

Exploratory study of conflict management in education sector of Afghanistan

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Abstract

This research aims to explore employees' understanding of functional conflict management and to explore specific behavioral skills effective for reaching a mutual agreement in the conflict resolution process in the education sector of Afghanistan. The phenomenological approach of the Qualitative methodology is applied while data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews. Data was analyzed by using thematic analysis approach. Major findings of the study illustrate that overall conflict is perceived as a negative phenomenon and decision makers have lack of awareness of the importance of functional conflict management in the workplace. Therefore, this study recommends that there is a dire need of developing capacity strengthening programs and to develop conflict management strategies, guidelines and procedures in workplace to avoid dysfunctional conflict and to encourage functional conflict for high performance. Providing capacity strengthening support to employees and enabling environment are other recommendations for positive changes in the Afghan educational institutions.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Conflict, Emotional management, Emotional intelligence, Education sector*

1. Introduction

Difference of opinion is predictable among humans. When two or more individuals or groups come in contact with one another in attaining their objectives, their relationships may become incompatible or inconsistent, which lead to conflict. The educational institutions of the Afghanistan are rapidly growing to respond the national needs of Afghan citizens. To provide quality services to the citizens, effective cooperation at various levels is required. People management is one of the key functions of

today managers and leaders to ensure organization produce better results (Robins, 2009). This requires to manage both dysfunctional and functional conflict properly in order to improve service delivery and generate new learning in the organization. Organizational conflict as it stands now is considered legitimate and unavoidable and a positive indicator of effective organizational management (Robins, 2009). Realizing this fact is equally important by practitioner and organizational decision makers, because conflict within certain limits is essential to productivity. Conflict can be functional to the extent to which it results in the creative solution to problems or the effective attainment of subsystem or organizational objectives that otherwise would not have been possible. Little or no conflict in organizations may lead to stagnation, poor decisions, and ineffectiveness. On the other hand, organizational conflict left uncontrolled may have dysfunctional outcomes. A moderate amount of conflict, handled in a constructive manner, is essential for attaining and maintaining an optimum level of organizational effectiveness (Rahim, 2001 & Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). The role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been tremendous in managing conflict. Emotionally intelligent individuals are more adept at putting difficulties behind them and redirecting their attention to conflict resolution (Abraham, 1999). In the context of education sector of Afghanistan, One of the biggest concerns of employees is the toll a conflict can take their workplace morale and trust. According to the Ministry of Education Report (Education, 2010), there are more than 190,000 (25 per cent female) employees, including teachers in the general education in the provision of education services to more than 9.3 million students (39 per cent girls) in Afghanistan. In the presence of such huge number of employees, chance of conflict is more inevitable.

In every conflict situation, no matter that is functional and dysfunctional, majority employees of the Afghan institutions feel uncomfortable due to lack of skills on emotional intelligence among the employees, because people often use high emotion and low reasoning while dealing with conflict. There is a tremendous need for overcoming this

tension in the workplace to recognize functional conflict as an opportunity for organization growth and learning. The disparity between employees who have Emotional Intelligence skills and those who do not have is widely perceptible. This gap largely affects the conflict resolution process in reaching to a mutual agreement. Therefore, there is an overwhelming and compelling reason to answer following research questions in the context of Afghanistan.

RQ1. What is the perceived understanding level of conflict in education sector of Afghanistan?

RQ2. What specific behaviors are effective for reaching a mutual agreement in the conflict resolution process?

2. Literature Review

In a social system, when two or more persons are interacting in such a way that each one influences and is influenced by another person. This connection between such groups may also become inconsistent when one or more of them wish a similar benefit (Rahim M. A., 2001). Conflict can be also defined a process in which one side perceives that his or her interests are being opposed by the other side(Rahim,2001) This perception can be the initial stage of a conflict situation. Each party makes efforts to gain acceptance of a preference, or gaining a resource advantage.

