
UNIT 15 CONFLICT AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

Objectives

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the concept of conflict and stress;
- able to identify the causes of conflict in an Organization;
- understand the various styles and of conflict;
- know the strategies to manage conflict; and
- know how to reduce and manage stress.

Structure

- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Understanding the Concept of Conflict
- 15.3 Types of Conflict
- 15.4 Causes of Conflict
- 15.5 Conflict Styles
- 15.6 Impact of Globalization and Culture in Conflict
- 15.7 Conflict Resolution
- 15.8 Understanding Stress
- 15.9 Knowing Stress Management Techniques
- 15.10 Summary
- 15.11 Self-Assessment Questions
- 15.12 Glossary
- 15.13 Further Readings

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Conflict and stress are inevitable behavioural features in an organization. Both the processes are present where the individual is working in a team or in a group. Not all conflict is bad. Similarly, not all stress is bad. In fact, both play a vital role in enhancing the performance of an individual and the organization at large. In the present scenario, organizations are facing a lot of conflict and stress due to globalization and cultural diversity in workforce. Thus, it becomes imperative to manage conflict and stress so that the organization's objectives are fulfilled and the individual performance does not diminish. Hence, in this Unit, we aim to familiarize you with the basic concepts of conflict and stress. We have also attempted to explain various techniques to manage conflict and stress.

15.2 UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CONFLICT

Conflict is an important behavioural process where people work in a team or a group. Conflict has become a common feature of organizational life more so

because of globalization, cultural diversity, varied perceptions, and so forth. It is a situation in which people disagree over an important issue. This might be because of clash of thought, ideas, and perceptions. 'Conflict is the psychological and behavioural reaction to a perception that another person is keeping you from reaching the goal, taking away your right to behave in a particular way, or violating the expectancies of a relationship' (Aamodt,2013).

Thus, a salient component in the process of conflict is *perception*. Misperceptions of other's ideas, intentions or behavior may result in conflict. Also, higher the importance given to a goal, behavior, or relationship, more will be the conflict. On the basis of meta-analysis, De Drau and Weingart (2003) posited that most conflicts result in lower team performance and lower satisfaction. This is referred as *dysfunctional conflict*. When such a conflict occurs, people are not able to work together, it lessens productivity, spreads to other spheres and increases turnover. Dysfunctional conflict is unhealthy and involves personalized anger and resentment directed at specific individuals. A person involved in dysfunctional conflict will tend to act before s/he thinks and most often relies on verbal abuse, threats and deception to communicate. It may also involve aggressive acts on subordinates, peers, supervisors, etc. (Inness, et al 2008).

All conflict is not bad. There is also healthy and constructive conflict which enhances creativity and resolves problems. This is referred to as *functional conflict*. Problem solving takes place and morale is increased (Tjosvold, 1984), involves positive change and lead to innovation in the organization (Cossier and Dalton, 1990), and results in increased productivity (Tjosvold, 1984).

A key in managing conflicts in organizations is to stimulate functional conflict and resolve dysfunctional conflict. Organization tends to thrive where there is healthy disagreement and well- managed conflict. Homogenous groups promote complacency and can be destructive. Such organizations, thus, are not able to adapt to the changing work environment. Early views on management, considered conflict to be dysfunctional. Frederick Taylor opined 'conflict as a threat to management authority and a waste of time'.

Moderate level of conflict is good for the organization and prevents groupthink and apathy. It may also increase friendly competitiveness and increase team effectiveness. Very low level of conflict leads to stagnation and complacency. Very high levels of conflict is detrimental for the organization since most often it is based on personal differences rather than organizational goals and objectives.

15.3 TYPES OF CONFLICT

Primarily, there are four types of conflicts that are observed in an organization. They are summarized as follows:

- 1) **Intrapersonal Conflict:** This is a conflict when an individual experiences some kind of internal conflict. For example, a mother who wants to be involved in her child's school activities and also to be involved in important assignments at office. She may experience intrapersonal conflict. This is referred to as *interrole conflict*. With organizations giving an option of work-from-home to the employees, interrole conflict has become even more common. *Person-role conflict* arises when an individual is expected to behave contrary to her/his values.

