CULTURE AND CONFLICT. A PARTICULARIZATION IN THE BUSINESS CONTEXT

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Abstract: The various interactions between employees create the premises for the emergence and development of conflicts, which, if not managed, can adversely affect the results of the work. Cultural values influence preferences for different conflict resolution options. The article analyzes the influence of different cultural dimensions on the emergence, as well as the ways of managing conflicts in the context of business.

Keywords: culture, conflict, context, organization, business

Introduction

The complexity of contemporary organizational life, the multiplication of complicated and stressful situations at work requires skills to work well with others who sometimes disagree with us. Conflict is a fundamental force that governs all aspects of life. Conflict occurs when there is a disagreement over essential issues within a social situation or when emotional antagonisms create frictions between individuals or groups (Uhl-Bien, M et al., 2014, p. 214). Within an organization, conflicts can occur between individuals, groups and departments (Huczynski, A.A., Buchanan, D.A., 2013, p. 726). Leaders and team members sometimes have to devote a significant amount of time to managing conflicts, sometimes being direct participants, sometimes acting as mediators or neutral third parties.

In literature, we can identify many points of view regarding the nature and content of the conflict, some of which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Conceptual approaches to the Conflict

Author and year	Definition
Huczynski, A.A., Buchanan,D.A.(2013, p.726)	Conflict is a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first part cares about"
Wagner and Hollenbeck (2010, p.227)	A process of opposition and confrontation that can occur in organizations between either individuals or groups- occurs when parties exercise power in the pursuit of valued goals or objectives and obstruct the progress of other parties"
Johns, G., Saks,A.M. (2014,p.494)	„Interpersonal conflict is a process that occurs when one person, group or organizational subunit frustrates the goal

	attainment of another"
Meier and Barabel (2015, p.534)	The conflict symbolizes the divergence between one or more actors on one or more dimensions (objectives, values, interests, methods, means, roles and statutes) and engaging antagonistic relations.
Popescu,D. (2010, p.228)	"A behavior in the direction of obstructing the attainment of goals by other persons"

Source: Synthesis from specialized literature

The various opinions identified in the specialized literature highlight the different causes or dimensions of the phenomenon: affecting the interest pursued by the other party, exercising the power in pursuing the objectives considered important, incompatibilities that arise in the interaction of individuals, differences in the interpretation of the different organizational situations.

There is no consensus on the role of the conflict in organizations, and there are several approaches to this. The traditional approach suggests the need to avoid the conflict, being consistent with attitudes towards group behavior that prevailed in 1930-1940. The interactionist approach encourages the conflict based on the supposition that harmonious and cooperative groups tend to become static and do not respond to the needs of innovation and change. However, some scholars who supported this approach have begun to identify problems when encouraging conflict. Therefore, the researchers have focused on managing the entire context in which the conflict takes place, before and after the behavioral stage (Robbins and Judge, 2013, p.447-449). We appreciate that studies on the role of culture in explaining and managing conflicts fall within this broader process view regarding conflict.

1. Culture and conflict

Globalization raises the need for employees to be as effective as possible when confronted with cultural barriers, both inside and outside their country of residence. As companies are increasingly operating globally, a large number of employees are sent to other countries, and at the local level, migratory flows amplify cultural diversity (Van der Zee and Hofhuis, 2018).

The way individuals seek to manage conflicts can be influenced by their cultural background. The conflict reflects some tensions that arise among the members of a group as a result of some perceived differences. When people from different cultures meet, there is a greater probability of a conflict occurring.

There are a number of research questions related to the culture-conflict relationship: what are the characteristics of the intercultural conflict? How does it differ from other forms of conflict? Martin and Nakayama (2014, pp. 231-232) identified three unique characteristics of the intercultural conflict: ambiguity, language difficulties and contradictory conflict resolution styles.

Individuals may often be uncertain about the perception of the conflict situation by the other party or about how to resolve conflicts. Moreover, the partner may not think he might be in

a conflict. When they experience ambiguity, individuals resort to the implicit conflict-solving style, the one learned in the family.

Language can lead to intercultural conflict, but it can also be the first tool to solve it. Poor knowledge of the language spoken by the partner involves difficulties in managing the conflict and remaining silent can sometimes be a useful aspect.

