

## Conflict Management Styles and Communication Quality; Two Parallel Approaches to Dysfunctional Conflict

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**Abstract.** Most organizations undergo a number of changes in hope to have a better performance and efficiency. In new conditions and after change, one serious problem that may arise is dysfunctional conflict. In this field study, we focus on an Iranian Internet Service Provider (ISP) -Fanava company- which has recently experienced a change in its structure. As a result, the link between older departments was changed and new departments such as Sales and Marketing were added. However, in the new system employees were not well-informed about the changes in the organization, especially about their new job-descriptions. Hence, it led to high degree of job-interferences among staff which in turn caused a high level of dysfunctional conflicts in the workplace. In this study we focus on two approaches that would potentially involve in the creation of the conflicts. One approach is the individuals' conflict management styles and the other is communication quality in organization. The results show that among the five conflict management styles, the competing style has a positive effect on the rise of dysfunctional conflict. In addition it is found that the quality of company-wide communication has a negative effect on the rise of dysfunctional conflict. However the effect of other conflict management styles- avoiding, collaborating, compromising and cooperating- and the quality of communication within work-groups, does not have direct effect on dysfunctional conflict.

**Keywords:** Dysfunctional Conflict, Change, Communication Quality, Conflict Management Styles.

### 1. Introduction

Conflict is defined as the behaviors of interdependent parties in response to potential or actual obstructions that impede one or more of the parties achieving their goals (Gaski, 1984). This definition is purposely broad. It encompasses the wide range of conflicts that people experience in organizations- incompatibility of goals, differences over interpretations of facts, disagreements based on behavioral expectations, and things like these. In this survey, we search for some factors involving in the creation of dysfunctional conflicts. As the aftermath of recent organizational change in Fanava -an Iranian private company- two main factors were investigated. Based on our hypotheses communication quality and conflict management styles would contribute in creation of dysfunctional conflict which are tested and further discussed in the next sections.

### 2. Literature Review

The traditional view about conflict is the belief that all the conflicts are harmful and must be avoided. According to this view, conflict difficulties communications between individuals, breaks personal and professional relationships, and reduces effectiveness, because it produces tension and distracts team members from performing the task (Wall and Callister, 1995). However, the human relations view of conflict which dominated conflict theory from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s, considers conflict as a natural and inevitable outcome in any group (Robbins & Judge, 2009a). The third view, the inter-actionist view,

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takes a further step and beliefs that conflict is not only a positive force in a group but it is also an absolute necessity for a group to perform effectively. In their view, conflict can prevent stagnation, stimulate interest and curiosity and can serve as a medium through which problems can be aired and solutions derived (Deutsch, 1973). However, the inter-actionist view does not propose that all conflicts are good. there are conflicts that hinder group performance; these are dysfunctional, or destructive.

Recent studies suggest that interpersonal conflict has multiple dimensions (e.g., Reid et al, 2004). Here, we focus on one of these dimensions, dysfunctional conflict, to refer to any type of undesired distracting conflicts that exists within organizations and due to its negative effects should be reduced or eliminated.

## **2.1. Conflict Management**

Initially, researchers conceptualized approaches for conflict management as positions along a uni-dimensional continuum ranging from cooperation and competition (Deutsch, 1949). This uni-dimensional view of conflict management approaches evolved into a representation which arrayed conflict management styles along two dimensions, assertiveness and cooperativeness (Thomas, 1976). Using these two dimensions, Blake and Mouton (1964) were the first to present the conceptualization of the five conflict styles for managing interpersonal conflict, namely: problem-solving, smoothing, forcing, withdrawal and sharing based on the dual concern model. Using this idea Thomas (1992) with Kilmann identified the five styles of conflict management based on two dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness, as following:

- competing or confronting (assertive and uncooperative)
- accommodating (unassertive and cooperative)
- avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative)
- collaborating (assertive and cooperative)
- compromising (midrange on both assertiveness and cooperativeness)

By reviewing the literature on conflict management styles, we try to investigate its effects on dysfunctional conflict among the staff in our study. Thus, the first hypothesis is:

H1: The conflict management style of staff when facing conflicts leads to higher degree of dysfunctional conflict in the workplace.