- 2) **Interpersonal Conflict:** Such a conflict, often referred to as '*personality conflict*', arises between two people at the workplace due to differences in working styles, ideas, and values. This may happen between any two coworkers, subordinates, or an employee and a customer. This type of conflict has potentially negative impact since it revolves around personal differences.
- 3) **Intragroup Conflict:** This refers to conflict that occurs between an individual and her/his group. It happens when an individual's needs, goals, values are different from those of the group
- 4) **Intergroup Conflict:** Such type of conflict occurs between two or more groups. This may happen within or outside the organization over various issues. For example, conflict over allocation of resources or a task to a particular department. Intergroup conflict may also occur at different levels in an organization. When conflict occurs between groups at the same level of organization, then it is called *horizontal conflict*. For example, delay in product delivery, conflict may arise. *Vertical conflict* may arise when there is conflict between groups at different hierarchical levels of organization. Power and control are the main causal factors.
- 5) **Interorganizational Conflict:** Such a conflict arises between two or more organizations. Heightened competition, mergers and acquisitions, and so forth can increase the chances of such types of conflict. It can be both functional and dysfunctional. For example, such conflicts may arise between companies, sports clubs, etc.

15.4 CAUSES OF CONFLICT

By now, it must be clear that conflict is not always negative but may have positive effect also. It may be caused by personal reasons and the sources may be found at the organizational level too. The causes may be grouped as given below;

- 1) **Individual Causes:** Such causes mainly reflect individual's perceptions and expectations of how the work should be done and what is significant in the work environment. Working style, personality, autonomy, culture of the individual and so forth are personal causes that may arise conflict. Nowadays, cross-cultural differences may also give rise to conflict at the workplace. For example, an employee calling her/his superior by the first name, that might be culturally appropriate for the employee, but the superior might find it to be offensive and disrespectful.

Personality is an important personal cause that needs a separate mention here. Most often, conflicts arise due to 'incompatibility' there are people who are difficult to work with than others. Bramson (1981) concluded that 'people who are dogmatic and authoritarian with low self-esteem are involved in conflict more often than as compared to open minded people who feel good about themselves.' Bramson also classified 'difficult people' and which was further advanced by Brinkman and Kirschmer (2006) that such people have abnormally high needs for control, perfection, approval, or attention.

Conflict can emerge from communication barriers. Such barriers can be *physical*, when there is a physical distance, *cultural*, when there is difference

in language or customs(due to lack of understanding of another culture), and *psychological*, when there is difference in personality.

Beliefs may also cause conflict. When a person believes that s/he is superior to other members in the group, is mistreated by others, or is vulnerable to others, cannot trust others, and is helpless or powerless (Eidelson and Eidelson,2003).

- 2) **Organizational Causes:** There are various sources of conflict at the organizational level. Few important causes are discussed here.

Goal incompatibility is an important cause of conflict. For example, different divisions in an organization have different goals to accomplish and thus, conflict is bound to arise.

Competition over resources is another important source of conflict. When there is a gap between demand and supply, conflict arises. For example, in a University, conflict may arise when there is scarcity of finances, space, faculty or staff or lab facilities, and so forth. It becomes difficult to satisfy the needs of every person or group.

Task interdependence can also cause conflict. This happens when the performance of some group members is dependent on the performance of other group members in order to complete a task. When the roles are not clearly defined as to who will do what then it results in conflict.

Another reason of conflict is jurisdictional ambiguity. It is found when geographical boundaries are ambiguous or unclear.

Activity-1 The task of the manager is to stimulate functional conflict and resolve dysfunctional conflict.

Do you agree with the statement? Give reasons. Examine the various causes and types of conflict.

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15.5 CONFLICT STYLES

Every individual uses a particular style when faced with a conflict. *Assertiveness* and *Cooperativeness* are the two dimensions on the basis of which the style works. The experts opine that there are primarily five common types of conflict styles. These styles are briefly discussed below.

