



Volume XXII 2019

ISSUE no.1

MBNA Publishing House Constanta 2019



Scientific Bulletin of Naval Academy

SBNA PAPER • **OPEN ACCESS**

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To cite this article: [I. S. Gheorghe](#), Scientific Bulletin of Naval Academy, Vol. XXII 2019, pg. 216-219.

Available online at www.anmb.ro

ISSN: 2392-8956; ISSN-L: 1454-864X

doi: 10.21279/1454-864X-19-I1-031

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Conflict Management and Resolution on board the Ship

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Abstract. Research in the recent past has led to the idea that „positive conflict” should be encouraged, in order to solve inter-personal issues in the workplace, as well as create a positive, performance-oriented atmosphere on board. Unlike problem solving in a shore office, for instance, conflict management and resolution on board a ship should also focus on strengthening the professional and personal relationship between the parties involved, so as not to become detrimental to day-to-day operations of the ship. The multicultural aspect should also be kept in mind, as conflict may also be interpreted in a cultural context.

Key-words: Communication, Conflict Management, Positive Conflict.

1. Introduction

Contemporary studies place conflict management and resolution in a paradigm shift from the archaic interpretation of competition, to a more acceptable, oftentimes even desirable step on the way to progress. This shift has its roots in the geopolitical transformations following the First and the Second World War, as the ending of these wars marks an introspection, as well as a move from international to internal conflicts.

In order to understand the issues surrounding conflict management, it is important to discuss the particularities of power, as an agent of change. The use of “hard” or “soft” power tends to offset the balance of conflict resolution, leading to a win-lose type of situation. However, in order to reach collaboration, which is the optimal conflict resolution technique in most cases, it is important to allow and even actively encourage positive conflict. Due to the professional power structure on board the ship, subordinates sometimes feel unappreciated, or even ignored in major decisions, which can lead to frustration and a stressful working environment. It is essential to create a safe and secure working environment, in which the seafarers feel inclined to collaborate, as it creates a beneficial system for all parties involved.

2. Conflict management on board the ship

The aim of conflict management is to improve learning and group outcomes, including organizational efficiency or performance. Unresolved conflict leads to an unsafe work environment, a bad turnover rate, loss of employees and company knowledge, as well as lack of knowledge from new personnel. Conflict embodies a fundamental and unavoidable aspect of progress. It is a demonstration of the variety of interests, morals, and principles that arise in the face of inherent limitations, as new formations generated by social change. However, the way in which people choose to manage conflict is simply a matter of habit and choice, a fact which may be exercised, by changing “habitual responses and [exercising] intelligent choices”. [1]

Recent research marks a clear paradigm shift from the obsolete interpretation of conflict as a negative, undesirable, nonessential subject of change, to a positive, wanted, even necessary, step towards progress. In order to understand the issues surrounding conflict management, it is important to discuss the particularities of power, as an agent of change. Ramsbotham et al. allow for the reading of two different types of power – coercive or ‘hard’ power, which is “the power to command, order, enforce” [1] and persuasive or ‘soft power’, which is “the power to induce co-operation, to legitimise, to inspire” [1] This dichotomy of “hard” versus “soft” power is also apparent on board the ship, as there is a clear hierarchy in the chain of command. Sometimes, this hierarchy gives rise to conflicts, especially in situations when superiors abuse their position by appealing to “hard” power.

As such, conflict in the workplace arises when one party, either an individual or a group, perceives their purposes, principles or ideas being “thwarted by an interdependent counterpart” [2] It is important to note that this hindrance is sometimes only apparent due to the differences in cultures, especially in multicultural crews, as is the case with most ships in international waters.

Most of the conflicts in the workplace, according to De Dreu, are concerned with “scarce resources, such as time, responsibilities, status or budgets, they may be about values, such as political preferences, religious convictions, and deep-seated morality, they may be about insights, facts, and the way we understand the world” [2] Due to the composition of the crews, and the many different sets of beliefs, both religious and civil, any number of the above-mentioned ideas, as well as any combination of ideas, may be a source of conflict.

In addition, De Dreu mentions another type of conflict which may be easily attributed to a workplace – “conflicts that are about the way the team is doing its job, about the pros and cons of certain task-approaches” [2] In this case, the chain of command plays an important role, again, as job tactics are usually supplied by superiors, with little to no regard to their subordinates. This is not to say that officers and ratings should disregard their commanding officers’ expertise, however, they should feel inclined to participate in a discussion and provide their input, to the best of their knowledge.

Finally, De Dreu indicates another cause of conflict – “conflicts that are about people, their values, humor [...]” [2] What makes these types of conflict more difficult to manage is the proximity to the parties involved. For instance, if a person working an office job has a problem with his/her superior, they may take some time away from that person in order to search for a resolution, or distance themselves physically from the issue. However, that is not possible in the case of a seafarer, as they are always in close proximity to their colleagues, for extended lengths of time. Their lifestyle on board adds to their mood, creating a stressful environment.

