

Chapter 49

Work–Groups Conflict at PetroTech–Italy, S.R.L.: The Influence of Culture on Conflict Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Field experts take numerous approaches to modeling how culture influences groups in dealing with interpersonal conflict and its dynamics. Researchers investigate cultural traits that may predict a range of cultural conflict behaviors. In addition, anecdotal evidence shows that researchers continue to take up a constructivist approach of identifying the centrality of cultural influence that causes work related conflicts. This study attempts to determine the different types and levels of conflicts within a multicultural workforce by considering various factors such as ethnicity and geographic and lingual diversities within the global context. The scope is to find possible solutions to reduce and/or eliminate group related and, to a certain extent, individual conflicts within the work place, which have become a matter of concern for any international organization. The findings reveal systematic conflicts between and within work-groups and suggest that regardless of type, relationship, and process, conflicts are detrimental to the operation and total outcome. Those conflicts have a negative impact on performance in the production, especially when they escalate. Displays of interpersonal hostility (yelling, name-calling, throwing things at people and making derogatory inferences about others' own cultures) prevent productive work in all groups, which are inefficient and do not seem motivated to complete their tasks. Increased bickering and hostile behaviour inhibits talking about and working on the immediate task. To a certain extent, the situation could be described as a "toxic working environment." A key finding reveals through interviews and participative and non-intrusive observations demonstrated that members of these work-groups are psychologically distressed when there are frequent arguments about interpersonal issues. Consequently,

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the intrinsic problems which escalate over a five year period, together with extrinsic economic problems due to the global economic downturn, cause the company to have high cost of labor and material. With less than expected sales and, operational destruction due to distress about going concern, PTI is put to challenge. Hence, PTI faces a serious test in solving the existing group conflicts. Failure to improve the working relationships could jeopardize the strategic going concern of the company.

INTRODUCTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Culture has been identified as having a significant influence on conflict dynamics, but there are limitations in existing research. In this study, we wanted to determine the different types and levels of conflicts within a multicultural workforce. Specifically, we were given the opportunity to study whether group conflicts exist in workgroups at a global company operating in the host country of Italy, and if they may create constructive and destructive dynamics in conflict. Due to time constraints and amount of time dedicated in collecting data we focused on determining the problem and not to offer a solution. Therefore we organized the study in two parts; this first investigation is Part 1, which identifies the problems. Part 2 will be a subsequent investigation in which we will analyze all results and offer possible solution scenarios. Therefore, this part of the study offers useful findings about the problems evolving conflicts at workplace. We then suggest that the instructor use the teaching notes available at the end of the chapter to engage participants in a constructive discourse about how conflicts originate, how they can be prevented, and offer a hypothetical scenario as to how they (students/participants) could resolve them.

CONTEXTUAL HIGHLIGHTS

To understand “Conflict Dynamics,” it is important to understand how conflicts originate and evolve. Considering various factors such as ethnicity, geographic and lingual diversities within

the global context, conflicts become a matter of concern for any international organization. The term “group dynamics” describes the positive and negative forces within groups of people and it can be referred to as “team chemistry.” Team chemistry can be described as the spontaneous reaction of people, especially a mutual sense of attraction or understanding that create the patterns of interaction among team members that determine team spirit, harmony, cohesion, and morale. In this scenario “conflict” can be described as the disagreement or clash between ideas, principles, or people working together toward a common goal. The term “group conflict” can be described as the “normal, predictable occurrence and condition of disagreement involving group members at work.” Lastly, within the context of *global conflict dynamics* we interpret the term “dynamics” as the relationships of power between “culturally diverse” people in a group.

In this same context, we explain the meaning of “Cultural fluency,” which involves recognizing and acting respectfully from the knowledge that communication, ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict, approaches to meaning-making, and identities and roles vary across cultures. Within this framework, conflict dynamics can be understood as an “escalation” of a disagreement or clash between ideas, principles, or people working together toward a common goal. We then interpret “conflict escalation” as the increase in the magnitude of disagreements, including, but not limited to, hostilities or possible verbal or even physical violence. We believe that conflict escalation depends on the way group members involved in groups’ interactions react in response to others. When management fails to identify and

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