- 1) **Avoiding Style:** As the name suggests, the employee using this style will generally ignore the conflict hoping that it will resolve itself. *Withdrawal* and *triangling* are two important forms of avoidance. Withdrawal is one of

the easiest ways to handle conflict. For example, an employee leaving the organization to avoid conflict. In triangling, the employee discusses the conflict with a third party, in a hope that the third will talk to the second party and the conflict to be resolved without meeting the two parties. When such a style is observed, the supervisor may use formal third party mediation.

- 2) **Accommodating Style:** The person relying in this usually sacrifices her/his needs and satisfies the needs of the others. The person is high on submissiveness and cooperation. This style is harmful in the long run.

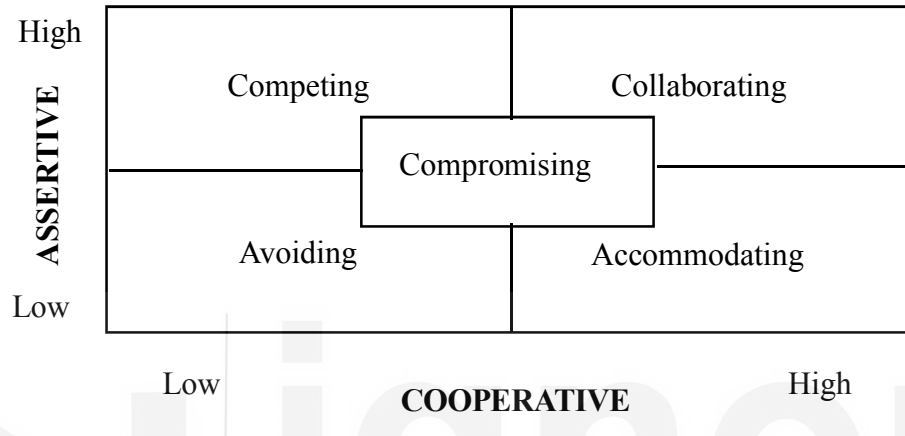


Figure 15.1 Conflict Styles

- 3) **Competing Style:** A person using this style does anything to win with little respect for the other person/group (win-lose). The person operates on the principle of ‘winning at all costs’. Such a style is very damaging for relationships and other conflicts may also arise. But it might be useful in emergency situations.
- 4) **Collaborating Style:** A person using this style tries to win but also wants the other person to win (win-win). This style is beneficial at all times but being time consuming, is not helpful during emergencies.
- 5) **Compromising Style:** It is a give-and-take tactics where most of the conflicts are resolved with the help of compromise so that solution benefits both the parties. It focuses on *satisficing*- the solution is minimally accepted by both the parties.

15.6 IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURE IN CONFLICT

Nowadays, large transnational companies hire personnel from different ethnicity and cultural background. Today's workplace is more multicultural and diverse and hence, has the potential of more conflicts. Hofstede has posited five dimensions along which cultural differences may emerge. They are as follows: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and long term/ short term orientation. These differences impact conflict management in organizations. By individualism, Hofstede means that the individual gives priority to one's interest and in collectivism, the individual gives priority to group interests first. In high-power cultures, individuals perceive

varying levels of power in organizations. Differences in power distance can be a source of conflict. There are cultures that can tolerate high level of uncertainty (for example, U.S.), while as, there are cultures that like high level of certainty in their work settings (for example, Israel). Masculinity-femininity refers to the preferences for assertiveness and material goods (for example, U.S) over preferences for human capital and quality of life (for example, Sweden). There are cultures that have long-term orientation, thereby focusing on future- saving and persistence(for example, China) and the cultures that promote short-term orientation, focusing on past and present, value tradition and fulfillment of social obligation(for example, Russia).

Thus, in today's time of globalization, workforce is more culturally diverse and has the potential for many types of conflicts. Understanding the cultural differences and the values, will be the key to manage conflict in multicultural work setting.

