Don’t Blame Conflict for the Adverse Consequences: 
A Study in Conflict Management

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Abstract:  
Much research has been conducted in the field of conflict management and its impact on the negative and positive consequences but little research has taken place in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The main purpose of this paper was to know the impact of some variables on the positive and negative consequences of conflict in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Survey method was used and data was obtained from two public and two private sector universities through questionnaire. Results show that Integrating and obliging strategies increased the positive consequences while dominating and avoiding strategies were found to increase the negative consequences. Similarly, structural issues and limited resources were found to invite negative consequences of conflict in the HEIs of KP. Interpersonal conflict had also significant negative impact on the consequences. Hence, conflict itself is not harmful but other variables make it harmful and destructive. The findings of this research form a base for helpful recommendations for educational administrators in encouraging the practice of positive conflict management strategies and for employees who want to maintain the peaceful environment in their respective institutions.

Keywords: Conflict Management Strategies (CMS), Consequences of Conflict, Interpersonal conflict, Task Conflict

I. Introduction

Conflict is inevitable and considered to be a normal phenomenon. It exists in all human relations (Robbins, 1998) and in all kinds of organizations (Bercovitch, 1983). Educational institutions are also experiencing different kinds of conflict despite the recent
progress in the theory of conflict management (Din et al., 2011, Din, Khan and Bibi, 2012; Holton, 1995). If conflict is managed properly, it may become a positive experience (Bibi et al., 2012).

It is “sewn into the fabric” of educational institutions (Gmelch and Carrol, 1991) and these institutions are considered “a perfect breeding ground for conflict” (Alcover, 2009) that’s why educational administrators spend more than 40% of their time in dealing with conflict (Stanley & Algert, 2007).

During the past two decades the subject of conflict management has generated a lot of attention in the organizational literature. The traditional approach of conflict has transformed into behavioral approach. The first approach viewed conflict harmful while the behavioral approach viewed it something as a reality of organizational life. According to Robbins (1978), functional levels of conflict are helpful to higher decision quality and innovation. In the words of Thomas (1976, pp. 889), “social scientists are coming to realize--and to demonstrate--that conflict itself is no evil, but rather a phenomenon which can have constructive or destructive effects depending on its management.”

Conflict is supposed to be a key problem in educational institutions (Din et al., 2011) and different people have different images of conflict in their minds. Despite the diverse images of conflict, the management of conflict is necessary and difficult (Algert & Watson, 2002). In conflict management, we design those strategies which reduce the negative impact and at the same time it enhances the positive aspects of conflict (Rahim, 2002).

Some scholars are of the view that conflict is better to be managed than avoided (Algert & Watson, 2002). Conflict management in the HEIs is somewhat a difficult task because its structure and environment is also considered a complex one (Din, 2013; Din et al., 2011; Stanley, Watson & Algert, 2005). Due to this complexity, the conflict is more evident in HEIs, although other organizations either public or private are not free from this phenomenon. Educational institutions have many stakeholders like students, teachers and administrators and these stakeholders are in conflict with each other for the attainment of their particular goals. Universities are adopting different approaches to minimize the negative effects of conflict and enhance the positive one.

II. Related studies

A. Conflict Management Strategies

Each individual respond to conflict differently and this response to conflict have attracted much attention of conflict researchers. These are behaviour patterns which are exhibited by individuals when they face conflict (Cupach, Canary & Spitzberg, 2010). According to Ruble and Schneer (1994), Conflict management strategies are “viewed as relatively stable personal dispositions or individual differences”. It means that people have one predominant style when they deal with conflict, although different conflict situations require different strategy (Din, Khan & Bibi, 2012; Din et al., 2011). Rahim and Bonoma (1979) have classified conflict management strategies on two basic dimensions: i.e. concern for self and concern for others. These five different styles of managing conflict are Dominating, Integrating, Avoiding, Obliging and Compromising.
It is a fact that conflict may bring positive or negative consequences depending on the situation. If the impact of conflict is positive then it is called functional conflict and if the impact is negative then it is called negative conflict. Similarly Conflict management strategies also invite the negative or positive consequences. Some of these strategies may be dysfunctional while some may be functional.

Out of these strategies, some may bring positive results but these may not be liked by the majority of individuals depending on the nature of the strategy. Here the main concern of the researcher was to know about those strategies which are perceived by the faculty to increase positive or negative consequences in the departments. Hence the hypotheses are

H1. CMS explain the variation in positive consequences.
H2. CMS explain the variation in negative consequences.

B. Consequences

According to conflict theorist, conflict can be negative as well as positive depending on its use. Destructive conflict invites negative consequences and known as dysfunctional conflict while constructive conflict invites positive consequences and known as functional conflict (Thomas, 1983; Hocker & Wilmot, 1995; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004a). Dysfunctional conflict is supposed to enhance dissatisfaction and reduce the affective well-being of the employees & organizational efficacy (Rahim, 2010; Guerra et al., 2005). Some researchers have found relationship conflict as dysfunctional while task conflict as functional one (Amason, 1996; McShane & Von Glinow, 2008; Robbins, 2000; Rollinson, 2002).