Intercultural conflict can be characterized by contradictory styles. An interesting example is that of "maquiladoras", assembly factories located on the border between Mexico and the US. Certain Mexican managers believe that US leaders have a rudimentary, tough style in their relationships with workers, expecting them to value harmony in interpersonal relationships. Instead, US managers expect from their Mexican colleagues a direct and honest style and a lesser concern for the emotional side. In these factories, the biggest difference between the two camps appears to be the way of expressing disagreement of US managers at meetings. Different styles of conflict management can cause difficulties and even amplify it.

Hellriegel and Slocum (2011, p.386) argue that the conflict is related to incompatibilities between the goals, cognitions or emotions within or between individuals or groups. Incompatible objectives can create certain breaks in the business, and when employees involved in a conflict of this type are from different cultures, misunderstandings can escalate. For example, the main objective in the mind of a Chinese negotiator when participating in a series of meetings can be to create an appropriate space of interactions that will allow him profitable exchanges in the future. Instead, the US negotiator's main goal in the same meeting may be to conclude a single transaction. In such a situation, there may be attempts by the US negotiator to clearly define its position the Chinese negotiator may not pay attention to these issues (Velo, 2012)

Cognitive differences can involve many challenges at different levels. Managers from cultures with a large range of power will prefer not to use the delegation of duties to subordinates. Thus, they will have much less information when they have to get in touch with partners on the same hierarchical level from low power cultures. On the role of emotions, businesspeople in emotional cultures express their feelings very openly, confusing their partners from neutral cultures, who often do not perceive what it is about (Velo, 2012, p.128).

The existence of conflicts is also based on the conscious or unconscious use of reality simplifications, through stereotypes, prejudices, and value judgments. Stereotypes are based on the principle of cognitive economy that drives the individual to establish categories. Cultural stereotypes are more evident in relations between cultures of different countries. Thus, the French are generally perceived by the Germans as being less hard workers, dishonest, disorderly and whiners. On the other hand, the Germans are perceived by the French as rigid, effective, disciplined, and strict (Meier, 2016, p.96-97). Prejudices are generalizing assessments, established in advance, without empirical or rational basis. The association of the Germans with disciplined and strict individuals implies a stereotype, and the refusal to discuss a business with a German just because it belongs to this nationality is a prejudice. The value judgment, which is more than a preference, may be acceptable or not, depending on the justification that justifies it.

2. Styles of conflict management and cultural differences

Different studies that seek to identify cultural differences in conflict management styles turn to the framework created by Geert Hofstede (2001,2012). Most of them address the

dimension of "Individualism-Collectivism," which Hofstede regards as the main component of cultural variability. In individualist cultures there is a stronger focus on the "self-interest" dimension, while collectivist cultures put more emphasis on the "concern for others" dimension, thus influencing the choice of negotiating strategies. Ting-Toomey et al. (1991) have shown that Americans are turning to dominance, while Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese, and Korean people prefer the style of avoidance. The meta-analysis led by Holt and DeVore (2005, p.165-166) based on 123 pair comparisons revealed that: (1) individualist cultures use force (forcing) as a style of conflict resolution more than collectivist cultures; (2) Collectivist cultures prefer the style of withdrawal, reconciliation and problem-solving more than individualistic ones; (3) In individualist cultures, the compromise is supported mainly by women; (4) irrespective of the type of culture, women will use compromise more than men; (5) men tend to use compulsion (forcing) more than women in individualist cultures; (6) If we refer to organizational roles, men are more inclined than women to practice coercion with superiors. Günkel et al. (2016, p.579) have found a positive relationship between collectivism and the style of integration, and a negative relationship between collectivism and the style of domination.

Relatively few studies have tested the association of power distance and conflict management styles. Thus, Volkema (2004) conducted a study on accepting different negotiation behaviors among college graduates from a large number of countries. Respondents in high-power distance cultures developed a lesser acceptance of competitive negotiation tactics (such as exaggerating requests to open negotiations). Purohit and Simmers (2006) have shown that there is a positive relationship between the power distance and the styles of domination and avoidance. Van Oudenhoven et al., (1998) found a positive relationship between the power distance and the integrative style. In cultures with a high power distance it is considered more appropriate for one party to gain advantage over the other, reflected in the bargaining tactics used, while in low-power distance cultures the parties are more inclined to compromise.