Box 15.1 Case Example

Indian family business and Conflict Researches have found that 13 percent of the family businesses survive till third generation. The first generation are passionate towards running the business, the second generation understands the difficulties that the first generation have undergone, the third and fourth generation do not agree on what drives the business. The reasons being lack of communication, inefficient succession planning, lack of clarity about roles in family business and so forth. Such conflicts should be resolved at the earliest. Family business board is one of the solutions that are viable. For example, TVS group. The family business board comprises of family members, who manage the business and there are professional managers also, who take business decisions. The family members are part of the business but do not participate in management. The boards are governed by family constitution which entails training and induction of new members, conflict resolution, and mentorship, as well helping any member who wants to start a new venture or diversify. Large business houses have been able to sustain themselves because they have successfully taken care of these issues in advance.

(Adapted from Quick, Nelson and Khandelwal, 2013:*Organizational Behaviour: A South Indian Perspective*)

15.7 CONFLICT RESOLUTION

There are different methods to resolve and prevent conflicts. Few methods are highlighted below:

- 1) **Policy framework:** A formal policy to handle conflict should be in place. Employees should try to resolve the issue at their ends before third party intervention. Also, employees should receive training from time to time on how to prevent conflict, reflecting on the probable causes of conflict and the strategies to resolve conflict.
- 2) **Use of conflict resolution skills:** If conflict occurs, then conflict resolution skills should be used in resolving the conflict. Aim should be to reduce

tension and increase mutual trust between the two warring parties. A strategy used is ‘cooperative problem solving’ when a task force or committee is appointed with representatives. They try to work upon the problem and its possible solution.

- 3) **Third-party Intervention:** If the warring parties are not able to solve the conflict themselves, then help is taken from third-party intervention and this is usually done with the help of **mediation** or **arbitration**.

In mediation, a neutral third party is involved to help both the parties to reach an amiable solution. Mediators do not decide but help in communication process and encourage the parties to reach a solution. Mediators are helpful when both the parties perceive the mediator to be competent and trustworthy and both the parties do not trust each other. Most of the conflicts are found to be resolved with the help of mediation in organizations.

While as, in arbitration the neutral third party listens to the arguments of both the sides and then makes a decision. The decision reached through arbitration can be binding and non-binding as well. If it is binding, then both the parties have to abide by the decision, even if one party or both the parties are displeased. If the decision is non-binding, one or both the parties can reject the decision.

- 4) **Negotiation:** One of the important mechanisms to resolve conflict that involves two or more parties that engage in an open discussion of problem solutions with the intent to reach a mutually agreeable solution. It requires careful planning and skills on the part of the negotiator. There are prerequisites to be fulfilled to go for negotiation. Primarily, the conditions to be satisfied are that it should involve two or more parties, there is a conflict of interest, the parties are willing to negotiate, and are willing to work together.

Also, there are two main approaches to negotiation, *distributive bargaining* and *integrative negotiation*. The former operates on a win-lose principle. The goals of one party are in direct conflict with the other party. Resources are limited but each party wants to maximize the interests of one’s own party. The latter involves a win-win approach. Here, the party’s goals are not mutually exclusive and the focus is on to achieve objectives of both the parties. Emphasis is on creating new solutions and options. There are cross-cultural negotiations taking place nowadays. To get the maximum benefit, one should know about the other culture as much as possible.

Activity 21

- 1) Discuss the various styles of conflict

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2) What are the techniques of managing conflict at work?

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3) Have you recently faced any conflicting situation? Using the concepts of this section, can you identify the type of conflict, the styles used by the involved parties and effective strategies to resolve the conflict?

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15.8 UNDERSTANDING STRESS

Stress is an important feature in organizational behavior. It is a word that we use all the time. And most often we interpret stress to be the most unpleasant fact of life. The word stress is derived from the latin word *strictus*, which means tight or narrow. Hans Selye gave the concept of General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) in 1936 which was later renamed as ‘stress response’. Selye (1976) defines stress as ‘a state manifested by a syndrome which consists of all non specifically induced changes in a biologic system’. GAS model involves three stages, namely, *Alarm reaction, Stage of resistance, and Stage of exhaustion*.

