

Assumptions, Fallacies and Misunderstandings-An Organisational Perspective

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Abstract

The immense amount of work in today's organizations and the necessity to work in teams for the fulfilment of organizational goals often leads to frequent misunderstandings among employees. In this process, our idiosyncrasies, assumptions and fallacies, and our personality traits make the workplace environment even more messy and awkward. This leads to a crisis and increased miscommunication. Diverse views and perspectives on how work should be done or shared are good. However, ego and egoistic tendencies can cause unnecessary misunderstandings. This causes bad blood among employees in organizations. If misunderstandings exist for too long, then, the stability of the organizations would be at stake. This negatively affects the employees and destroys the atmosphere prevailing in the organization. In this article, an attempt is made to understand the nature of conflicts generally prevailing in organizations from a very practical perspective. Differences of opinions, of course, exist among peers or between superiors and subordinates. However, humility and determination to resolve issues amiably should always be considered. Sincere intentions marked by humility and empathy in resolving issues and a desire to put aside individual interests for the sake of the organization should be of paramount concern for all employees.

Keywords: Communication, assumptions, empathy, collaboration, understanding, conflict, listening skills

Introduction

Communication at the workplace is increasingly becoming important in organisations. Employees spend a lot of time at the workplace today. Given the nature and complexity of today's workplace, relationships have assumed significant importance. Successful communication, hence, necessitates that employees have good listening skills, good nonverbal communication, and the desire to establish supportive and understanding climates. They should also be able to manage conflict and resolve misunderstandings. There is pressure to perform to the expectations of the management, the clients, and the organization as a whole. And so, in our haste to live up to the myriad expectations of the ever changing demands of the organization and society at large, employees are under an intense pressure to perform. In this process, there is bound to be friction and misunderstandings between peers. There can also be miscommunication between superiors and subordinates. Hence, interpersonal conflict seems to be an inevitable reality at the workplace today. Before we try to understand what interpersonal conflict is all about, let us delve a little deeply into what we mean by interpersonal communication. What exactly is interpersonal communication? Interpersonal communication is selective, systemic, unique, processual (is an ongoing process) transactions that allow people to reflect and build personal knowledge of one another and create shared meanings (Wood, 2010) [4].

Beebe and Redmond define it as the process of interacting simultaneously with another person and mutually influencing each other, usually for the purpose of managing relationships.

According to Martin Buber, a 20th century philosopher, relationships lie along a continuum of I-It, I-You, and I-Thou. In an I-It relationship, the speaker treats the other person based on the societal role. For example, in interactions between a bus passenger and a conductor, or between a customer and a server in a hotel, there is hardly any self-disclosure. We ask for the ticket and the conductor issues the ticket. We order an item in the hotel, and the server gets it. Beyond this, there is hardly any communication between the two. In 'I-You' communication mode, both the communicators recognize each other as individuals, and there is some amount of self-disclosure. In the terminology of Patricia Sias, this relationship approximates 'collegial peers'. There is mutual respect and a bit of personal element in such transactions. In 'I-Thou' mode of communication, there is highest self-disclosure between the two participants in communication. We have I-Thou relationship with very few people in life. Again, in the terminology of Patricia Sias, this may approximate 'special peers'. The participants know each other well, and can predict the other's behavior to a reasonably good extent. (Miller and Steinberg, 1975) [6]. At the organisational level, we are expected to have I-You level of communication with our peers, subordinates, and superiors. Based on Martin Buber's communication continuum, what is the nature of communication in organizations? Is it an I-It, or I-You, or and I-Thou? According to Professor Julia T. Wood, it is important to have and maintain I-You communication in organization.

Now, why does miscommunication take place in organizations? What conflicts result due to miscommunication? What is 'conflict' basically?

Interpersonal conflict occurs when there are different views, interests, or goals between individuals. (Wood, 2010) [4]. Communication scholars William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker define an interpersonal conflict as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals.” So, incompatible goals and scarce resources are the essential elements of an interpersonal conflict. According to Kory Floyd, conflict in interpersonal relationships is natural, can be direct or indirect, harmful, and beneficial too. (Kory Floyd, 2010) [7].

Conflict in Organizations

“All these different rages—road rage, air rage, whatever rage—are all symptoms of the same thing: We all have too many commitments and too little time.”—Lynne McClure, McClure Associates.

It is natural, thus, to have miscommunication in organizations. When miscommunication gets escalated over a period of time, it results in breakdown in communication leading to gradual eroding of relationships. Employees exhibit their behavior in different ways during a conflict.

Different people express their resentment in different ways at the workplace.

Some Causes of Conflicts

In organisations, conflicts are natural. But what could be some of the reasons for conflicts? Conflicts can take place due to inequality or injustice in workload distribution, invigilation duties given to staff during exams, delegation of departmental responsibilities. Other reasons could be when a coworker is progressing in his/her professional career. Sometimes, when a coworker is recognized by the management of the institution for professional reasons, it can cause some sense of uneasiness and insecurity in others. And all that is required is a ‘spark’ to ignite an imaginary conflict. Miscommunication between employees takes place due to ‘cognitive fallacies’. Some common fallacies include

1. **Halo Effect:** Based on one trait we see in the other individual, we generalize or attribute multiple qualities to him/her. For example, if somebody tells us that a certain coworker is apathetic, then we also assume that he/her is irregular, sloppy, aimless, and irresponsible.
2. **Allness Fallacy:** It is the belief that one can say everything there is to say about something.