According to (Pammer & Killian, 2003), conflict is disagreement, debates, opposing perspectives, fighting ideologies in a pluralistic and unequal society. The recent conflict sensitivity research study conducted by (Hashitha, Vindhya and Priyanka, 2017), reflects that for organizations in Afghanistan, it is important that have the ability to identify and understand complex social relationship, differing interest as well as social and gendered norms. This understanding also helps to avoid doing unintended harm at the workplace. (Omisore, 2004) argued that many conflict practitioners do not perceive properly on the conflict happening in the organization and its management. Negotiation skills are required for both parties in order to

reach win-win solution. Conflict leads to creative thinking and find solution for real differences in life. Some possible ways for concluding conflict are: the winning of one party, compromise between both parties, conciliation and ending/delay without solution due to the level of importance of the issue.

2.1 Conflict in Education Institutions

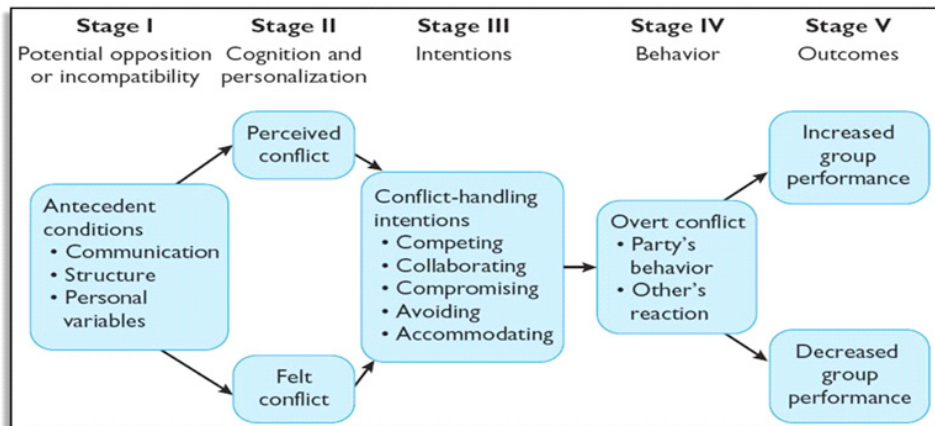
Like in most other institutions, people in education institutions also perceive conflict as a negative phenomenon. When employees heard the word of conflict, they suddenly exemplify war, fight, crisis, aggression and other negative connotation. The word conflict is something one should run away from to not get involved in. Conflict in education environment is a daily manifestation because of the existence of a huge number of employees and concerning rules the school and learning authorities and participants. Schools and learning domains are the most occurrence arenas of conflict, where it is very essential for the authorities and administrators to know why they as school managers are so often central in community debates (Bua, Felix Terhile, Ada, Joan Nike, Akinde, Esther U, 2015).

A research study conducted (Nnior Machomi Morake, Ratau John and Stephonia Dingwe, 2011) recommends that educational authorities should not perceive conflict with a traditional view. Education staff need to be trained in conflict management skills to bring positive development and ably manage changes in learning settings. This study also recommends a contextualized conflict management strategy to be in place toward managing conflict situations both at schools and management levels.

The (The Da Vinci Institute, 2004) journal explained the functional conflict process in five stages. The first stage is explaining potential opposition or incompatibility on present conditions, where the conflict commence. The second stage is reflecting the cognition and personalization, where perception makes a key role in the conflict resolution. Perceived can be indicated as awareness by one or more individuals involved and felt

conflict is more about emotional engagement in creating frustration and hostility. The third stage is intention of getting the conflict's conclusion, which may be cooperativeness and or assertiveness by using styles of competing, collaborating, accommodating, compromising and avoiding. The fourth one is about the behavior of the conflict process that reveal in actions. The final stage is about the outcome. The result of the conflict may be functional or dysfunctional, where the positives are productive and the negative create bad consequences. The below graph illustrates the conflict process in an organization.

