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Management and Conflict Resolution: Conceptual Tools for Securing Cooperation and Organizational Performance

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Abstract

In theories of conflict management, managers' conflict resolution skills have often been understood as their relational attitudes and ability to communicate, but choices of conflict resolution strategies in organizational management should also depend on the types of conflicts managers face. Understanding how a complex conflict situation involves one or several conflict types is a matter of understanding the deep structure of the conflict. Knowledge of such deep structure is a key to realizing what the conflict is about and how it should be resolved. The chapter uses conflict theory to distinguish between six conflict types that are especially important from an organizational perspective: *interpretation conflicts*, *argumentation conflicts*, *value conflicts*, *interest conflicts*, *role conflicts* and *personal conflicts*. After having clarified their significance in an organizational context, the chapter elucidates how knowledge of the conflict types and how they are logically related to each other can be used in managers' conflict resolution practices. The last part of the chapter uses the conflict types to develop a model for practical conflict resolution in management. The model can be used as a tool for analyzing conflict situations—to gain a deeper and more systematic understanding of how the situations should be resolved in accordance with the best interest of the organization.

Keywords: conflict resolution, organizational management, conflict types, communication, agreement

1. Introduction

It has been extensively documented that managers need conflict resolution skills in order to secure sound organizational performance [1–5]. Managers need to understand how

productive conflicts are healthy for their organization and how destructive conflicts have negative consequences [6–9].

In the literature on conflict management, managers' conflict resolution skills have often been understood as their handling styles, communication competence and ability to convey appropriate values and attitudes [10–15]. What has received less attention is that choices of conflict resolution strategies should depend on the types of conflicts managers face.

In this chapter, I argue that knowledge of conflict types is important for managers and use conflict theory to distinguish between six types that are especially important from an organizational perspective. *Interpretation conflicts* occur when fundamental disagreement is caused by different interpretations of verbal or non-verbal communicative acts. *Argumentation conflicts* are conflicts in which the disagreeing parties endorse incompatible arguments or weigh the strength of arguments differently. *Value conflicts* are conflicts in which the parties strive for incompatible ideals of what they consider to be valuable. *Interest conflicts* occur when the parties seek to realize inconsistent aims at personal or group level. *Role conflicts* are conflicts in which there is lack of clarity or disagreement about formal or informal roles. The final category, *personal conflicts*, involves disagreement that is grounded in perceptions of unacceptable personality traits or attitudes.

After explaining how these conflict types are relevant in organizational contexts, I clarify how knowledge of the conflict types can be used in conflict resolution at management levels. The fundamental idea is that the conflict types are logically related to each other, and that there is, for each conflict type, a core methodological principle for concept resolution that managers should focus on. In the last part of the chapter, I categorize these principles in an overall model for practical conflict resolution in organizations.

2. Background

In order to understand the importance of managers' conflict resolution practices in organizations, it is necessary to have a more precise understanding of the concept of conflict. Theorists differ somewhat in their definitions of the concept, but there is widespread consensus that a conflict involves more than disagreement: conflicts involve use of power and means to realize interests [4, 7, 9]. This means, as Sibana ([16], p. 11) observes, that conflicts are 'derived from social beliefs and involve two or more parties who share incompatible objectives.'

Note that this definition of a conflict is neutral with respect to whether conflicts may be good or bad for an organization. In conflict theory, the potential positive and negative dimensions of conflicts have often been connected to the distinction between productive and destructive conflicts [2–4, 6]. As thoroughly elaborated by Rahim [8] in his influential analysis of conflicts in organizations, a productive conflict is a conflict that has positive functional effects for an organization. Destructive conflicts, on the other hand, are conflicts that have dysfunctional outcomes. Thus, if an organization is to benefit from a

conflict, 'the negative effects of the conflict must be reduced, and positive effects must be enhanced' ([8], p. 7).

The importance of recognizing productive conflicts should not be underestimated [16, 17]. At the same time, it is not difficult to understand why destructive conflicts have received most attention in the literature on social interaction in organizations. It is when cooperation breaks down, when poor interaction undermines organizational performance, that the importance of conflict resolution as a management responsibility really becomes crucial [17]. Further on in this chapter, this will be a key point. Although many of the analyses developed in this chapter can be used to understand all social conflicts, I focus particularly on destructive conflicts.