How do Individuals Deal with or Respond in Conflicts?

Aggressive communicators generally resort to accusing, screaming, and shouting. They become even more provoked if the listener is a passive communicator. Using abusive language, threatening and becoming hysterical for their “assumptions” are common symptoms. An aggressive communicator would say, “It is not my fault. They are to be blamed.” This, generally, could be one of the ways a person with an aggressive style of communication reacts. Most aggressive communicators claim to be assertive in dealing with conflicts, and consider themselves to be ‘sanctimonious’ even!

Passive communicators, generally, do their best to avoid, ignore, or pretend that there was no conflict. Passive communicators have low self-esteem and are timid. They do not speak assertively. They think that the problem or conflict would subside in due time. They do not assert themselves. A standard answer of a passive communicator would be like this: “It is not a big problem. Things will subside. In fact,

there is no conflict here.” That means a passive communicator even denies there is a problem. Withdrawing, denying the existence of a conflict are some of the ways a passive communicator does.

Assertive communicators are those who disagree respectfully. They do not let others talk to them rashly or let others heap abuse on them. In a conflict situation, they express their opinions frankly and boldly, but with due respect to others. They believe in an ‘I win-you win’ approach. An assertive communicator would protect the face of the listener. They help people maintain a ‘positive face (Goffman). In a conflict situation, hence, an assertive communicator protects his own face and the face of the listener’s. Brown and Levinson in their classic work on politeness define face as “the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself/herself.” Face is a social image that individuals would like to preserve for themselves.

So, what essentially an assertive communicator does is to protect the face of the persons in conflict.

Some common statements communicators would utter in conflict situations

Aggressive Speaker

1. How am I supposed to understand that?
2. You are completely insane.
3. They did it, not me. (Emphasis on ‘they’)
4. Excuse me, you did not inform me.
5. You were supposed to inform me

Passive Speaker

1. I was wrong.
2. It is all right. It was my fault.
3. Let us leave the issue here.
4. I am to be blamed for all that is happening.
5. Time will heal.

Assertive Speaker

1. I am really sorry that this happened, but
2. I am truly sorry if you are hurt because of what I said.... I didn’t mean that.
3. I believe we all should resolve this issue amicably, and it is possible.
4. I can understand your perspective, but please listen to me too.
5. You may be right; however, I too wish to add something to the discussion.
6. I am not blaming you, but there could have been a better way of dealing with this

How Must Conflicts be Resolved?

Conflicts can easily be resolved. It is not difficult. The solution then is to match our concern for ourselves with concern for others. It is natural to be self-centered. However, it is equally important to show empathy with other people’s situation also. Genuine concern and empathy for others must be cultivated. An altruistic attitude in resolving problems at the workplace is the need of the hour. According to researchers Robert Blake and Jane Mouton, there are two underlying dimensions in our approach to dealing with conflict. They are as follows: our concern for our own needs and desires, and our concern for the other party’s needs and desires.

It is believed that there are five major strategies for engaging in conflict. They are as follows: competing, avoiding,

accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. (Floyd, 2009)^[8].

Competing

The competing style represents a high concern for your own needs and desires, and a low concern for other's needs. The person just wants to win at the cost of the other. Here, one person wins and the other person loses (Floyd, 2009)^[8]. It is at the cost of the other person. There is aggression and lack of concern for the other person. Power is the distinguishing characteristic here. Physical or implied force is used here. In organizations, people use implied force when they want to win at any cost. Superiors can use implied force to get their work done (Adler and Rodman, 2006)^[3].

Avoiding

In this scenario, the individual simply ignores or fails to deal with the conflict. People even deny that there is a conflict. This is more or like a 'lose-lose' situation, neither of the individuals has any gain. A nation may gain military victory at the cost of thousands of lives, large amounts of resources, and a damaged national consciousness hasn't truly won much. It is only a pyrrhic victory. On an interpersonal level too, this holds true. Most of us have seen battles of pride in which both parties strike out and both suffer. This approach does no good to the individuals or the team or the organization (Adler and Rodman, 2006)^[3].

Accommodating

Here, there is high concern for the other party but a low concern for the self. In the accommodating style, the person gives up his needs to meet other's needs just to protect the relationship. It is "keep the peace" in their relationships (Floyd, 2009)^[8].

Compromising

This requires a moderate concern for other's needs and desires. Here, both parties give up something in order to gain something. They may not get exactly what they want, but all parties leave the conflict having gained something valuable. There is some satisfaction of having gained something. (Floyd, 2009)^[8].

Collaborating

Here, the individuals believe in 'I win-You win' mode of communication. They try to ensure that both the parties gain in the process. This requires willingness, patience, energy, and time since the needs of both the individuals should be met. This is also called the 'collaborative' approach. (Floyd, 2009)^[8].

Conclusion

Conflicts are a natural phenomenon in organisations. However, employees should have a sincere desire to resolve all outstanding issues in an amicable manner. Successful organizations are those who have collaborative employees. Unresolved issues can precipitate the crisis further. This does not help the individuals or the organization. Empathy and mutual respect are the foundations by which we can resolve all outstanding conflicts. Accusations, assumptions, aggressive tone and aggressive body language are detrimental to mutual well-being. Colleagues should willingly come forward, agree to disagree respectfully, appreciate one another's efforts. They must be aware of the fact that the existence and success of an organisation depends on mutual

collaboration, cooperation, and empathy employees have for one another. It is the 'big picture' we need to resolve issues.

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