## **2.2. Communication**

Communication is defined as the transfer and the understanding of meaning (Robbins and Judge, 2009b). In the field of organizational communication, probably the most widespread and well-known classification of communication consists of the functional, interpretive and critical perspectives (Putnam, 1983). In the functional perspective, which is our perspective of communication in this study, communication is viewed as a tangible substance that flows upward, downward, and laterally within the organization (Doolin, 2003). Content and meaning of messages play a secondary role, since meaning is assumed to reside in the message. The aim of research is often to uncover effective ways of communicating. In the interpretive perspective, a meaning-centered view of organizational communication is adopted. The aim is to generate insights and to seek understanding. In the critical perspective, the basic outlook is the same as in the interpretive perspective, but the aim of research is social change: to free individuals from sources of domination and repression.

In empirical studies by Anderson and Narus (1984, 1990) it was found that communication increases cooperation and moreover, it was shown that it decreases conflict by increasing trust. Graham R. Massey and Philip L. Dawes (2007), examined two dimensions of interpersonal conflict: dysfunctional conflict and functional conflict. Drawing on relevant theory, they included three communication variables – frequency, bi-directionality, and quality – as antecedents in their structural model.

In case of Fanava Company, the ambiguity caused by organizational change, not only covered the organization in employee level, but also it spread to the management level which in turn spread conflict among managers and the departments under their authorities. Therefore, it is likely that the lack of clear communication would be the second reason for dysfunctional conflicts. Therefore, our second hypotheses are:

H2.a The lack of communication quality within workgroups, leads to creation of dysfunctional conflicts.

H2.b The lack of communication quality across the organization and the resulting ambiguities leads to creation of dysfunctional conflicts.

### 3. Methodology

In order to examine each of the hypotheses we distributed two distinct questionnaires among 53 employees in all departments throughout the organization. Before filling out, employees were informed that questionnaires were also being distributed in other departments at the same time and further, there was no need to state their names. The first distributed questionnaire was the conflict management style questionnaire which comprises 15 statements with a five-choice answering-section for each statement with answers ranging from completely disagree to completely agree.

The second questionnaire was used to evaluate the quality of communication. It consists of seven questions which asks respondents quality of communication in two levels of workgroups and company as a whole (the collection of departments). It has seven questions with a five-choice answering-section.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Reliability

This study adopted Cronbach's alpha coefficient to measure whether the reliability of this study conform to Nunnally's (1978) suggested value of reliability. The value of Cronbach's alpha should be at least  $> 0.5$  and the most ideal value is more than 0.7. As table 1 shows the value of Cronbach's alpha for all the constructs is between 0.512 and 0.747. Questions that did not contribute to the accepted level of the 0.5 were deleted, leading to increase in the alpha coefficient in order to reach the acceptable level. Although all the reliability coefficients except for the compromising construct, is not higher than 0.7 but they conform to the accepted level, leading us to go further for other analysis of data.

Variables	M	SD	$\alpha$
Accommodating	11	2.021	0.671
Avoiding	9.83	2.455	0.512
Collaborating	11.56	1.504	0.598
Competing	9.67	2.311	0.531
Compromising	11.06	1.382	0.747
Company-Wide Communication	9.17	2.176	0.524
Workgroup Communication	11.17	1.493	0.631
Dysfunctional Conflict	2.72	0.895	0.612
N=53, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, $\alpha$ =Cronbach's alpha coefficient			

Table 1: Reliability analysis of constructs

### 4.2. Regression

By using multiple regression analysis, we tested the hypotheses. In the regression model the dependant variable is dysfunctional conflict interpreted by employees and the independent variables are the earlier mentioned conflict management styles and the quality of communication in two levels of company-wide and workgroups. Thus, the multiple regression model was estimated as follows:

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \beta_5 X_5 + \beta_6 X_6 + \beta_7 X_7$$

In this equation, y indicates the dependant variable dysfunctional conflict. X1 indicates accommodating, X2 collaborating, X3 competing, X4 avoiding, X5 compromising conflict management style and X6, X7 company-wide and workgroup levels of communication, respectively. Each  $\beta_i$  is the coefficient of  $X_i$  as dependent variables. The correlation matrix and results of regression analysis are shown in tables 2 and 3.