3. Conflicts in organizations

Conflict resolution is of general significance in social relations, but of special importance in areas of discourse in which poor communication can have substantial negative consequences. Organizations are such areas, and this explain why conflicts have received so much attention in management theory [1–4, 6, 7].

Many theorists have, in fact, argued that managers' conflict resolution skills are of crucial importance in organizations. In recent years, it has been extensively documented how conflicts undermine organizational performance [2, 5, 6, 12]. Many analyses have focused on negative consequences of conflicts when they occur, and concepts such as work engagement and job motivation have been used to explain why managers' preventive conflict work is important [18–22].

The significance of reactive and proactive conflict resolution is often associated with the conflict ladder [23]. This metaphor has been used to explain how an initial situation involving a minor dispute can accelerate and turn into a brutal conflict with severe negative consequences, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

The conflict ladder can be applied in a variety of analyses of conflict escalation, but it is widely recognized that it is of special importance in heterogeneous social relations. This is primarily because the probability of escalation increases in social networks where people with different backgrounds, ideas and values work together [20, 23, 24]. Organizations typically have these characteristics, and it is therefore not difficult to understand why many theorists have been concerned with how tensions between personal and professional perspectives in organizations determine how conflicts arise and develop in accordance with the conflict ladder.

The importance of bridging opposing interests in order to prevent conflict escalation has received particular attention in the management of organizational reforms—when managers lead processes of change. As shown by Kotter in his influential *Leading Change* [25], in processes of reorganization it is crucial that managers secure good communication and

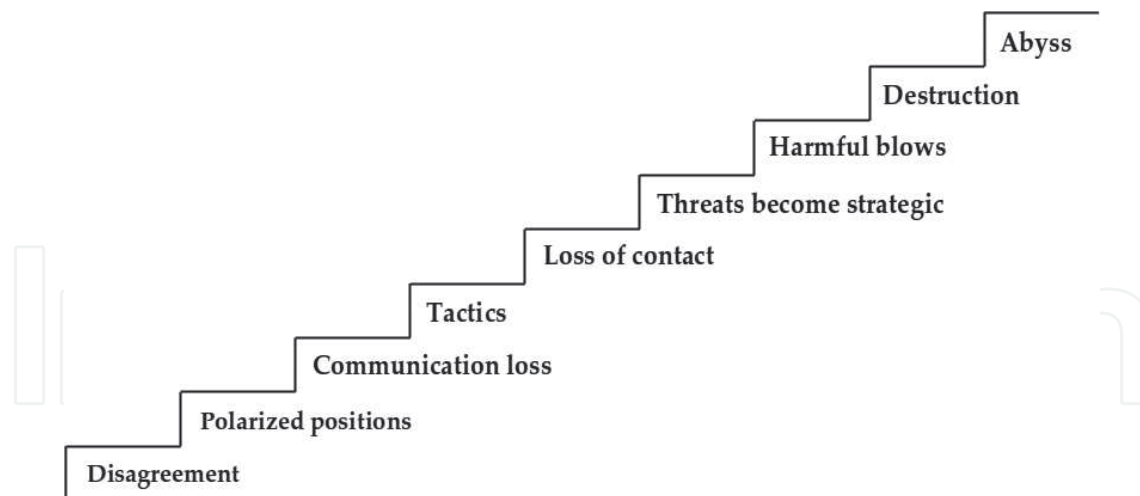


Figure 1. The conflict ladder (Glasl, 1982).

have the ability to create shared understanding despite a diversity of interests and professional perspectives. A key aim is to create an inspiring organizational culture, give employees the same knowledge of aims and processes and make sure that teams function well. In fact, most models of organizational change are based on the idea that agreement is the goal and that conflicts can have substantial negative consequences in social relations [26]. In general, good communication in organizations involves much more than information exchange. Securing organizational communication also has a relational element. Dialog, both centrally at top management levels and throughout the organizational structure, is crucial for creating well-functioning teams and a shared sense of commitment [2, 13, 27].

