

Conflict Resolution in E–HRM Environments

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INTRODUCTION

There have been studies on conflict resolutions but many focused on regional inter-tribe and international conflicts between or among nations of the world. Only very few have written about industrial conflict recently, even these few did not touch the mechanism of resolving conflicts in the organization in depth. Therefore, this article will focus on various conflict resolution mechanisms and the three major models of conflict resolutions—namely distributive bargaining, integrated bargaining, and interactive problem solving as given by Cross, Susan, Rosenthal, and Robert (1999). To do this effectively, we will explore the available literature on the antecedents of conflicts in human resource systems. Varieties of views and notions held by individuals and groups in respect of the role and the consequences of conflicts in the functioning of humans in our modern complex organizations will be considered. The consequences of conflicts on interpersonal, inter-group, and inter-organizational processes, when conflict may empower, distress, or lubricate the wheels of human interaction in the context of human resource management will be traced. The views of experts, professionals and academicians on how and why conflicts should be handled to ensure a healthier and conducive environment to work will be traced.

BACKGROUND

All aspects of human resource management, including how companies interact with the environment, acquire, prepare, develop, compensate, evaluate, and resolve conflict within the organization can help meet their competitive challenges and create value. Meeting challenges is necessary to create value and to gain a competitive advantage. This emphasizes how electronic human resource management (e-HRM) practices can

and should contribute to business goals and help achieve effectiveness.

E-HRM is a new and intriguing field of research at the intersection of human resource management and information systems. It is an innovative lasting and substantial development in HRM that results in new phenomena and major changes. E-HRM focuses on human resource management practices including labor-management relations such as union structure and membership, the organizing process, contract negotiations, new union agenda, and less adversarial approaches to labor-management relations. It utilizes information technology in a two-fold way:

- Technology is necessary to connect usually partially segregated actors and enable interactions between them irrespective of their working in the same room or in different positions within and between organizations—meaning, technology serves as a medium with the aim of connection and integration.
- Information technology serves as a tool for task-fulfillment. This implies technology supports actors by partially helping and substituting for them in executing HR activities.

It is a fact that e-HRM is a multilevel phenomenon by its nature. Individual actors are interacting in groups within organizations that interact with other organizations. Actors of e-HRM are those who plan, implement, and perform e-HRM. These include managers, HR professionals, employees, consultants, and line managers, and are therefore different actors that constitute a configurational component.

E-HRM activities encompass the single HR functions like recruiting and selection, training and development, compensation, and conflict resolution which are performed in order to provide and maintain the needed human resources.

Conflict resolution is about industrial relations and collective bargaining.

Industrial relations are all aspect of the employment relationship between employers and employees. It deals with everything that affects the relationship between workers and employers from the time the employee joins the organization till he leaves the job. Industrial relations are borne out of employment relationship in an industrial setting. They are characterized by both conflict and co-operation. It also involves the study of conditions that are conducive to the labor, management co-operation, and policy framework laid down by the government.

Industrial relations cover: promotion and development healthy labor management relations, maintenance of industrial peace and avoidance of industrial strife, and development of industrial democracy.

However, Fajana (2004) identified that there are three parties to industrial relations:

- The workers, sometimes represented by the trade unions;
- The management (employers organization); and
- The government and its agencies.

The interaction of these actors would produce both agreements or consensus and disagreements or conflicts. This is because the parties have partly congruent and partly divergent interests. The objectives of the actors may be economical but methods of achieving these various objectives may involve the deployment of economical, political, or they may use administrative weapons for example, the unions may use strike to enhance its bargaining position, management may employ the administrative control to manage industrial conflict and the state may evoke the powers derived from its sovereignty to make laws and regulations that will guide the actors in the conduct of their relationship with one another. The whole idea of industrial relation emerged as a result of conflict involving the inability of the employers and the employee to have a proper dialogue concerning the terms and conditions of employment differences in values or philosophy, differences in goals or objectives, differences in opinion, role pressures, limited resources, power struggles, change, and lack of communication. The ensuing conflict is inevitable but must be channeled and accommodated using proper machinery. This mechanism involves 1) individual

resolution supported by freedom of contact and by the lack of any substantial restriction to the operation of the labor market, 2) unilateral determination by employers, managers, the state, or the trade union, and 3) joint or plural models of regulation by the actions of the parties involved. The role of collective bargaining in resolving industrial conflict has caused industrial relation to be viewed by many authors as simply the process of conflict resolution (Thompson , 1990).