Figure 1: The Conflict Process



Source: The Conflict Process (Robbins, 2005)

2.2 Conflict is good or bad?

Conflict is happening if someone wants or does not want. Thus, conflict can be good if it manages properly and conflict can be bad if it is managed badly (Robbins, 2013). Robbins described the conflict views in three different categories such as traditional, human relations and interactionist views of conflicts. The traditional view of conflict expected that all conflict was bad and must be avoided. This has been viewed as negatively. This also has links with the attitudes of group behavior that ruled in the 1930s and 1940s. The human relations view insist that conflict is destructive and negative, the human relations view of conflict says that the existence of the conflict is good in an organization and this is unavoidable. When conflict

is unavoidable, then it is better for the organization to manage conflict properly to get benefit from it (Rahim, 1983; Wall & Nolan, 1987). The interactionist view encourages conflict at the workplace with a peaceful, tranquil and cooperative ways at the appropriate level (Jehn, 1992; Pin-kley, 1990; Pondy, 1969). The author insists that an appropriate level of conflict supports to achieve organizational goals with a self-critical and innovative approaches. This school of thoughts also indicates that some conflict may be destructive. Therefore, it is important to analyze whether the conflict is associated with the task or not. If there is no link between the conflict and tasks or process, then should be discouraged.

2.3 Role of Emotional Intelligence in Conflict Management

A person who has an ability to control his/her emotions can realize, interpret and respond to others emotions accordingly Pandey et al.(2015) stated that multiple intelligences are existing and the social intelligence is independent of abstract intelligence (Henderson, 2006). Emotional Intelligence (EI) represents the proficient relationship of feeling, thinking and acting and the skill to manage, control one emotional to get anticipated successes (McGrath, 2013). The author explained four major skills that build emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, self-management, mindful of others and relationship management. Moods and emotions are both conflicts triggers and anger and negative emotion can be revealed suddenly, thus self-awareness deliberate internal feelings as self-management make individual able to respond properly (Jerus, 2015). Through the skills of emotional intelligence, negative feeling is managed, stress and tensions are minimized. The chance for mutual agreement can be maximized. (Jerus, 2015).

2.4 Theoretical framework of the study

This paper is grounded on the conflict management process proposed by Robins, (2005). This study placed emphasis on the fourth stage of the aforementioned process in the context of Afghanistan. The fourth stage expressed by robins in his proposed conflict management

process, is the importance of behavioral or reaction approach of conflicting parties in conflict situation. Along the similar lines, this paper conceptualize that conflict in the workplace is inevitable and unavoidable phenomenon, however the significant factor in conflict is the way workers deal with that specific conflict. Therefore policy makers and decision makers in organizations should not perceive conflict with a traditional view and should revisit their approaches to develop conflict management strategies, guidelines and procedures in such a way where room for functional conflict management is considered for superior performance. This is possible only when staff and decision makers have complete understanding of the conflict resolution and conflict management. This study recommends a contextualized conflict management strategy to be in placed toward managing conflict situations both at schools and management levels.

3. Methodology

This is a non-experimental study based on phenomenology approach of qualitative methodology. The data gathered from individuals' working in education sector of Afghanistan. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews with fourteen employees while followed semi-structured approach. Interviews were recorded by using voice recorder application of mobile phone and interviews were transcribed later on for data analysis. The interview questions were developed in the light of research objectives with focusing on conflict management concern. The authors made effort to develop question as much specific as answerable by the participants. The interview questions were validated by experts of the field both from academia and industry. Minor amendments were made to the interview questions following the recommendation of the field experts taking into account the broader subject of the study. The following specific issues were discussed with the participants during the interview: The issues discussed during interviews were their perceive understanding of conflict, their views on their ways of managing conflict in their personal and professional life. Moreover, it was also asked from the informants whether their organizations

have specific conflict strategy, similarly, their perceived understanding of specific behaviors needed for reaching mutual agreement and lastly the emotional intelligence with relationship of conflict was also discussed.