4. Resolution skills

The importance of managers' conflicts resolution skills has received much attention in organization theory. It is not difficult to understand why this is the case: managers not only have crucial relational roles, which are sometimes described as the glue that holds organizations together [28]. They are also driving forces in strategic work. Managers have a special responsibility for achieving overall goals through dedicated and motivated employees [6, 12, 22]. These goals can only be achieved if managers have both a proactive and a reactive focus on conflict resolution. Having such a focus is so important that it is often formally specified as a requirement for managers, and it always falls informally under their responsibility and role as managers.

In analyses of this responsibility, managers' ability to resolve conflicts has often been understood as their use of handling style. Five different handling styles have received particular attention in conflict resolution theory: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and

compromising [1]. These four strategies correspond to managers' attitudes and how they confront conflicts with attitudes that correspond to the resolutions strategies [4, 8, 11].

The focus on conflict-handling styles in the literature is understandable, but focusing too much on this involves a danger: how successfully managers resolve a specific conflict will depend not only on their attitude to relational aspects of the conflict but also on its content. In other words, it is not only knowledge of how a conflict can be addressed by using handling styles but also the underlying nature of the conflict in question that should guide managers' choice of actions. By transcending the complex surface of a conflict situation and identifying the deep structure as one or several conflict types, it is easier to determine how the conflict should be resolved.

5. Types of conflicts

Further on in this chapter, I will distinguish between six conflict types. I will then argue that there is a logical connection between them that it is especially important for managers to have knowledge of.

5.1. Interpretation conflicts

These conflicts occur when one or both parties in the conflict ascribe to the opposing party beliefs the party does not, in fact, have, so that disagreement about an issue of discourse is, in reality, caused by inconsistent perspectives of interpretation.

Such conflicts can be of two kinds. *Semantic* interpretation conflicts occur when the opposing parties do not attach the same meaning to the language that is used: the interpretive gaps are so profound that the parties express different concepts even though they use the same communicative expressions [29, 30]. *Associative* interpretation conflicts occur when the parties do not form the same beliefs about written or verbal communicative acts even though the acts are, in themselves, understood similarly. In such cases, the problem is that even though the parties understand the thoughts that are strictly speaking expressed in language, they associate these thoughts with very different beliefs [31, 32].

An iceberg metaphor has often been used to explain how communicators are disposed to form strikingly different interpretations of communicative acts. What is literally expressed in language is only one aspect of communication. As Davidson ([32], p. 449) notes, interpretation also rests on 'rest on vast vague assumptions about what is and what is not shared by the attributer, the person to whom the attribution is made, and the attributer's intended audience'. All interpretation conflicts are caused by misinterpretation that occur when belief attribution is incorrect: the beliefs one party ascribes to an opposing party are not beliefs the opposing party actually has.

Interpretation conflicts are in fact *pseudo conflicts*—there is no real disagreement about an object of discourse. What the parties think is real disagreement is, in fact, a misunderstanding.

This means that an interpretation conflict is never perceived by the involved parties to be such a conflict. If that were the case, the parties would realize that they misunderstand each other and the conflict would dissolve.

5.2. Argumentation conflicts

Argumentation conflicts are conflicts in which disagreement is grounded in incompatible arguments or arguments that the parties do not perceive as having the same strength. Argumentation conflicts typically arise when the conflict parties focus on very different arguments, but they can also arise when the parties are concerned with the same arguments but disagree about their soundness or practical implications.

In resolving argumentation conflicts, it is important to distinguish the aim of understanding arguments from the aim of determining their strength. This is a fundamental distinction that has received a lot of attention in philosophical communication theory. It is not possible to understand whether a person has a plausible justification for a point of view unless one has uncovered the person's justification in the first place [33, 34].

Achieving this aim of justificatory understanding in practical conflict resolution is to a large extent a matter of creating an atmosphere conducive to constructive and equal dialog [8–10, 13]. An important goal is to base communication with the parties on knowledge of why the parties think they are entitled to have the views that they have. Theorists have presented a variety of methods for resolving argumentation conflicts on the basis of this kind of communication, and although these methods differ in detail, there is widespread agreement that any strategy for resolving argumentation conflicts should involve four principles [7]: (i) make the parties understand that there is a problem, (ii) define the problem, (iii) find ways of solving the problem and (iv) if the problem cannot be solved, find ways to avoid it.

