

Managing Conflict in Malaysian Sports Organizations

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Abstract

Using the bureaucratic model as framework, this paper examines the sources of conflicts faced by sports organizations in Malaysia. Centralization of power, excessive formalization, organizational differentiation, dependence on common resources and status differences between departments are some of the sources of conflict identified in this paper. Strategies to minimize dysfunctional conflict includes modifying the structure of sports organizations, fewer departmentalization, adopting a structure that promotes decentralization and using some forms of collaborative strategies.

Introduction

Sports associations in Malaysia often faced the problem of conflict between individuals, groups in the organization and with outside organizations. Recently, the Malaysian Sports Commissioner's office has openly come in conflict with several sports associations such as the Malaysian Tae Kwan Do Association and the Malaysian Golf Association. Internal conflict between management and staff was reported in several sports organizations such as the football and badminton associations and the National Sports Council. Even though conflict are a normal and natural consequences of human interaction in organizational settings, too much conflict can be dysfunctional because it diverts attention away from more important tasks such as accomplishing the goals and objectives of the organization (Yukl, 1994). In addition, excessive conflict can disrupt the organization in terms of reducing cooperation, disrupting communications, destroying morale, polarizes individuals and groups, produces irresponsible behaviors, and creates suspicion and distrust (Lippit, 1994).

Rahim (1986) defines conflict as "an interactive state manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or difference within or between social entities, i.e., individual, group or organization. Conflict in an organization takes in many different forms such as the following : arguments, physical violence, insults, public accusations, secret complaints, sabotage, backstabbing, gossips, challenges, threats, secret petitions, and non-confrontational vengeance. Walton and Dutton (1969) suggest nine antecedents to organizational conflict. The antecedents are mutual task dependence, task-related asymmetries, performance criteria and rewards, organizational differentiation, role dissatisfaction, ambiguities, dependence on common resources, communication obstacles, and personal skills and traits. The literature on organizational conflict deals mainly with two major issues : the causes of organizational conflict and the methods of managing conflict.

Sources of Conflict

In Malaysia, the high need for control and the need to standardize work, often result in excessive formalization and centralization in organizations. Formalization in terms of rigid rules and regulations serves as a means of control in many public organizations in Malaysia. Rigid rules are also used to standardize work performance and to ensure uniformity in the behaviors of the employees in the organization. For example, most sports organizations have rules and regulations with regard to reporting to work, dress code for employees, coffee breaks and lunch breaks, addressing superiors, applying for leave etc. Violation of rules and the resulting punishment may be a source of conflict between superiors and subordinate, especially if the subordinate perceives the rule violation as not being detrimental to the organization. Consider, for example, an officer who spends hours at home working on coaching curriculum that he/she has to sleep late; but is punished by his superior for reporting to work five minutes late the following day. This officer will certainly resist the punishment because in this instance the application of the rule does not take into consideration the extra effort he/she puts in outside the organization. In this case, the violation of the rule and the resulting punishment may be a source of tension and conflict between the officer and his superior. Conflict may also arise because of differences in the interpretation of a rule. Rules are often abstract in nature and functions only as a general guide to specific situations. Since rules do not anticipate all situation, the meaning and the relevance of rules are often subject to interpretation. Subordinates and superiors may interpret rules differently and differences in interpretation may create tensions resulting in conflict. Thus, it can be concluded that the proliferation of rules and regulations in Malaysian sports organizations may be a source of conflict because people resist being punished for rule violations especially if there are differences in the interpretation of the rules.

Power and authority in Malaysian sports organizations such as the Ministry of Youth and Sport, the National Sports Council and the Malaysian Olympic Council are centralized at the top. The subordinates in these organizations have very little autonomy in terms of decision-making or problem solving. Conflict regarding hierarchy of authority may occur when subordinates perceive that a superior may have exceeded his/her authority or when subordinates question the legitimacy of the authority of a superior. A head of department who orders officers to come to work on Sunday may have a valid reason to do so but he/she may have exceeded his authority in doing so. Centralization of authority may create a preoccupation with ranks at the higher levels of the hierarchy, where a superior attempts to control the subordinates of his fellow superior. A coach who gives command to workers in the facility department illustrates the tendency of some superiors in an organization to give command to the subordinates of another superior. This tendency to control the subordinates of a fellow superior may result in conflict between the two superiors. Another source of conflict may be due to the dissatisfaction and tensions caused by a lack of autonomy in decision making among the subordinates in Malaysian sports organizations.. Dissatisfaction regarding a decision is likely to occur especially those related to promotions, wage increases, bonuses and performance evaluations of subordinates. Often, there is a perception that rewards are independent of effort. Thus, a decision to promote a supervisor may result in conflict because of the perception that the supervisor is getting the credit for the effort of other subordinates in the department.