Purohit and Simmers (2006) have shown a positive link between uncertainty avoidance and dominant conflict management style and avoidance. Confirming their theoretical predictions, He, Zhu and Peng (2002) found that avoiding uncertainty is negatively related to integration and positively with accommodation. Contrary to predetermined assumptions, the authors have found a positive relationship between avoiding uncertainty and avoiding conflict management. Günkel et al. (2016, p.577) have shown that avoiding uncertainty is positively related to the integration style.

Few studies have examined the influence of the "masculinity-femininity" dimension on individual preferences for a particular style of conflict resolution. Gabrielidis et al. (1997) identified a relationship between femininity and style of accommodation, while integration (collaboration) was related to both masculinity and femininity. He et al. (2002) found a negative relationship between masculinity and style of domination and no significant effect on the other four styles. Van Oudenhoven et al. (1998) found that individuals in more feminine countries tended to prefer a style of integration.

Respect for tradition and long-term attachment are specific to long-term oriented companies. Günkel et al. (2016, p.577) tested the hypothesis that long-term orientation is positively related to integration and compromise styles, with no effect on avoidance style. Contrary to the theoretical assumptions, the study showed that long-term orientation was positively and significantly associated with the style of domination.

Table 2 Studies that analyzed the influence of culture on conflict resolution styles

Study	Cultural dimension	Conflict handling style	Operalisation of culture/countries
Boros et.al.(2010)	Individualism/collectivism	Avoidance, contending, cooperating	Cultural dimension is directly measured; respondents from two countries, Netherlands and China
Cai and Fink (2002)	Individualism/Collectivism	Avoiding, Compromising, dominating, integrating, obliging	Cultural dimension is directly measured. Individuals from 31 countries
Croucher et.al.(2012)	High versus Low context culture	Avoiding, obliging, dominating, compromising	Cultural dimension is not directly measured; respondents from four countries(India, Ireland, Thailand and the United States)
Gabrielidis et. al.(1997)	Individualism, masculinity	Accommodating, avoiding, competing, collaborating	Cultural dimensions are not directly measured; respondents from two countries, Mexico and United States
He et. al.(2002)	Individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance	Dominating, integrating, compromising, avoiding, obliging	Cultural dimensions are not directly measured; respondents from three countries USA, France, China
Kim and Meyers(2012)	Holism	Accommodating, avoidance, competing, collaborating, compromising	Cultural dimension is directly measured; respondents from two countries (South Korea and the United States)

Oudenhoven et.al.(1998)	Power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity	Problem solving, assertiveness, emphasizing	Cultural dimensions are not directly measured; respondents from five countries (Denmark, United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Spain, Belgium)
Purohit and Simers(2006)	Power distance, uncertainty avoidance	Accommodating, avoiding, compromising, collaborating, competing,	Cultural dimensions are not directly measured; respondents from three countries (USA, Nigeria, India)

Source: Synthesis of **Günkel, M., Schlaegel, C., Taras, V. (2016)** - *Cultural values, emotional intelligence and conflict handling styles. A global study*, Journal of World Business, 51, p. 582-583

Conclusions

Conflict has become a natural phenomenon of personal existence and organizational life. Managing conflict in an inappropriate way can cause negative feelings, staff fluctuations, and extra costs, being one of the most difficult challenges faced by managers. These challenges are amplified by the fact that there are interactions between employees with different values and cultural norms. Individuals belonging to different cultures often have different ideologies, such differences being important in selecting the way to respond in a conflict situation.

There are differences between the ways Western and Eastern cultures use conflict management strategies. Most often researched and most differences have been identified in the dimension of "Individualism-Collectivism," although other dimensions such as masculinity-femininity or power distance play an important role. Further research is needed on the influences of other cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede on conflict resolution styles. It is necessary to deepen the mechanism by which cultural values directly or indirectly influence conflict resolution strategies. It is recommended to take into account several cultural dimensions and to investigate them in several cultures to create the possibility of relevant comparisons and generalizing the results.

Managing organizational conflicts sensitive to cultural values increases job satisfaction; positively influences work results and has a beneficial impact on training employees working in an international environment. Negative stereotypes about other cultures can cause these employees to observe differences rather than similarities and respond to conflict with distributive behavior (Van der Zee and Hofhuis, 2018). Developing intercultural skills and cultural intelligence will help them create a climate of work that will positively value differences.

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