looks for an explanation for its loss in some external source such as the decision makers or dumb luck. When the group accepts its loss, it begins to splinter, internal fights break out, and unresolved internal conflicts surface. The losing group becomes more tensed, gets ready to work harder, and appears desperate to find something to blame for the loss. The losing group places a high concern on recouping its losses by working harder, with less concern for members needs. The losing group tends to learn something about itself because its positive image was upset by the loss, forcing a re-evaluation of the group’s perceptions. Once the loss has been accepted realistically, the losing group tends to become more cohesive and more effective (Schein, 1969).

3 REDUCING INTER-GROUP CONFLICT

Huse and Bowditch (1973) suggest five ways for minimizing conflict within the existing organizational framework:

1. Make certain that information for solving problems is discovered and held in common by the groups involved. Representatives of different groups might meet regularly to study problem areas and to develop joint recommendations.
2. Rotate people among different groups. Some groups are too specialized to use this method of reducing conflict, but some work areas are well suited for rotating members.

3. Bring groups into close contact with one another. Bring opposition groups together to clear the air and allow them to share perceptions.
4. Locate a common enemy. A competing company, the government, or some other group may allow the groups in conflict to join forces and cooperate to repel the invader. This may bring the groups into closer contact and dissipate conflict.
5. Identify or develop a common set of goals. This is the idea of locating a super-ordinate objective that both groups have in common.

4 CONCLUSION

Management of groups involves more than the consideration of individual personalities. Groups that have continuity develop cultures and thereby share similar feelings, beliefs, and values. It is rather obvious that when groups compete in organizational operations, differing perspectives produce conflict. It is less apparent that conflict itself is an organizational practice. Organizations differ on how they "do" conflict. Conflict may be carried out in active or passive ways. Denying conflict or pretending that it does not exist is a way of "doing" conflict. After conflict behaviors have been negotiated and become routine in groups, they operate at a lower level of the members' awareness. When groups confront each other, they must not only deal with the matter of conflicting goals and attitudes, but also with the conflict that result from the differing practices of conflict.

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