In the prevention of argumentation conflicts in organizations, it is essential to create mutual understanding of organizational knowledge and facts about frameworks that all employees must accept. Sound *communication management*—inspired by Habermas' theory [34, 35] of emancipatory dialog—presupposes that managers convey arguments that employees are capable of evaluating the soundness of. In an ideological sense, the ideal of focusing on rational arguments in conflict resolution falls under the principle of finding solutions that are grounded in shared knowledge of the best interests of the organization.

5.3. Value conflicts

These conflicts arise when the parties in a conflict have opposing values that influence their preferences for action—the beliefs they have about how they think it is correct to act. Value conflicts pose a double challenge for managers. They need to uncover the values that are at stake for the conflict parties, but they also need to decide, normally in dialog with one or both parties, how some values should prevail.

The latter task in particular can be challenging as long as values are of fundamental importance to those who have them, but nonetheless different from (descriptive) beliefs about the world. In general, when we are concerned with values, we are (normatively) concerned with how something should be. Values are ideals we strive for, norms we think we are entitled to realize [23, 36].

It is precisely this aim of uncovering personal ideals that is the natural starting point in value conflicts. After such an uncovering, the values of the parties can often be challenged in a constructive way, so that they reconsider their own value preferences on the basis of reflection about beliefs the values are based on. At the same time, this strategy depends on the nature of the values the conflict involves. Personal values are not the same as cultural values that are accepted as sound within a social context, and contextual cultural values must, in turn, be understood in the light of more general value concepts like equality, freedom and solidarity [37–39].

Thus for managers, the first communicative aim in value conflicts is to clarify the opposing values and how they are perceived as central in the conflict. The next aim is to create room for reflection about the importance of the values, and how the values are consistent with the organizational framework that the parties must accept [21]. This requires communication skills that involve much more than uncovering facts. The reason is that values are not true or false—they cannot be corrected in the same way as incorrect beliefs [40]. Resolving value conflicts is in itself a value-laden activity that requires sensitivity and consciousness about values.

5.4. Conflicts of interest

These conflicts arise when conflict parties have incompatible goals that they strive to fulfill. Managers typically face conflicts of this kind in reorganizations or processes of change, often involving union representatives or groups of employees who are opposed to each other, but sometimes no more than two individuals [25]. The conflicts can resemble value conflicts, but differ in the sense that the parties in interest conflicts have a more strategic intention of achieving a goal that benefits themselves [4, 20].

The tension in such conflicts can be high, especially when the parties believe that they have very good reasons for endorsing their own interests. Actions that are grounded in interests are to a large extent goal driven, and the goals are often defined as something that offers a personal outcome. Interests at stake can be individual or collective, and tensions can arise on various levels in an organization [41].

In resolution of conflicts of interests, it is important for managers to understand the interests that the conflict involves and thereafter determine whether they are compatible with organizational principles that all the parties must accept. This is, to a large extent, a matter of giving factual information: by conveying organizational knowledge managers can often create a shared understanding of the best interests of the organization [42]. It is,

moreover, important to talk openly with employees about organizational visions and arguments in support of them [25]. Managers who initiate dialog about core organizational values and listen to employees' views about aims and means of achieving them are in a good position to create agreement and cooperation in accordance with the best interests of the organization [13, 43].

5.5. Role conflicts

Role conflicts arise when the conflict parties have different views about areas of responsibility, distribution of tasks and borderlines between formal and informal roles. These conflicts can easily arise if there are many gray zones between roles and uncertainty about routines and competence skills [2–4, 44].

Managers have, in the first instance, a responsibility for creating clear areas of responsibility, as a preventive means of avoiding role conflicts. When such conflicts arise, managers should make sure that there are clear agreements, and that they are accepted by all the conflict parties. Initiatives to change roles can be unpopular among employees who are given limited freedom to do what they want, but managers need to make decisions that benefit the organization.

