

## Organizational Conflict Management

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### Summary

Conflict has arisen with the existence of humanity and has always existed. There are conflicts in the triangle of work, family and environment for various reasons. It is of great importance to accept and manage conflict, which is an inevitable phenomenon, to reduce its negative effects and to increase its positive effects. While the traditional management approach deals with the negative aspects of the conflict; The modern management approach focuses on increasing the positive effects of conflict and using conflict as a driver for renewal and development, especially for organizations. Therefore, it is necessary to successfully manage conflicts that may threaten the existence of organizations. Proper management of conflict in organizations provides a strategic advantage that can increase both individual and collective success.

### Introduction

When it comes to conflict, the first thing that comes to mind is the mutual parties such as individuals, groups, group members, organizations, organization members, societies, and situations where these parties cannot agree and reconcile on certain issues. Conflict can be mentioned in any environment and time where there is more than one idea. It is for this reason that conflict cannot be prevented, in some cases it is unpredictable and inevitable. Conflict arises for many different reasons, both internal and external (Demirtaş, 2019; Rahim, 2001). The managerial approach to the issue of conflict has changed in parallel with the developments in management science. In parallel with these developments, the changing managerial perception also brings the issue of conflict management to the fore

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and emphasizes the importance of the subject (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 2011; Thomas, 1992). Modern management approaches, which consider conflict as a constructive force, support the innovation processes of organizations and contribute to sustainability (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2007; Folger, Poole & Stutman, 2017).

There are different types of conflict, as well as its application in different forms of management. Given the perceptual nature of conflict, it is inevitable that there will be different forms of management of conflict and that entirely new methods will emerge (Pondy, 1967; Wall & Callister, 1995). The aim of this study is to outline the issue of conflict management. In this context, the definition and scope of the concept of conflict, the effects and management of the conflict are explained, and the types of conflict management are discussed. Nowadays, the issue of organizational conflict management has been examined in detail due to the fact that it threatens the existence of organizations.

### **1. Definition and Scope of the Concept of Conflict**

Conflict and disharmony can be between two people or groups, as well as between individuals/groups or organizations within the organization or even between states. Nowadays, the concept of conflict is one of the main issues examined by social sciences. It is difficult to come up with a common definition of the concept of 'conflict' as it is addressed by different disciplines (Folger, Poole & Stutman, 2017; Thomas, 1992). Conflict can be treated as a process in which different perspectives collide. This concept, which can be defined in different ways according to various perspectives, can be seen as a relational situation in which the expectations of the interacting people are not met in the simplest sense. This definition also reveals the main features of the concept of conflict (Lewicki, Saunders, & Barry, 2015; Jehn, 1995). The conflict develops as a result of the relationship established between the two parties. It occurs when expectations are not met or there are too many expectations. This process is a process of interaction, and in interaction, the behavior of the individual mutually affects each other (Pondy, 1967; Eren, 2020).

Conflict can occur in different types based on various reasons. These types offer important clues in understanding the nature of the conflict and the reactions of the parties. Conflict can occur in different types based on various reasons. The types of conflicts according to the reasons for their occurrence are as follows (Thomas, 1976; Wall & Callister, 1995):

- ✓ **Potential Conflict:** Conflicts that have not yet been revealed, but are likely to occur under certain conditions. Potential conflict is a

situation in which a conflict environment does not arise but there is a possibility of a conflict in the future. Such conflicts are latent tensions that, as a result of the accumulation of differences, can turn into a major conflict in the future.

- ✓ **Perceived Conflict:** These are situations where the parties are not yet fully aware of the existence of the conflict, but some signs of the conflict are observed. Perceived conflict is the process by which parties recognize each other's differences but have not yet escalated into an open conflict. At this stage, the parties may feel that something is wrong, but they do not fully perceive the seriousness of the conflict.
- ✓ **Felt Conflict:** It is a situation in which the conflict becomes more pronounced and the parties have negative feelings towards each other, and the tension increases. Felt conflict is the stage where the parties have negative feelings towards each other and have difficulty finding a solution. In this type of conflict, tension between the parties has intensified and begun to be clearly felt.
- ✓ **Overt Conflict:** These are the situations where the conflict is fully exposed and there are mutual accusations, insults and direct bickering between the parties. Obvious conflicts are the stage where the parties use expressions that are directly opposed to each other and the conflict becomes evident in all its dimensions. At this point, the conflict has clearly surfaced, and there are distinctly verbal clashes between the parties.