WHAT IS INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT?

Many discussions of industrial conflict refers to strike (Fashoyin, 1981). Strike is the most significant aspect of industrial conflict though (Rosenthal, 1998) a part of the phenomenon of conflict. Kornhauser, Dubin, and Rass (1994) argued that the examination of conflict should be enlarged to include the total range of behavior and attitude that express opposition and divert orientation between individual owners and managers on one hand and working people and their organization on the other hand. Industrial conflict is defined as a situation of disagreement between two parties, characterized by the inability of those concerned to iron out their differences, which does not necessarily have to result in strikes or lockouts or other forms of protestations (Fox, 1971), classified industrial conflict into different categories. The first category is between individuals in industry; the second category is the one involving a non-union member and management; the third category is the conflict between a labor union or one of its members and the management group; the fourth is the conflict between collectivities. Jackson (1985) commented that the Fox's first and fourth categories could involve conflict that does not involve labor and management.

Webne-Behrman (1998) defines conflict as "disagreements through which, the parties involved, perceive a threat to their needs, interest or concerns." Cross and Rosenthal (1999) asserted that conflict occur when people (or other parties) perceive that as a consequence of a disagreement there will be threat to their interest needs and concerns. Though, conflict is a normal part of organization life, providing numerous opportunities for growth through improved understanding, there is a tendency to view conflict as a negative experience caused by abnormally difficult circumstances. Conflicts are normal experience within the work environment

(Mauro, 1982). They are, to a large degree, predictable and expectable situations that naturally arise as we go about managing complex and stressful project (Kochan, McKersie, & Cappelli, 1984). Conflict is more than a mere disagreement—it is a situation in which people perceive threat (physical, emotional, power, and status) to their well-being.

Moreover, Boulding (1959) identified three different kinds of conflict situations. He distinguished three different situations each of which he believed will go by the name of conflict.

The first is the economic conflict—this is the situation in which a movement of change in a situation makes at least one party, in its own eyes, worse off and the other party better off. An important dynamic principle, which emerges from the theory, is the “principle of the widening of the agenda” (Miller, 1956). As long as the two parties are not in the conflict set, negotiation of a “trading” nature is possible whereby two parties become better off. “Trading” inevitably moves the parties toward the conflict set and eventually lands them there. Posner (1994) reiterated that once there, the only possibility is agreement or non-agreement, and if there is management, various rituals must be performed such as strike, wars, and so forth, which will change the willingness to agree of one or both parties so that agreement becomes possible, assuming that the relationship can not be avoided.

The second conflict situation identified is the interaction conflict as implied in the arms race in any process of mutually heightening hostility through the reaction of each party to the behavior of the other. The pioneering analysis of these processes by Lewis F. Richardson (1939) perhaps merits entitling them “Richardson processes.” In the Richardson model, some measure of hostility-friendliness was postulated (the model apply just as well to the process of falling in love as they do to the arm race). The increase in the hostility of each party is a function, first of some constant term which represents the underlying grievance and second of the absolute level of hostility of the other party. These may have an equilibrium solution (“a balance of power”) or they may be indefinitely explosive up to some boundary out which the system breaks down in war, strike or divorce—depending on the nature of the parameters. The less “sensitive” the parties—the less the hostility of one increases at each level of hostility of the other—the more likely is a balance of power solution to be found.

The third type of conflict situation is that described by Kurt Lewin (1948) and Neal Miller (1956). It is also called “quandary.” This is a situation in which the individual is incapable of making a decision because it is pushed in two opposite directions at the same time. It does not involve two parties but the motivational forces operating on a single party. Here, Miller makes the extremely interesting suggestion that quandaries which result from opposing pull or attractions are unstable; if the individual users go slightly towards one side or the other, the side toward which he veers exert a strong pull on him and he soon gets over to it. Quandaries, which result from opposing repulsions, are stable; as we veer to one side, the push becomes stronger and pushes us back into the quandary. This proposition may be ventured that those who are motivated mainly by hatred (fleeing away from what they do not like rather than toward what they like) are likely to get into quandaries and to be racked with stable internal conflicts, conflicts destructive to their internal organization. Those who are motivated by love, who move toward what they like rather than away from what they do not like, will be able to resolve quandaries easily, will be unlikely to get into processes of mutually increasing hostility, and can afford to have flexible value images which will help them in getting out of issue conflicts (liking what they get, instead of getting what they like).