Role conflicts can easily arise when there are tensions between professional and administrative roles. These role conflicts have become increasingly common in organizations, in the light of modern ideals of economic-administrative management 'from above', and professional pressure from first-line services 'from below' [43–47]. This double pressure can be especially challenging for managers who have to bridge the two worlds: they must understand the roles of those who work on the periphery of the organization while at the same time be sensitive and heedful of centralized pressure. The solution is often to look at distribution of roles in the light of actual competence and to acknowledge that individual employees have different beliefs about areas of responsibilities, depending on where they work in the organization [13, 28].

5.6. Personal conflicts

Personal conflicts arise when someone perceives others' way of being as unacceptable or provocative. These conflicts are not connected to social roles or interests we strive to fulfill. They concern instead who we are as individuals, the personality traits we have and how we express attitudes [7, 10, 47, 48].

The fact that personal conflicts are rooted not so much in persons' actions as in the persons themselves makes them especially challenging to resolve. Any attempt to encourage the conflict parties to reconsider their way of being can easily be experienced as personal criticism, which in turn creates communicative distance or, in the worst case, complete denial.

Good communication skills are required to resolve personal conflicts. There are four main communication strategies managers can use. A *relational* strategy is to make it clear to the

parties how they experience each other. A *confronting* strategy is to make it clear that (and ideally why) some actions are unacceptable. A *pragmatic* strategy is to make it clear to the parties that they must be able to work together even though they do not have very good chemistry. A *functional* strategy is to make it clear that the conflict has unacceptable negative consequences for the functioning of the organization and that the parties must work together in order to ensure that it continues to function.

The choice of which communication strategies to use will depend on the content of the personal conflict and the context in which it arises, but all the strategies can be used to improve interaction if they are adapted wisely to the situation in question. For managers, it is also important to work preventively, by accentuating ideals like respect, openness and equality among employees with idiosyncratic personalities [10, 13]. When many individuals work together, the aim is always to create a shared sense of team commitment among a variety of individuals with unique personality traits.

6. A model for conflict resolution

The abovementioned conflict types can surface in various ways in organizations. At the same time, they are related to each other conceptually. In the first type of conflict – interpretation conflicts – there is no substantive platform of disagreement, no shared conception of a factual object of discourse. The parties are, in reality, talking past each other.

In argumentation conflicts, the parties have the same perception of what the conflict is about, but their views on how it should be resolved are based on incompatible arguments. The next three conflict types involve specific ideas the parties have about what they are entitled to in terms of realizing values, fulfilling interests and conforming to roles. The final conflict type – personal conflicts – can be understood as the category that remains when the other possibilities have been eliminated.

Understood like this, the way the conflict types are related to each other should guide managers' resolution practices. When confronted with a given conflict situation between opposing parties within a manager's area of responsibility, the natural first step is to determine whether the parties understand each other, whether they agree about the issue of discourse and whether they understand their own and opposing parties' arguments. If such an exploration does not lead to clarifying solutions, it is relevant to ask whether the conflict involves opposing interests or values, or incongruent role beliefs as regards organizational structure. If none of these questions can be answered in the affirmative, the conflict falls into the remaining category, personal conflicts.

It is important to bear in mind that although this step-by-step strategy has a general application, it is not always necessary to explore all the steps in detail. It may, for instance, sometimes be clear from the start that the parties do not misunderstand each other. Nonetheless, the two first conflict types can function as a check list: in cases where it is not already clear how

a given conflict should be understood, it is always relevant to ask whether it has been caused by misinterpretation or incompatible arguments related to an area of discourse within the relevant organizational context.

More generally, there is a logical connection between the six conflict types that can serve as a model of preparedness, as illustrated in **Figure 2**. The conflict types may certainly overlap, and a given conflict may involve several conflict types. Furthermore, there are sometimes gray zones in which it is not clear how a given conflict should be analyzed. Nevertheless, considering each conflict type in turn will normally lead to clarifying insight. Ordinarily, it is not necessary to do more than ask a core question corresponding to each conflict type. As regards the two first types—interpretation conflicts and argumentation conflicts—the questions can be formulated as follows:

- Do the opposing parties have very different interpretations of the conflict?
- Are the parties concerned with very different arguments?