According to Quick, et al (1997), stress or the stress response is the unconscious preparation to fight or flee that a person experiences when faced with any demand. Stress is also defined as psychological, physical reaction to certain life events or situations. It is a process that begins with life events or situation. If we put it simply, anything that involves ‘change’ creates stress. These life events are called as *stressors*. Thus, a stressor or demand can be a person, or event that triggers stress response. Examples can be an appointment with the doctor, wedding, job interview, making a speech, and so forth. These situations are perceived to be stressful. Blood pressure, perspiration, high heart rate, stiffness in body, is few ways in which the body responds. These physical reactions are called ‘stress reactivity’. But if these physical reactions occur for a longer time, beyond the tolerance limit of the body, then negative physical or psychological consequences may result (Greenberg, 2011) and these consequences are called as strains. In other words, ‘distress’ or ‘strain’ refers to the adverse psychological, physical, behavioural, organizational consequences that may occur as a result of stressful events.

A particular event might not be stressful to you, but might be stressful to the other person. Thus, stress is subjective. Also, not all stress is bad. Stress resulting

in positive energy and enhanced performance and health is called as 'eustress' (eu- means that something that is proper) or positive stress. On experiencing the stressors, the feeling is of challenge and achievement. An example of positive stress is the anxiety before taking a test. If there is no anxiety, then you might also be not motivated to study and take the test. Thus, some stress is always helpful and this is known as 'optimal level of arousal' or Inverted-U theory. Too much arousal or having little arousal will result in low performance, while as moderate level of arousal will result in peak performance. This optimal level of arousal differs from one person to the other. The Figure below shows the relationship between stress (pressure) and performance.



Fig. 15.2: Relationship between Stress and Performance

'Distress' or 'negative stress' occurs when there is too much stress that the person cannot endure and cope and nothing is done to mitigate its effects. The events have a harmful effect. Thus, the situation becomes demanding with no or little control over the situation is perceived. For example, last attempt for a job interview. Hence, negative stress is experienced when there is an imbalance between stressors (demands) placed on us and our ability to meet those demands. Here it is important to make a distinction between eustress and distress. For example, an interesting finding of a study on 1800 managers in U.S. there amount of eustress had no relationship to job satisfaction or to move to other organizations. On the other hand, managers with high level of distress were less satisfied with their jobs and made attempts to find a new job than did managers with low distress level.

Other related concepts are *hypostress* and *hyperstress*. The former indicates insufficient stress due to lack of stimulation. For example, a person feels monotony in the current job since there is no challenging work. The latter term refers to excessive stress when events (including positive events) pile up and stretch the limits of the person's adaptability. Role overload can be a cause of hyperstress.

15.9 KNOWING STRESS MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

As we have understood till now, stress is an inevitable feature of our personal and work life. All stress is not bad and negative and it can be prevented and managed. First of all, we should be self-aware and learn to recognize the first symptoms of distress in ourselves. Secondly, stress management techniques should be focused to prevent and manage stress at individual level and at organizational level. Now in this section, let us discuss various strategies to prevent and manage stress.

I) Personal strategies to prevent and manage stress.

- 1) **Work-life Balance:** One of the most important mechanisms to manage stress and improve coping with it is to strike a balance between personal life and work life. The balancing act will affect our physical and psychological well-being and will help us to cope up with the demands, challenges, and various stresses at personal level and at work place. It has been observed that the people whose life revolves around work related issues, experience more stress. Working continuously is unhealthy for physical and mental health. There might be chances where a person has to devote extra time or sacrifice some personal time, but the same should not be practiced for long-term approach. This is not productive at the personal as well as organizational level.
- 2) **Positive mindset and Resilience:** How we respond to a potentially stressful situation depends on the mindset that the person is having. Positive attitude alters our subjective experiences of stress when it occurs. Positive thinking can be learned overtime. Negative thinking or pessimism is found to be related to depression, physical problems, and low levels of achievement. As Martin Seligman, father of Positive Psychology uses the term **PERMA** and says 'our cognitive appraisal of a situation influences whether or not we will experience it as stressful'. PERMA refers to *Positive emotion, Engagement, Positive relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment*. Learned optimism is one of the five dimensions of Positive Organizational Behaviour. The others are self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, subjective well-being, and hope.