We know that relationship, task and process conflict have different outcomes for the organization. Out of these three types, relationship conflict is considered to be more damaging than others. It enhances anxiety, distrust, anger, stress level, communication problem, dissatisfaction, fear and apprehension and decreases satisfaction, departmental commitment and group decision commitment (Baron, 1991; Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000; Guerra et al., 2005; Jehn, 1995; Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999). Relationship conflict also renders the work group dysfunctional. Keeping in view the different consequences of conflict types and conflict sources, we can hypothesize that

H3. Different types of conflicts have impact on the negative consequences.
H4. Different sources of conflict have different impact on the Negative Consequences.

III. Methodology

The population for this research included all general universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa working in public and private sector. At the time of data collection there were twenty four (24) universities working in public and private sector (HEC, 2010). Four universities were selected for data collection, two in public sector and two in private sector. Public sector universities were University of Peshawar and Gomal University while private sector universities included Sarhad University of Science and Technology and Qurtuba University. A self –designed questionnaire was distributed among the faculty of different departments. A sample of 142 teachers was obtained. After collection of data, the researcher coded it to facilitate quantitative analysis. All the analysis was done by using the SPSS 15 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences),
The 28-item questionnaire was developed with the help of conflict literature (Rahim, 1983; 2001; 2002) to measure the conflict management strategies and consequences of conflict.

The respondents were asked to respond to questions about CMS (15 items) on five point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree). CMS included items about Dominating (3 items), Integrating (3 items), Compromising (3 items), Obliging (3 items), and Avoiding (3 items). The combined Cronbach alpha of these five variables was 0.772 which is satisfactory.

There were thirteen items related to consequences of conflict. Consequences were further divided into positive and negative consequences. It was also developed on five point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Positive consequences included seven items and negative consequences included six items. The combined Cronbach alpha for these two variables was 0.725 which was also satisfactory. Construct validity was judged through inter-correlations among the variables i.e. CMS and consequences. All relations were positive and significant at 0.05 and 0.01 level. While sampling adequacy was judged through Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure. KMO value was 0.741 which was also acceptable.

IV. Analysis

H1. CMS explain the variation in positive consequences.

Table 1. Regression Analysis of Hypothesis 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>B Values</th>
<th>DV</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>F Stat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.491</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Compromising</td>
<td>.260</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dominating</td>
<td>.350</td>
<td>Consequences</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrating</td>
<td>.362*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.003</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Obliging</td>
<td>.427*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>-.444*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.010</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

The table 1 shows that the value of coefficient of determination (R²) is 0.491 which shows that 49.1 % variability in the positive consequences has been explained by CMS.

This table also shows the F-statistics and the beta values of independent variables. This table shows that obliging strategy explained 42.7% while integrating 36.2% variation in the positive consequences.

H2. CMS explain the variation in Negative consequences.
Table 2. Regression Analysis of Hypothesis 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>R²</th>
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<th>Beta Values</th>
<th>DV</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>F Statistics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
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<td>Negative Consequences</td>
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<td>.062</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Compromising</td>
<td>.324*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dominating</td>
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<td></td>
<td>.413</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrating</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td></td>
<td>.788</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Obliging</td>
<td>.371*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that 69.6% variability in the negative consequences has been explained by five conflict management strategies. It also shows that negative consequences have been significantly explained by avoiding strategy i.e. 37.1% and dominating strategy i.e. 32.4%.

H3. Different types of conflicts have impact on the negative consequences.

Table 3. Regression Analysis about Hypothesis 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>Beta Values</th>
<th>DV</th>
<th>Sig</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>.382*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Task Conflict</td>
<td>.466*</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpersonal Conflict</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td></td>
<td>.176</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Process Conflict</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Table 3 shows explained variance which is .591. We can say that 59.1% of the variability in the negative consequences can be explained by interpersonal conflict, task conflict and process conflict. Interpersonal conflict (46.6%) and task conflict (38.2%) have significant impact on the negative consequences.

H4. Different sources have different impact on the Negative Consequences.

Table 4. Regression Analysis about the Hypothesis 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
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<th>Beta Values</th>
<th>DV</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>.184*</td>
<td>Negative Consequences</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.040</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personality Factors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>.270</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Comm:</td>
<td>.490*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Structural Issues</td>
<td>.220*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Limited Resources</td>
<td></td>
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The table 4 shows explained variance which is .528. We see that the negative consequences are significantly explained 18.4% by personality factors, 49.0% by structural issues and 22.0% by limited resources.

V. Discussion

This research has found that integrating and obliging strategies have significant variation in positive consequences. According to Deutsch (1973), if all the participants are satisfied with the outcome of conflict, then it will bring productive consequences. Our results also show that Integrating strategy, in which all conflicting parties gain and satisfied, increased the positive consequences which are in line with Deutsch (1973) assertion. Similarly Deutsch (1973) has stressed that if the outcomes of conflict are satisfying for one party and dissatisfying for other party will invite negative consequences. This is the case of obliging strategy in which one party gains while the other party loses willingly. Our findings show that obliging strategy have a significant impact on the positive consequences which are in contrast to Deutsch (1973). De Dreu et al. (2004) and Friedman et al.(2000) have also found that obliging strategy amplify the negative effect of conflict.