When examined in general, we can classify the causes of conflict under three headings as personal, communication-related and organizational. Personal reasons arise from different personality traits, role and status differences, differences in goals and objectives, while communication-related reasons arise from different perception styles, communication difficulties, insufficient information exchange, non-listening and misunderstandings. Organizational reasons, on the other hand, occur as a result of structural and functional differences within the organization, purpose incompatibilities, resource scarcity, uncertainties, differences of opinion between managers, organizational change processes, division of labor and functional dependencies (Şimşek and Çelik, 2018: 222-223). This situation is possible in the nature of the conflict and in the process of its development.

## 2. Effects and Management of Conflict

The effects and management of conflict play an important role in organizations and social settings. Conflicts can have both positive and

negative consequences. For this reason, conflict management stands out as a critical skill for organizations to maintain their healthy functioning (Rahim, 2001; Thomas, 2006). Conflict is the difference of opinion between two or more people and groups that arise for various reasons. Organizational conflict, on the other hand, refers to conflicts between two or more individuals or groups within an organization in which there are differences in purpose, perception, status, and other differences (Jehn, 1995; Pondy, 1967). Conflict involves behaviors that prevent parties from achieving each other's goals and objectives, and is a two-dimensional process that can have both positive and negative consequences (Eisenhardt, 1999; Lewicki, Saunders & Barry, 2015).

In the positive effects of conflict, creative solutions to problems can be found by encouraging innovative thinking and revealing different perspectives. Well-managed conflicts can generate stronger collaborations and understandings between individuals and groups (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Tjosvold, 2008). Conflict can create opportunities for organizational change and development because it encourages thinking differently from the status quo and challenging old ways (Anderson & West, 1998; Amason, 1996). Openly discussing differences can help to find healthier ways of communicating and strengthen long-term collaborations (Tjosvold, 2008). In the negative effects of the conflict; It can reduce employee motivation and productivity, which can create unrest among groups (Robinson & Judge, 2017; Wall & Callister, 1995). Open clashes can create tension between the parties and disrupt group dynamics, reducing the efficiency of the team. It can cause communication gaps. In the long run, conflict can weaken organizational structures, damage work relationships, and lead to employee departure (Jehn, 1995; Thomas, 1992).

The concept of conflict, which is encountered in every field these days, is as old as human history. The concept of conflict, which has been defined in a wide variety of ways in the literature, has been used in the process from a negative meaning to a positive meaning as the driving force of the change and progress of organizations. While conflict initially had a mostly negative meaning, it has been evaluated as a factor that plays an important role in the development and change processes of organizations over time and triggers progress. Successfully managing conflict is a strategy developed to achieve balance in complex relationships.

Conflicts are inevitable in every field and in every relationship. However, conflict management, when handled with the right strategies, contributes to the development of organizations and individuals. Instead of seeing conflict

as just a negative situation, it is possible to create a healthier and more productive environment by managing it. This is one of the most important benefits of effective conflict management.

Conflict management is the intervention made to direct the disputes in the direction of a specific goal and to reach a positive conclusion of the process (Rahim, 2001; Thomas & Kilmann, 2002). These interventions may be aimed at ending the conflict or influencing the process. The purpose of conflict management; The main goal of conflict management is to bring the conflict to a peaceful end and achieve reconciliation between the parties (Thomas & Kilmann, 2002; Rahim, 2002).