In this way, most conflicts pertain to two major classes – personal or professional: “There is an apparent distinction between task and relationship in these typologies similar to other organizational theories that distinguish between task and interpersonal dimensions of organizational life.” [3] As such, it is always important to consider which type of arguments should be used, as well as establish which approach works best with each of the two types of conflict. In addition, it should also be mentioned that not all conflicts may be easily classified as either personal or professional, and that both of these types of conflict incur negative responses.

Nevertheless, recent research focuses on “positive conflict”, which is associated with “learning, [...] higher levels of creativity and innovation, [...] improved quality of group decision-making, and [...] increased overall team effectiveness” [2] As such, positive conflict should be encouraged, in order to increase productivity and create a team spirit. The idea of stimulating positive conflict is becoming more appealing to management, as positive conflict “challenges traditional assumptions that effective designs minimize conflict and transaction costs, a rigid authority hierarchy is needed to maintain order, and effective leaders decisively end disputes.” [4]

De Dreu even goes as far as to propose a set of sine qua non conditions for determining whether or not a conflict has a positive function: “Conflicts should be task-related; [...] should not (also) involve issues related to personality, identity, religious values, humor, or political ideologies; [...] should be of moderate intensity; [...] Most team members should prefer, a priori, suboptimal instead of optimal decision alternatives. [...] Team climate should be high on psychological safety and within-group

trust; [...] Given (1–5), positive effects may emerge on, and are limited to innovation and decision quality.” [2] In this way, for a conflict to be deemed positive, it should not prejudice the character, individuality or principles of those around, and it should be carried out in a safe working environment. Without these conditions, the conflict might become personal, and such types of conflict are usually not productive, especially on board a ship with limited personnel.

3. Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution represents the segment regarding the choice of a conflict management style, as well as its applicability to the situation at hand. Following the distinctions made in the first part of the present article, regarding the difference between “hard” power and “soft” power, Ramsbotham goes on to differentiate between two patterns of soft power – “exchange power”, associated with bargaining and the compromising approach (‘do what I want and I will do what you want’), and ‘integrative power’ associated with persuasion and transformative long-term problem-solving (‘together we can do something that is better for both of us’).” [1] As such, academics advocating for positive conflict try to propose a more analytic and empathetic approach, advising the use of soft power strategies in planning a resolution.

Although it might prove difficult to provide a single solution to conflict management on board, the truth is that there are many aspects to be considered. One of these aspects is the multicultural aspect, which is not to be neglected, especially in multiethnic crews. “Observers have argued that Indian managerial conflict resolution tendencies reflect Hindu norms of seeking a solution that pleases everyone, as well as British norms of active, mutual problem solving” [5] This proves that, in addition to the many elements surrounding a potential conflict, such as power, symmetric versus asymmetric conflicts, and conflict outcomes, such as win-win, win-lose, lose-lose situations, the background of the parties involved also plays an important role in the determination of an outcome.

In addition, the dual concern model is also applicable in such cases, leading to other classifications of the types of conflict resolution. This pattern suggests that individuals have “characteristic styles of managing interpersonal conflict.” [6] This is to say that sometimes, the basis of conflict lies not in what we argue for, but rather in how we argue with our colleagues. Furthermore, the article marks the distinction between people’s approach to conflict resolution, categorizing them into four major groups: “accommodation, collaboration, avoidance, and competition.” [6]

On board a ship, mainly due to the chain of command, “hard” power is intrinsically employed in all types of conflict, even if this happens on a subconscious level. This makes it more difficult to achieve collaboration, as the parties become involved in an asymmetrical conflict, one from which only the privileged party wins. Sometimes, exchange power is utilized, however integrative power is almost always ignored, thus reducing the chances of a favorable outcome, leading to accommodation or avoidance as the preferred conflict resolution styles.

4. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of conflict management and resolution is improvement, learning, and organizational efficiency. In achieving this goal, it is important to bear in mind that change is inevitable, however, the way in which seafarers deal with change, especially when on board, is what makes the difference between outcomes. It is also important to bear in mind that sometimes, attacks on morals, values or ideas, although not necessarily particular, may be seen as personal attacks, especially in clashing cultures. As such, it would be best to deconstruct an argument, rather than criticize a person.

In addition, the current research has prompted the possibility that “positive conflict” creates a favorable context for improvement on board a ship, as it leads to the collaboration of all parties involved. The contemporary paradigm shift regarding conflict management and resolution is a stepping stone on the path to progress. Power, as a subject of change, is the most important agent accountable for counterbalancing conflict resolutions, resulting in a win - lose type of situation. Even though on board „hard” power is usually employed in day to day operations, the chain of command should never stand in the way of communication. Collaboration, as well as positive conflict, should

always be the basis of communication on board, between peers as well as between superiors and subordinates.

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