CONFLICT RESOLUTION-MECHANISM

In order to maintain and promote a fair and productive work environment, actors in the industrial relations encourage the active resolution of work place conflict.

Effective conflict resolution is a combination of complex social skills. Boulding (1959), Joyce (1983), and Opffer (1997) affirmed that the most important avenue of conflict resolution is simple avoidance. If avoidance is impossible, the resolution of conflict depends on two factors: the reduction in the intensity of the conflict on one hand and the development of overriding organizations, which include both parties, on the other.

Overriding organizations can develop through sheer conquest in which one party is eliminated (making a desert and calling it peace) or through the development of images in both parties in which there is acceptance of the role of a larger organization.

Industrial conflicts expressed in whatever form pose

costs to all the actors (Fajana, 2000). To these actors, these costs include among others victimization, promotion of the union leaders to a higher hierarchy in the organization by the management thereby blocking their mouth on whatever grievances, political instability, and inflation even they get respect from the government. Over time, certain mechanisms have emerged and new approaches worked out to reduce the effects of conflicts in industry. Some of these termed conflict management programmes according to Zartman (2000) include:

- Promote the development of sound and stable labor-management relations;
- Prevent or minimize work stoppages by assisting in parties settling their disputes through an empowering process;
- Advocate intervention, mediation, and voluntary arbitration as the preferred process for settling issues;
- Offer a practical way to resolve disputes and preserve relationship; and
- Foster the establishment and maintenance of constructive joint processes to create organizational effectiveness.

Note only that most employees support value-driven partnerships with their employers through maintenance of industrial intranet connectivity. This will enable the firms to concentrate on their core activities (Schienstock, 2002).

Moreover, collective bargaining appears to be the main machinery that employers and trade unions use to consider demands and resolve conflicts internally. Other two ways are deputation and joint consultation. The differences in these three ways can be found in the type of subjects discussed, the manner of reaching agreements, the authority of the meeting, the periodicity of the meeting, the style of management, and the level of responsibility of the parties for decisions reached (Thompson, 1990).

Deputation is a process used where management appear autocratic. The workers may be called to express their views on a given subject but this may not have a bearing on what is finally decided. Decision in most of the time has already been made, workers are merely informed. The employer occupies a determinant role position.

Joint consultations is a two-way communication where the workers and their employers meet not in

terms of bargaining strength but in terms of their worth and ability to contribute to the subject being discussed (Opffer, 1997). These subjects include things like welfare, canteen, and safety productivity. Management seeks the view of workers and workers contributions are taken and used in the decision. It is a bi-partite relationship.

Other methods include mediation, conciliation, and arbitration.

As organizations move further into e-HRM, the human resource information systems designed by managers must continue to take the dynamics of these mechanisms into account (Strohmeir, 2007).

MODELS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

There are three models of conflict resolution, namely, distributive bargaining, integrative bargaining, and interactive problem solving.

Distributive Bargaining

The distributive bargaining model originated with the field of labor negotiations (Stevens, 1963; Walton & Mckersie, 1965). It can be described as a set of behaviors for dividing a fixed pool of resources. This model has been extended to a wide range of conflict situations including international negotiations (Tracy & Paterson, 1986; Walton & Mckersie, 1965). In fact, almost all negotiations have a distributive component (Thompson, 1990). It is also referred to as “hard bargaining.” Distributive bargaining is competitive, position-based; agreement-oriented approaches to dealing with conflicts that are perceived as “win/lose” or zero-sum gain disputes. The negotiators are viewed as adversaries who reach agreement through a series of concessions (Bartos, 1995).

Integrative Bargaining

The integrative bargaining model was first conceptualized by Pruitt and Carnevale (1993) and is currently one of the most frequently used models of conflict resolution (Fisher, 1983; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Raiffa, 1982; Thompson, 1990).