Conflicts, when properly managed, can spur innovation and accelerate organizational change, but when poorly managed, they can lead to demoralization and inefficiency (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Pondy, 1967). The effects of conflict can have both positive and negative consequences, depending on the way it is managed; That's why effective conflict management is so important. Limiting the negative effects of conflicts and increasing their positive effects is key to the success of conflict management. In the process of life, many small and large conflicts are encountered. Avoiding these encounters can make the conflict more likely to be. Therefore, avoiding conflict is a futile effort. It is usual for conflict to exist wherever there are individuals, unfortunately it is stable that it does not exist. By approaching it from a harmonious and proactive perspective, we can avoid these complex conflict situations and bring dynamism to organizations.

Conflict management is thought to be a planned process (Rahim, 2001; Thomas, 1992). It is necessary to conclude the conflict by understanding it well, defining it, acting and conducting it with an impartial eye. Key strategies used in conflict management include compromise, cooperation, conflict avoidance, dominance, and compromise. In order to manage the conflict effectively, it is necessary to first get to the root of the problem and clearly articulate the concerns of the parties. The decisions to be taken by managers in conflict management play an important role in determining the culture of the organization and improving the relations of the employees. Conflict management is a process of finding a fair solution by taking into account the rights and interests of all parties. In this process, strategies for resolving the conflict can be implemented. In resolving conflicts, it is important to establish a healthy dialogue between the parties and to find a common solution (Lewicki, Saunders & Barry, 2015; Rahim, 2002). The conflict resolution process allows parties to discuss disputes constructively and reach a common solution (Folger, Poole & Stutman, 2017). Especially

if there is a lack of trust between the parties, external interventions such as mediation can also be an effective solution in conflict management.

The issues that need to be addressed regarding the management of conflict in an organization can be stated as follows:

- ❖ Anticipating conflicts and managing them with appropriate strategies is critical to the long-term success of organizations.
- ❖ Developing conflict management skills can help leaders and managers make more effective decisions.
- ❖ Managing conflicts in a timely and effective manner can improve both the efficiency of the organization and employee satisfaction.
- ❖ Conflict can turn into an opportunity when managed correctly, because every conflict can be the beginning of a process of healing and development.

### 3. Types of Conflict Management

Widely preferred conflict management techniques include different solution-oriented approaches. It is possible to evaluate these techniques as follows (Thomas & Kilmann, 2002; Rahim, 2002; Tjosvold, 2008): Figure 1 illustrates the types of conflict management.

*Shape 1: Types of Conflict Management*



#### 3.1. Competitive Conflict Management

This approach aims at the gain of a single party to resolve the conflict and aims to neutralize the other side. Competitive conflict management is preferred in situations that require quick and strong decisions. One side seeks to defeat the other in order to maximize its own interests. It is effective

when urgent and important decisions need to be made or when the balance of power is clear. However, it can have negative consequences in long-term relationships.

### **3.2. Collaborative Conflict Management**

This technique aims to find a common solution, taking into account the interests and needs of each of the parties causing the conflict. Cooperation is a solution process based on mutual agreement. The parties respect each other's interests and try to produce mutual win-win solutions. It is ideal for strengthening long-term relationships, creating sustainable solutions and building trust between parties.

### **3.3. Avoidant Conflict Management**

In the avoidant approach, the parties prefer to avoid the conflict and choose to postpone or ignore the problem. This solution is an approach to ignoring the conflict rather than resolving it. It can be used in situations where the conflict is temporarily insignificant or too complex to resolve. It can also be preferable when the conflict should not lead to a bigger problem.

### **3.4. Conciliatory Conflict Management**

Reconciliation is an approach in which both parties aim to find a middle ground by waiving some of their demands. The parties make certain concessions of their own accord, but each side obtains part of its own interests. It is used in situations where the conflict needs to be resolved quickly and when both parties need to find an acceptable solution.

### **3.5. Adaptive Conflict Management**

In this approach, one party agrees to meet the needs of the other party while ignoring its own interests. The stronger side usually adapts and accommodates the other side's demands. In cases where the balance of power is unequal, one of the parties can resolve the conflict by complying with the wishes of the other. It can also be used in situations where relationships need to be maintained.