It may be sufficient to ask these questions if the conflict is, in fact, based on incompatible interpretive frameworks. The questions can also be used in dialog with the opposing parties to develop a shared understanding of what the conflict is about. Such a platform of

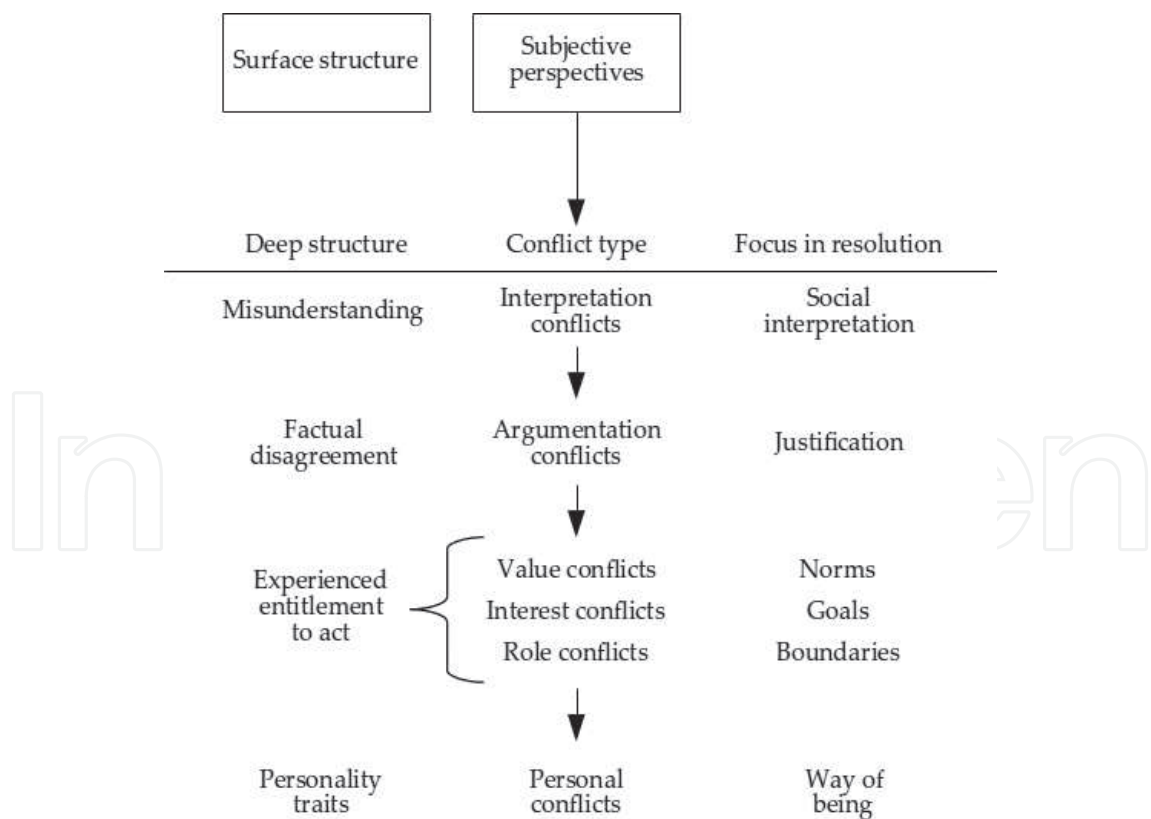


Figure 2. Model for conflict resolution.

agreement is often knowledge of facts in the world, but the idea has a wider significance: in all conflict resolution, it is crucial to find something the parties can agree on, something that can serve as a shared starting point for constructive dialog. Furthermore, in an organizational context, the aim is always to seek agreement about the best interests of the organization.

It is also important to find a common core in the next phase: even when managers are unable to resolve a conflict by focusing on its factual basis, it is important to transcend subjective perspectives in order to understand what the problem really is. Three questions become relevant:

- Do the parties have inconsistent values?
- Do they have incompatible interests?
- Do they disagree about role distribution and areas of responsibility?

This second part of the conflict resolution process differs from the first in the sense that it is not always natural to start out with questions about values. It might be just as natural to start out with the issue of interests. In this phase, managers are therefore to a larger extent engaged in a clarifying analysis. It is necessary to understand which strategy that best fits the conflict in question.