Division of labor in Malaysian sports organizations is based on functional departmentalization. Functional departmentalization often results in organizational differentiation especially if different units and departments in the organization. This is especially so if an organization has units and departments that practice different procedures and orientation towards work. Conflict are likely to occur when people have interdependent jobs requiring substantial cooperation but different objectives. In addition, conflict between members of different units may arise from differentiation in work procedures especially if there is much interdependence among the units, that is one unit relying on other units to accomplish the task of the unit. In the sports setting, coaches often have to deal with other units when requesting for training materials and equipment. The function of the other units is to provide supporting work. However, each unit often has a different set of procedures which are different from those used by the coaches. As a result of the different procedures, requests for materials by

coaches are often rejected or delayed due to the failure by coaches to follow procedures. The procedural differences between different units may result in negative comparisons between units. Members of a unit may jointly have the perception that they are more competent or better than the other unit. For example, most coaches often fail to see the procedural differences and there is a tendency to blame the delays on the inefficiencies of the staff of other units. Thus, it can be concluded that the different and contradictory forms of procedures used by different units in Malaysian sports organization is a possible source of tensions which may cause conflict between members of the different units in the organization.

Another source of conflict is dependence on common resources. In Malaysian sports organizations, functional departmentalization may result in some departments having more status and receiving better benefits than other departments. The differences in status can be a source of conflict especially if the different departments are competing for the same scarce resources. For example, the National Sports Council and the National Institute of Sports compete with each other for common resources. However, some departments in these organizations may be given priority in terms of budgetary allocation. These factors can result in a status difference between the different units and departments. Differences in status can be a source of dissatisfaction and it may cause the members of some units to engage in offensive maneuvers so as to improve the status and power of the respective units. When different units and departments are competing with each other, a win-lose mentality tend to prevail which promotes hostility and tensions between the different groups. Thus, it can be concluded that functional departmentalization in Malaysian sports organizations may create differences in status between departments and the status differences may be a source of conflict especially if the departments are competing for the same scarce resources

Recommendations

Strategies to minimize dysfunctional conflict includes the following phase : diagnosing the conflict and intervention strategies to reduce the conflict. In the diagnostic phase, the manager first determine whether there is too much or too little conflict in the organization. This is accomplish by examining the relationship among individuals or groups in terms of their attitudes, behaviors and the underlying structure that influence the interaction between groups (Brown, 1995). If the diagnosis indicates that there are too much conflict in the organization, several intervention strategies can be undertaken to reduce the amount of conflict. These includes changing the attitudes of the group so that the various groups have a better understanding of the relationships between them, changing the behavior of the group from behaviors that promote conflict into one that is more constructive, and changing the structure that influence the long term relations among the parties (Brown, 1995).

Depending on the type of conflict, Heffron (1989) suggests the following conflict management strategies : avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration. According to Heffron (1989), it is best to avoid the conflict if the issue is trivial and there is no likelihood that the conflict will prevail. Accommodation involves one party giving in to the demands of the other party and this strategy is most appropriate when one of the parties realized that they are wrong. Compromise is a strategy which involves the use of bargaining and negotiation and is best used when both parties are committed to opposing goals and there is parity in terms of power. Heffron (1989) suggests using collaboration strategies when both parties seek mutual problem solution that is satisfying to both parties. Finally, competition involves the use of threats, force, authority or power and this strategy is best used by the manager when people are acting purely on self interests.

A combination of strategies mentioned by Brown (1995) and Heffron (1989) can be used to reduce some of the organizational conflict faced by Malaysian sports organizations. The following strategies are recommended to reduce conflicts:

1. To minimize conflict arising from the problems of functional differentiation and status differences between different departments, modifying the structure of the organization is recommended. For example, units and departments can be combined around the main

function of the organization. This will result in a fewer departments in the organization because people with different skills such as teachers, typist, clerks, printers and maintenance workers will be combined under one department. With fewer departments in the organization, there will be less functional differentiation and less interdependence between different units.

2. With fewer departments, there will be less competition for resources in the organization. If competition for resources still persists, potential conflict can be resolved by using some forms of collaborative strategies or by making more resources available.
3. Structural changes can also be used to resolve conflict due to excessive formalization (such as rigid rules and regulations) by adopting a structure that provides for flexibility. One way of doing this is by adopting a structure that promotes decentralization where work is coordinated by using some forms of lateral relations such as the matrix structure. Decentralization will also reduce conflict regarding the hierarchy of authority mentioned earlier in this paper.
4. Collaborative strategies can be used to reduce conflicts arising from misunderstandings regarding performance evaluation and promotion issues. Increasing the participation of subordinates in the performance evaluation process may be the best strategy to avoid misunderstandings.

The administrative action strategies mentioned above is designed to minimize conflicts which are dysfunctional to the organization. According to Yukl (1994), conflict have both positive and negative impacts on the organization. Some level of conflict is necessary in order to stimulate interest and curiosity which are important ingredients for innovation and creativity in the organization (Heffron, 1989). On the other hand, too much conflict can be dysfunctional in terms of reducing cooperation, disrupting communications, destroying morale, polarizes individuals and groups, produces irresponsible behaviors, and creates suspicion and distrust (Lippit, 1994). Any effort at managing conflict should be targeted at minimizing destructive conflict while maximizing functional conflict in the organization. For this reason, any strategies at managing conflict should first start with determining if there is too much or too little conflict in the organization and whether conflict is dysfunctional to the organization.

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