## **4. Conflict Management in Organizations**

The emergence of conflict in environments where there are interacting people is the inevitable result (Deutsch, 1973). In other words, conflict, which is a natural output of social interaction, is also a reality of organizational life (Robinson & Judge, 2017). The acceptance of this reality

has led organizations to live with conflict and to try to make the conflict work in favor of the organization (Thomas, 1992). Conflict, which was always handled with its negative side in the past, has started to be considered as an effective tool to increase the effectiveness, efficiency and continuity of organizations with the acceptance of its reality. In this context, whether the conflict will be effective or not is related to its success in management (Rahim, 2002). However, in practice, instead of facing the reality of conflict and using it in favor of the organization, it is possible to suppress conflict problems or to solve them with authoritarian methods (Tjosvold, 2008).

Conflict resolution and conflict management are different issues (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Conflict management involves developing effective strategies at the macro level to minimize dysfunctional conflict and creating a certain level of conflict in order to improve learning and organizational effectiveness (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). Looking at the historical development process, conflict management for organizations; It consists of a process that leads to the acceptance of conflict as a preventable situation, the perception of conflict as an inevitable fact of the organization, and the perception of it as a situation in which positive results are obtained for the organization. (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

Conflict in organizations can have beneficial and harmful consequences depending on whether it is functional or not (Rahim, 2002). When we look at the harmful consequences of the conflict; Uncontrolled opposition in organizations creates discontent, damages common bonds, delays communication, reduces group effectiveness, and creates damages leading to the disintegration of the group (Jehn, 1995). Intra-organizational conflict, on the other hand, increases the stress of employees, creates a closed climate, and reduces coordination and morale (Amason, 1996). The benefits of conflict are; It enables the emergence of new ideas within the organization, encourages creativity by increasing the quality of decisions, increases curiosity and interest among employees by revealing innovations, and enables the re-evaluation of activities (Edwards, 1992). Ultimately, conflict with its negative and positive aspects must be kept at a certain level in organizations (Thomas & Kilmann, 2002). Levels above and below this level, where conflict becomes functional, threaten the continuity of organizations (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008).

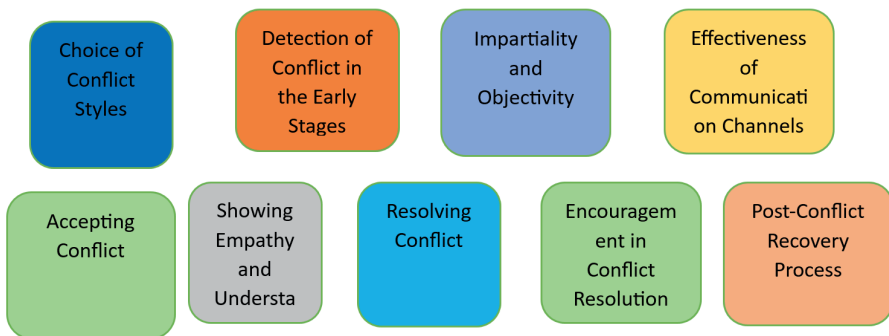
Recently, there has been a differentiation in the approach to intra-organizational conflicts in terms of management (Tjosvold, 2008). The issue of conflict is treated in a negative way according to the classical management approach (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Accordingly, conflict is a situation that



prevents organizations from functioning effectively and harmoniously. The reason for the occurrence of conflicts within the organization is the incorrect application of management principles. The modern management approach, on the other hand, considers intra-organizational conflicts as inevitable and desirable for their positive effects (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). According to this approach, conflicts are the driving factors that ensure the continuity of organizations. The acceleration of globalization, the competition and interdependence relationship it brings with it, make conflict inevitable (Robinson & Judge, 2017). At this point, the management of the conflict comes to the fore as an important issue. The need for managers who have the qualifications to successfully manage conflicts is an indisputable fact (Tjosvold, 2008).

#### 4.1. The Role of Leadership in Conflict Management

The role of leadership in conflict management is critical and multifaceted. Leaders not only act as managers in managing conflicts, but they also play an important role in resolving conflicts constructively, improving relationships within the organization, and achieving organizational goals. Since conflict management is a factor that can affect the performance of organizations, the approaches of leaders in this process can directly affect the results. Therefore, the role of leadership in conflict management is important. It is possible to specify the steps that leaders should follow in the conflict process as follows (Renko Tarabishy, Carsrud & Brännback, 2015; Uğur and Deadlock, 2020). Figure 2 illustrates the processes that leaders should follow in conflict management.