If the person is able to develop resilience then s/he may actually adapt, learn and change and become more adaptive in the process. Realistic optimism and strong sense of values that help in setting priorities, also enhances resilience. Self –awareness in this process is very critical. Correct and realistic assessment of strengths, weaknesses, and evaluating our goals in light of this is the most important aspect.

- 3) **Social support:** It is one of the mediating factors of how people cope with stress. Social support acts as a buffer to many types of stressors, especially at workplace. Laughter and positive humour at workplace has been associated with positive emotions, low stress and enhancement of productivity. Social support system provides emotional caring, information, feedback, support and mentoring.

- 4) **TimeManagement:** It is one of the most significant strategies to prevent stress. One should manage time effectively, thereby setting priorities and accomplishing goals and commitments. The symptoms of poor time management are missing deadlines, constant rush, insufficient rest time and indecisiveness. If a person is able to manage time, then s/he can track her/his accomplishments and avoid unnecessary confusion and stress at the last hour.
- 5) **Coping skills:** Refers how to deal with the conflict. One should try to improve coping skills by focusing on what the person can change and control, instead of focusing on what one cannot change.
- 6) **LeisureTimeActivities:** Such activities should help in reducing stress. Leisure activities should promote joy, spontaneity and connectedness with significant others and nature.
- 7) **Physical Exercise:** Aerobic exercises are found to be positively correlated - improvement in person's responsiveness to stressful activities. Flexibility training also helps in reducing unnecessary muscular tension that accrues because of distress.
- 8) **Diet:** Good dietary practices help in reducing stress. Food with high sugar content, and foods high in cholesterol, alters the blood chemistry and hence make her/him vulnerable to stress.
- 9) **Professional Help:** Person should be able to identify the symptoms at the earliest, and thus, early detection of strain symptoms, along with professional help will help in preventing physical and psychological damage. A person may have the markers like, loss of appetite or increased appetite, loss of sleep or oversleeping, and mood swings that are indicative to seek professional help.

II) Organizational Strategies to prevent and manage Stress

- 1) **Job Redesign:** Redesigning jobs is important so that employee needs are taken care off and some sources of stress are reduced. An increase in worker control will help in reducing stress at organizational level; most common is job decision latitude. Another benefit of job redesign is to reduce uncertainty and increase predictability at workplace.
- 2) **Goal Settings:** This strategy is designed to enhance task motivation. It helps in focusing a person's attention and helps in channelizing energy into productive way.

Activity 3

a) Differentiate between stress, distress and strain

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b) Discuss the relationship between stress and performance

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c) Describe the individual and organizational stress preventive methods

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15.10 SUMMARY

This Unit has attempted to help you to understand the meaning and types of conflict in an organization. With the advent of globalization, the organizations have diverse workforce but are now vulnerable to conflicts than ever before. It has given you insight to resolve conflict in organizations. It has helped you to understand that all stress is not bad and negative. It is very important to understand the difference between stress and distress. Lastly, you have come to know the various strategies to manage stress at the personal as well organizational level.

15.11 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1) What is meant by conflict? Discuss the various types of conflict, citing examples.
- 2) Elucidate the various strategies to reduce conflict in an organization.
- 3) Discuss the relationship between stress and performance.
- 4) What do you understand by stress? Discuss various strategies to reduce stress.
- 5) ‘Organizations now have multiethnic workforce and hence are vulnerable to conflicts’. Comment.

15.13 FURTHER READINGS

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