3.1 Population and sampling:

Qualitative studies that focus on phenomenological dimensions often propose interviews. With relation to this, Creswell (1998, 2003) strongly suggests conducting interviews that range from 5 to 25 in numbers. On the other hand, Morse (1994) recommends that the number must not be less than 6. As far as the face-to-face interviews are concerned, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Creswell (2003) suggested at least 12 interviews as a rule of thumb. They suggest that participants must be the holders of knowledge in the area being investigated. The targeted population under this research were workers in the education sector of Afghanistan. The sample size was determined using convenience and non-probability sampling. This type of sampling has been determined based on various parameters such as context, access to relevant departments and availability of individuals for interviews. A total of 14 respondents were selected from the education sector. Out of these, 8 were government and 6 non-government individuals were interviewed, where around 21 per cent respondents were female employees.

Table 1: Respondents profile

Education related Employees	Frequency	Percent
Government	8	57%
Private	6	43%
Total	14	100%

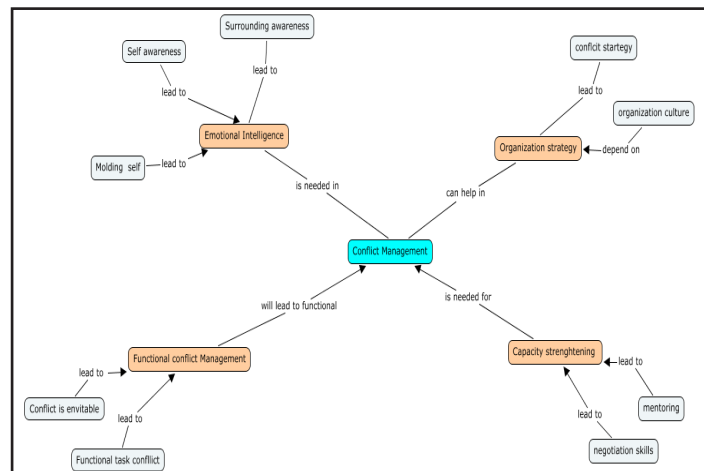
Source: Author's compilation

3.2 Procedure of data analysis

The six key steps proposed by (cress-well, 2003) for the data analysis were systematically proceeded. All collected opinions were converted to transcription and the important themes were underlined as a basic themes. It is worth pointing out that the basic themes were developed

from comments as chunks and also consider codes of the text in this study. Following categorization of the themes, the entire themes were critically reviewed. The highlighted basic themes were converted into organizing themes which is further grouped into global themes. Total nine (09) basic themes were identified in the first step while four organizing themes were extracted based on the nine (09) basic themes which were clustered and finally one global theme was extracted. The four organizing themes identified were “capacity strengthening of employees”, “functional conflict management”, “organizational approach” and the fourth one was “emotional intelligence”. All these four organizing themes were grouped together to extract one global theme called “conflict management” as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 2: Schematic diagram of basic themes to organizing themes into global themes



Source: Author's compilation

The interviewees' responses indicate mixed feeling about the conflict at the workplace. Approximately 64 per cent of participants disclosed that conflict is negative and should be avoided. While 36 per cent stated that if the conflict is managed positively, then it would be good otherwise conflict always lead to negative consequences. The majority of the participants revealed that conflict is not productive in an organization. They linked this statement with the ability of their organization for the conflict management.

If there is no workable strategy in placed in the organization, then usually conflict lead to bad consequences. Some of the participants were not able to differentiate conflict with conflict management, while a few of them highlighted the differences between conflict and conflict management.