When managers have been unable to achieve an understanding of the deep structure of a conflict by posing these five questions, it is relevant to consider the final category, personal conflicts. The problem is not merely what someone says or does, but who they are, or, at least, how they are perceived. The question becomes:

- Is social interaction undermined by personality traits?

It may be difficult to resolve this conflict type, which is, in itself, a reason for trying to resolve a given conflict situation by considering the other conflict types one by one, before concluding that a conflict situation involves a personal conflict. In general, managers should not assume that a conflict between employees in their organization is a personal conflict unless the other possibilities have been thoroughly considered and eliminated.

This means, in other words, that the resolution model can be used to explain why managers should not conclude that a conflict is personal unless they have thoroughly eliminated the other possibilities. It has been extensively documented that conflict parties too quickly assume that the problem is the opposing parties themselves more than factual or relational issues, and the model can help managers to think constructively about these issues [7, 8, 46]. Often, the core problem involves one or several of the other conflict types, and it is often easier to find solutions when this is the case. By using the model, it is possible to get knowledge of the real source of conflict escalation and to use this knowledge to work efficiently on de-escalation. The probability of finding solutions is much greater if managers do this instead of relying on a superficial understanding of the conflict.

7. Concluding remarks

The five-step model I have presented in this chapter can be understood as a resource in managers' conflict resolution practices, to be used individually or in dialog with discussion partners, like other managers in management teams. It is a tool for analyzing conflicts to gain a deeper and more systematic understanding of the situation in question so that it becomes clearer how it can be resolved step by step. The model can be used to understand complex conflicts between employees, or between employees and managers, so that the initial understanding of a conflict is transformed into knowledge of the underlying deep structure. The model can also be used in debriefing after a conflict, to understand why the conflict escalated, so that managers are better prepared to resolve a similar escalating situation the next time it occurs.

The principles in the model can, additionally, be used to analyze situations in which conflicts have not arisen even though there is a risk that they will arise, typically in processes of reorganization. Furthermore, if managers have knowledge of the characteristics of conflict types, they are better prepared to resolve destructive conflicts not only between persons they are managers for but also in their own relations to other people in their organization.

Obviously, the degree to which it is possible for managers to use the resolution model comprehensively will depend on contextual matters. Practical limitations can make it impossible for managers to pursue extensive analyses of conflict situations, but it would be wrong to think that the model is irrelevant in such situations. It does not take much time to explore the six questions above in reactive analysis of a given conflict, during a conflict or in preventive work before a conflict is likely to arise.

The resolution model is generally applicable to conflict situations, but it is particularly useful for dealing with social interaction in organizations. The complexity of the model corresponds to the complexity of organizations in which people come together from a variety of perspectives, with different beliefs, values and interests [36, 49]. These differences influence how conflicts arise in the various ways described above.

Theoretically, the aim of overcoming the diversity of perspectives and reaching agreement in organizational work is often associated with the philosopher Gadamer and his idea of a fusion of horizons [49]. For Gadamer, agreement and absence of conflict are connected to successful communication: it is impossible to separate the issue of how we understand each other from how we agree and cooperate. According to Gadamer, this implies that if people are in a social conflict, then they have not really communicated well.

Gadamer's philosophy has been developed outside an organizational context, but it is widely recognized that it is eminently applicable to organization theory. The heterogeneous nature of many organizations makes it challenging to achieve a shared understanding and a shared sense of commitment. It has been extensively documented that knowledge gaps and lack of contact between various organizational levels can lead to destructive conflicts—directly through lack of teamwork and indirectly through lack of psychological effect such

as loss of motivation and job engagement [50, 51]. Such conflicts can arise in vertical relations between different levels, but also in relations between employees who work together as colleagues.

Much more could be said about conflict in organizations and the general significance of conflict resolution and agreement as conditions for organizational performance, but this falls outside the scope of this chapter. The aim here has been to focus on the practical usefulness of distinguishing between conflict types in managers' resolution practices designed to promote agreement and shared understanding and to pinpoint this in a practical model for conflict resolution. The model can be used in a variety of ways, in a range of contexts and under various circumstances, to understand how destructive conflicts can be prevented, avoided and resolved.

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