The results show that only the competing style among the five conflict management styles is a predictor of interpreted dysfunctional conflict ( $\beta_3 = 0.247$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The other four remaining conflict management styles did not include acceptable significance level. Therefore, H1 is partially supported. The results also

reveal that workgroup communication quality did not affect dysfunctional conflict, leading us to conclude that H2.a is rejected. However, company-wide communication quality has a significant negative effect on

	2	3	4	5	6	7
1- Workgroup Communication	0.071	-0.724	-0.690	-0.457	0.246	0.446
2- Collaborating		-0.057	-0.106	0.031	-0.258	0.074
3- Accommodating			0.052	0.149	-0.380	-0.600
4- Competing				0.379	-0.167	-0.296
5- Company-Wide Communication					-0.063	0.152
6- Avoiding						-0.284
7- Compromising						

Table 2: The Correlation Matrix of independent variables

Standardized $\beta$ coefficients	
Accommodating	0.317
Collaborating	0.004
Competing	0.247 <sup>**</sup>
Avoiding	-0.001
Compromising	-0.443
Company-Wide Communication	-0.700 <sup>*</sup>
Workgroup Communication	-0.495
$R^2$	0.726
Adjusted $R^2$	0.534
F-Test	3.787
Significance	0.029
Note: significance at: $p^* < 0.05$ , $p^{**} < 0.01$	

Table 3: The Regression Analysis results

Dysfunctional conflict ( $\beta_6 = -0.7, p < 0.05$ ). Hence we conclude that H2.b is supported. Therefore, among all the variables in the study, the competing conflict management style and company-wide communication quality are the two predictors of dysfunctional conflict within the company. The first one affects dysfunctional conflict positively while the second one affects it negatively.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, we worked on a case of a private company that has recently experienced a comprehensive change in order to be more efficient, to make better financial performance and to increase its competitive advantage. These changes were accompanied with some negative outcomes that among them, the ongoing dysfunctional conflicts among staff would be considered as one of the most salient ones. Based on the information that we provided from the company, we presumed two main factors to probably be involved in the rise of the dysfunctional conflicts. The first hypothesis assumes that conflict management styles of individuals, is related to the level of dysfunctional conflict in the workplace. However the results show that among five conflict management styles, only the competing style is a predictor of dysfunctional conflict. It was found that competing style has a positive effect on dysfunctional conflict. Therefore, by referring to the regression model, it is predictable that the higher employees adopt competing conflict management style at times of conflict, the higher it is likely to see an increase in the level of dysfunctional conflict among employees. The direct effect of other conflict management styles on dysfunctional conflict was not supported.

In the second hypothesis, based on the regression analysis, the company-wide communication quality had a strong negative effect on dysfunctional conflict. It declares that as the quality of communication

throughout the company increases, employees are more involved with ongoing issues, get informed about the contents of their jobs leading to less ambiguity and job interference among them, which in turn reduces dysfunctional conflict. Therefore H2.b was supported. However, H2.a was not supported. One possible reason is that people within their workgroups have high levels of interaction with their workgroup colleagues. Thus it is not far to assume that the level of intimacy and close relations among them is higher than that of employees from different workgroups. Therefore, any decrease in the quality of communication although being disruptive, cannot lead to increase in the same level of dysfunctional conflicts among members of the workgroup as it would to employees from other workgroups and departments.

It must be noted that the company under study, was a small sized company and the number of employees under study was small. Moreover, the company in our study had recently experienced a change in structure. Therefore, for future studies, we suggest scholars to consider these two factors of size and organizational change, if there is going to be any extension to the current study.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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