According to this research, dominating and avoiding strategies brings significant variability in the negative consequences. These two strategies are responsible to turn the conflict into dysfunctional conflict. These findings are in line with previous studies like Din, Khan and Bibi(2012) and Alper et al. (2000)which have also proved that dominating and avoiding strategies increases the negative consequences. According to Johns (1996), the dominating strategy protects one’s interests, which breeds negative consequences and if the conflicting parties have equal powers then this strategy forces them towards a dead end. According to Din (2013), this strategy has negative repercussion for the future conflicts. The person who adopts this strategy is bound to face the same strategy from the other party which means that dominating strategy does not manage the conflict but push it in the future to settle the scores.

In dominating strategy, one tries to win his position through hook or crook and relies mainly on power. In some situations, this strategy may prove useful while on the whole this strategy is considered harmful and negative one (Manolescu & Deaconu, 2009). Similarly, due to its nature, this strategy is uncooperative, ineffective and inappropriate and fails to solve the main causes of conflict(Black & Mouton, 1964; Spitzberg, Canary &Cupach, 1994; Lee, 2008; Schermerhorn, 2002).

This research showed that avoiding strategy invited more negative consequences as compared to other consequences. It has proved to be more dangerous than dominating strategy. It has the highest variability in the negative consequences i.e. 37.1%. In this strategy, the root causes of conflict are ignored and not addressed because the conflict is avoided completely due to which the situation does not change for conflicting parties. This research shows that avoiding strategy creates more stressful situation for the conflicting parties in the HEIs. Our findings have also been substantiated by previous researches Din (2013), Din, Khan &Bibi (2012) and Din et al. (2011). Avoiding strategy pushes the conflict in a latent state which becomes a lurking threat for both sides and the conditions which are responsible for generating conflict are ignored completely (Manolescu & Deaconu, 2009).
Avoiding strategy is also responsible in increasing the negative consequences because in this strategy no party achieves its objectives or desires. Although conflict appears to be settled but actually it disappears for the time being and may resurface in the future. According to Schermerhorn (2002), it is the extreme form of ignorance and non-attention. Sometimes when the matter is important, then avoiding style does not work because it can produce harmful effects for the party.

The research conducted by De Dreu et al. (2004) has also proved that avoiding strategy invites negative consequences. In their words, “avoiding and yielding amplify the negative effects of conflict on individual health, well-being, and job satisfaction” (p. 15). Friedman et al. (2000) has also found the negative relationship between avoidance and effective problem-solving.

The findings of this research also shows that interpersonal conflict has significant impact on the negative consequences which is in line with the previous studies like Fox, Spector and Miles (2001), Frone (2000), Penney and Spector (2005), Spector and Jex (1998), Janssen, Van de Vliert and Veenstra (1999), Jehn (1995), Amason (1996), Janssen et al. (1999) and Jehn (1997).

Some researchers have found that task conflict is a functional conflict and leads to positive consequences so it should be encouraged while interpersonal conflict should be discouraged (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt, Kahlajy, and Bourgeois, 1997; Jehn, 1994; Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin, 1999; Simons and Peterson, 2000), while this research found that task conflict also leads to negative consequences. Hence this research finding is different from earlier findings of the researchers, which leads to the conclusion that faculty in the HEIs of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa considers that both types of conflicts lead to negative consequences.

This research has also proved that negative consequences were significantly explained by structural issues, limited resources and personality factors. These findings are in line with Din (2013) who also found that these three sources of conflict are responsible for the negative consequences. Structural issues in the Higher Education Institutions appeared to highly significant in increasing the negative consequences. It is evident from the above findings that educational administrators must resolve all the structural issues if they want to reduce the negative consequences of conflicts.

Structural issues increase the frustration of employee which leads to negative consequences (Galtung, 1964). In universities, there are ambiguous lines of authority, roles and communication. Holton (1998) has also identified that structural issues and scarce resources are the major sources of conflict in university context.

VI. Implications

The understanding of conflict and its different management strategies are necessary for efficient management of educational institutions. Based on findings of this research, educational administrators will focus on those strategies which are beneficial and invites the positive consequences and at the same time will avoid the dangerous strategies. This will make them better managers of conflict. Instead of eradicating the conflict completely, knowing about the suitable and beneficial conflict management strategy can enhance the success of employees and organizations. Higher Education
Commission of Pakistan should consider the introduction of training programs in conflict management for educational administrators in order to create a peaceful environment in HEIs.

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations
From the above discussion, it is clear that conflict itself is not good or bad. The management of conflict and different conflict sources are responsible for the positive and negative consequences. Hence, conflict should be treated prudently in order to turn it into beneficial phenomena for both individual and organization.

Data for this research was obtained from the educational institutions of Pakistan, future researcher should take data from different countries in order to make it more representative of different cultures. The findings will then be more representative, generalizable and comparable. In this research, the researcher used cross sectional method. The future researcher is advised to adopt longitudinal design in order to get an accurate measurement of the variables.

References