*Shape 2: Processes to be followed by leaders in conflict management*

1. **Accepting Conflict:** Leaders recognize that conflict is an inevitable situation in organizations. Conflict management is not the elimination of conflicts, but managing them effectively and developing solutions. Rather than exacerbating conflict, leaders develop strategies to recognize and solve problems.
2. **Detection of Conflict in the Early Stages:** An effective leader is able to observe the emergence phase of the conflict and intervene in the early period. Preventing conflict before it escalates ensures that a solution is reached faster and healthier. This is directly related to the leader's emotional intelligence and observation ability.
3. **Impartiality and Objectivity:** It is very important for leaders to approach conflicts from an impartial and objective point of view. During the conflict, they should put aside personal interests and emotional reactions, observe the rights of all parties equally and seek solutions.
4. **Effectiveness of Communication Channels:** Leaders play an important role in ensuring open communication. Conflicts are often caused by communication deficiencies or misunderstandings. The leader opens the right channels of communication between the parties in conflict, allowing ideas and feelings to be expressed in a healthy way.
5. **Selection of Conflict Styles:** Leaders provide guidance in choosing appropriate conflict resolution styles for conflict management. For example, in some cases it may be necessary to find solutions by collaborating, while in other cases it may be more appropriate to adapt to the demands of one party. According to the analysis of the situation, the right strategy should be determined.
6. **Showing Empathy and Understanding:** The leader's ability to empathize is invaluable in terms of resolving the conflict constructively. Empathy allows the leader to understand the feelings and perspectives of each individual involved in the conflict. This understanding can build trust between the parties in the settlement process and produce positive results.
7. **Conflict Resolve:** The leader designs the strategies to be applied in conflict management. These strategies may differ depending on the type of conflict. For example, a cooperative conflict situation may require cooperative strategies, while a more dominant leadership style may be required in a competitive situation.

8. **Promotion in Conflict Resolution: Leaders** emphasize that conflict is not only a problem, but also an opportunity for innovation, development, and change. Conflicts, if managed correctly, can contribute to the production of creative solutions in organizations, increase trust among employees and increase overall productivity.
9. **Post-Conflict Recovery Process:** After the conflict is resolved, leaders should evaluate the consequences of the resolution and take the necessary measures to avoid similar situations in the future. In addition, the lessons learned during the conflict process can be integrated into the organizational culture and a healthier work environment can be created.

## Conclusion

Conflict management is a process that should be applied in every environment where people are present. So much so that even states use conflict management methods in their diplomatic relations. As with any form of management, conflict management is a phenomenon that consists of a certain process. In general, conflict resolution and conflict management are two issues that are confused. Although resolving conflict is perceived as managing conflict, resolving it is a stage of management. Managing conflict consists of the sum of certain processes.

The issue of conflict, which can also be seen in individuals, groups and organizations, is a subject that is handled scientifically according to the modern management approach today. Because it is an element that threatens the existence of organizations, the management of conflict is important. So much so that conflict management is one of the most important issues in both private sector enterprises and public administration. Although public administration organizations are hierarchical, bureaucratic and legislative, there may still be conflict situations. For this reason, there is a need for leader, qualified and meritorious managers who have management skills and the capacity to manage conflict in both the private and public sectors.

Resolving conflict situations, achieving success and resulting in positive effects are directly related to the qualifications of managers. When we look at the executive profiles in private and public organizations in our country, the number of successful managers in conflict management with leadership skills is very low. While the probability of encountering successful managers is higher considering the flexibility of preference in the private sector, it is less likely to encounter such successful managers considering the hierarchical, bureaucratic and nepotistic characteristics of public sector organizations.

The role of leaders in conflict management is not limited to the ability to solve problems; It also includes the ability to turn conflict into opportunity and create organizational learning. An effective leader allows the conflict to become functional and contributes to the healthy progress of the organization.

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