Integrative bargaining is a co-operative, interest based, agreement-oriented approach to dealing with conflicts that are intended to be viewed as “win-win”

or mutual-gain disputes. The integrative bargaining process involves both concessions making and searching for mutually profitable alternatives. It facilitates useful search for better proposals than those explicitly before it. This implies that negotiators are viewed as partners who co-operate in searching for a fair agreement that meets the interests of both parties (Bartos, 1995). Some common integrative bargaining techniques include clear definition of the problem, open sharing of information, and exploration of possible solutions.

Interactive Problem Solving

This is a form of third-party consultation or informal mediation. It is a transformation-oriented, needs-based approach to resolving conflict that originated within the field of conflict resolution (Kelman, 1990), and has been applied to a wide range of protracted inter-group conflicts. The model begins with an analysis of the needs and fears of each of the parties and a discussion of the constraints faced by each side that makes it difficult to reach a mutually beneficial solution to the conflict. Some of the goals is to help the parties perceive the conflict as a problem to be jointly solved rather than a fight to be won, improving the openness and accuracy of communication, improving inter-group expectancies and attitudes, inducing mutual positive motivations for creative problem solving, and building a sustainable working relationship between the parties.

Many large city governments are now embracing virtual models of interactive online conflict resolution. For instance, New York City Cyber Settle—an online dispute-resolution system, facilitating all manner of bodily injury and other insurance claims was reported so effective that it was renewed for another 3 years (GCN, 2007).

FUTURE TRENDS

Conflict is a part of organizational life and may occur within the individual, between the individuals, between the individual and the group, and between the groups.

Industrial conflicts expressed in whatever form, pose costs to all industrial relations actors. As such, they must be resolved in time to reduce the effects of conflict and to prevent the deployment of all forms of costly expressions of industrial discontents. Approaches

and mechanisms as well as attempts at industrial democracy were discussed in the article. However, certain areas still remain untouched, and which need further research. First, there is need to find out the conditions under which working relationships produce conflict in the organization. Further studies will bring out the different working relationships, the effect conflict will have on them, and how to resolve such conflict.

Secondly, possible outcomes of conflict in enhancing organizational performance need to be researched. Though it is already established that conflict is a normal thing in the organization, but there remains the need for HR managers to continue to explore modalities of managing it constructively. Finally, there is need to find out the effects of the formation of joint labor-management committees such as quality circles, quality of work life improvement programmes, and work and production committees in achieving greater labor-management co-operations.

CONCLUSION

Conflict situations in organizations cannot be avoided. It would remain a part of the organization due to the congruent and divergent interest in both the employers and the employees. The development of HR technologies and workforce analysis helping to transform HR into a decision science with a measurable impact on business results. The expanded use of the intranet/Internet for the delivery of HR applications, especially in resolving conflicts, is also emphasizing the importance of HRIS for organizations of all sizes. The ongoing development of technology complemented by more use of the Web has enabled smaller organizations, non-HR managers, and even practicing HR managers to have access to tools such as networks and intranets, various conflict resolution mechanisms that ease communication and avoid conflict that facilitate good relationships among members of the organization and save costs while reducing time and resources dedicated to other HR administrative tasks.

Therefore, an emphasis on the role of technology in bringing down HR costs and facilitating a healthier and conducive environment to work in through the latest technology, could have a significant impact on the HR profession in the years ahead and help professionals improve their knowledge and skills in HR technology that will assist them to speak the language of business

in an environment that is increasingly technology-driven. Most importantly, the art, science, and practice of conflict resolution need to be developed.

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KEY TERMS

Arbitration: A method of settling a dispute legally.

Collective Bargaining: A negotiation of working conditions and terms of employment between employers, a group of employers, or one or more employers' organization and one or more representative of worker's organization with a view to reaching agreement.

Conciliation: A method of affecting a settlement of a dispute.

Conflict: A perceived difference between two or more parties that results in mutual opposition.

E-HRM: Also known as virtual HRM; refers to technological mediated networks of actors providing the firm with the HR services needed without the further existence of a conventional HR department.

Grievance: An alleged violation of the rights of an employee.

Industrial Relations: A study of all aspects of the employment relationship between workers and employers.

Joint Consultation: A meeting between the workers and their employers to discuss on issues of mutual interests to both sides.

Mediation: A dispute resolution process in which a neutral third party known as a mediator helps the negotiators resolves an impasse by reaching an agreement.

Strikes: The collection of individual rights to withdraw service.