Respondents indicated various behaviors for reaching the desired result in conflict. Though, conflict involved parties want to get good result in conclusion, some of them also reflected that fairness would be their first priority for reaching mutual agreement. Half of the interviews participants stated that they analyze both the pros and cons of various options during the conflict resolution process, while 29 per cent mentioned they also listen to another party to better understand the position of the opposite party. The behaviors of the leader/manager and subordinate are not alike when the supervisor and supervisee are involved in a conflict. Usually, during the negotiation session, supervisors have a greater chance to get a better result because of the legal status and legitimate power and as well as the fear of the subordinate for future job security. Other steps for reaching to conflict resolution were identifying the advantage and disadvantages, get information from third party, using previous lesson learning and consultation with friends and relative on specific matters. Those who had knowledge and skills of conflict, they provided better responses compared to those who did not have enough knowledge and skills on the subject. Therefore, social knowledge and organization cultures were the two key points reflected by the participations during the interviews. An individual with emotional intelligence skills are in a better position to deal with conflict compared to those who do not have the emotional intelligence capacity. People with such skills are calm and very tactful and can effortlessly convince the other party while negotiating. Attending special training and receiving constructive feedback from the mentor and leaders help to improve the emotional intelligence skills in the workplace.

4. Limitations and implications of the study

One of the main limitations of the study was accessibility to female

respondents because of cultural sensitivity. It was also felt during interviews' process that some of the participants were feeling reluctant to share their views. Therefore, it was realized that some individuals did not share the real information about their current approach for the conflict solving, because they tried to explain the positive aspects of functional conflict management at the workplace. Finally, it is substantial to mention that findings of the study cannot be generalized with confidence and should be limited only to education sector.

The role of leader/manager in promoting functional conflict is vital for the wellbeing of the organization. The intention and commitment of the manager is very important to manage conflict in the workplace. Thus, it requires enough knowledge and emotional intelligence capability to manage conflict effectively. Almost all interviewed individuals mentioned that there is no clear guideline or procedure in place pertaining to conflict management in their organizations. In order to ensure organizational growth and employee satisfaction, having a conflict strategy in both government and non-government organizations is very important. Building individual capacity on conflict management through organizing training sessions by expert and providing required resources on demonstrating organizational commitment for practices. While trainings and integration of functional conflict processes within the organization is not good enough without fostering an organizational culture that proactively uses a functional conflict management strategy. Managers and leaders should cultivate the habit of respect to individual insight to avoid negative conflict and keep communication channels open in the organization between employers and employees. Conflict and functional conflict education is important for all employees. Since, education institutions provide human resource to the market, therefore, providing required level knowledge and skill about conflict management would promote functional conflict management in the competitive environment of Afghanistan. All positive conflicts and its management are useful for the betterment of education quality; thus functional conflicts contribute in producing effective human resource to

the learning environment. Therefore, the role of educational institutions is vital to produce a skillful workforce to the society. For the successful conflict resolution, applying emotional intelligence (awareness, thoughts, emotions, distortions, desires, and needs) help to leave self-interests in order to envision the conflict situation properly from another's perspective as well. Therefore, employers are recommended to provide short training to employees on intelligence emotion development. Managers to develop their teams through mentoring and feedback mechanism to manage conflict with emotional involvement. This requires the manager to identify the individual staff member's weakness, behavior and conflict triggers and then to see the conflict from an independent perspective. Organization encouragement to stimulate functionally productive conflict to reawaken employees to perform well through competition and acknowledgement of their achievements. This approach helps workers to stimulate other junior staff in the organization to learn how to deal with conflict situations to get the desired result.

5. Conclusion

This research study was conducted to explore employees' understanding on conflict management, what specific behavioral skills are needed in individual level for effective conflict management. This study elaborates that specific skills are needed for developing emotional intelligence to strengthen the capacity of the employees to deal with conflict situation positively for organizational growth and learning. The findings highlighted the definition of the functional conflict, the importance of conflict strategy in an organization, employees' understanding, the role of emotional intelligence in conflict resolution and type of skills and behaviors for effective dealing with conflict situations.

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