

Managing conflict at work: A qualitative analysis of municipal sports officers' views in Gauteng province, South Africa

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Abstract

Conflict is an inevitable part of life and the importance of understanding and managing it is cardinal. The lack of understanding of conflict can affect various areas within an organisation, creating unstable and sometimes very vulnerable situations. Given the fact that conflict is perceived to be an inevitable occurrence in any organisation, it is logical to focus on the effective management thereof. Hence, the purpose of the study was to investigate conflict management from the viewpoint of municipal sports officers. Following a comprehensive literature study on conflict management, a qualitative research approach was adopted to collect data. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with municipal sports officers at selected municipalities in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. Emerging from the in-depth interviews were the following themes: *negative consequences of conflict, benefits of effective management of conflict, training and support, sources of conflict* and *conflict management strategies*. It was recommended that training in conflict management should be provided for all levels of employees on a regular basis so that they develop the necessary knowledge to solve different conflict situations. There should also be clear conflict resolution procedures to address conflict situations which employees should be aware of.

Keywords: Conflict management, municipal sports officers, conflict management strategies, consequences, benefits, training, support.

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Introduction

Conflict in an organisation is an inevitable and pervasive part of organisational culture. It can consume up to 20 percent of a manager's time trying to resolve it within the workplace (Song, Dyer & Thieme, 2006; De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer & Nauta, 2001). Behfar, Peterson, Mannix and Trochim (2008) argue that conflict can impact on performance within the organisation and it has a huge influence on organisational effectiveness. Employee performance and effective teamwork within organisations are highly dependent on how conflict is managed and resolved at work. Conflict does not only affect worker

productivity but also negatively affects individuals' well-being (Dijkstra, Beersma & Evers, 2011).

Conflict may be described as a process of interaction manifested from disagreement, dissonance or incompatibility between or within social groups (Antonioni, 1998). It may be referred to as perceived incompatibilities or differences in views among the parties involved (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Rahim (2002) defines conflict management as a process of preventing or limiting negative aspects of a conflict situation while at the same time increasing any positive aspects related to the specific situation. In the event of positive aspects being increased or realised, it can be referred to as benefits of properly managing conflict. Conflict can be resolved or prevented by implementing appropriate conflict management resolution strategies. Various processes can be used to manage conflict. These include, understanding positions, communication, dealing with emotion and problem solving (Behfar et al., 2008).

Conflict may be experienced at different levels by an individual. On a personal level one may experience inter-role conflict or person-role conflict. In inter-role conflict, one may assume more than one role (e.g. a sport officer and parent). In this context one has to make a choice to meet the demands of each role. In person-role conflict, one may be faced with choosing one's values over that of a colleague or superior. On another level one may experience interpersonal conflict which is conflict with others either in or outside the organisation but that is related to one's job.

The lack of understanding of conflict can affect various areas within an organisation, creating unstable and sometimes very vulnerable situations. Given the fact that conflict is perceived to be an inevitable occurrence in any organisation, it is logical to focus on the effective management thereof. The process of conflict management encompasses a wide range of activities, including communication, problem solving, dealing with emotion, and understanding positions of individuals in the conflict situation as well as in the organisation (Brett, 2001).

From a classical viewpoint of organisational conflict, it is assumed that conflict is detrimental to organisational efficiency and should therefore be reduced or eliminated (Pike, 2009). Song et al. (2006) posit that conflict is harmful and has the potential to damage the culture within an organisation. Chen, Liu and Tjosvold (2005), on the other hand, are of the view that conflict is not always negative for the organisation. The authors argue that conflict can facilitate the understanding of compound issues as well as assist in the development of important strategic solutions. Petty (2012) and Krutza (2012) identified five reasons why conflict can be advantageous for an organisation. These are: 1) the

big topics and tough issues are sorted out quickly, 2) social loafing is reduced, 3) decision-making is at a higher standard due to team members challenging themselves and other members, 4) leadership skills are challenged, and 5) performance standards could be enhanced. Tjosvold (2006), in agreement, adds that conflict, when constructively managed, helps one to dig into issues, understand problems, create solutions and strengthen relationships.

Given the different possible outcomes of conflict, it is important to consider how it is handled. Baron (1988) concluded that people who received destructive criticism would retaliate and in most cases handle conflict by means of resistance or avoidance. Contrary to this, people who received constructive criticism would be more inclined to handle conflict through collaboration and compromising. The author also concluded that people receiving destructive criticism were more likely to set lower goals resulting in lower efficiency output within the organisation.

Conflict dynamics

Conflict can arise as a result of many conditions including: (1) antecedent conditions of conflicting behaviour (2) affective states, for example stress, tension, hostility, anxiety of the individuals involved, and (3) cognitive states of individuals, for example their perception or awareness of conflicting situations (Thomas & Kilmann, 2011). Furthermore, conflict can also originate from lack of proper communication, different cultures, and historical, political and different social conditions within a group, team or organisation (Chen & Starosta, 1997). There are also many other issues such as union action, implementation of new management techniques, lack of effective personnel, implementation of new technology, extent and content of work, misuse of power, organisational changes, meeting targets and deadlines, professional competition, personal problems taken to work, incompatible personalities and leadership styles which contribute to conflict (Song et al., 2006; Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Bell (2002) and Hart (2000) identified eight common causes of conflict within the workplace. These include conflicting resources, conflicting styles, conflicting perceptions, conflicting goals, conflicting pressure, conflicting roles, different personal values and unpredictable policies.

Mismanagement of conflict can result in larger and more uncontrollable situations if not managed or resolved timeously. Some of the consequences of conflict include: (1) hostility towards colleagues, (2) non-cooperation, (3) lack of performance, (4) depression, (5) considering resigning from current job, (6) developing health problems, and (7) retaliation from other staff members (Anon, 2013). However, many other consequences may arise due to conflict

situations and there might be circumstances where these consequences can even be positive. Leboeuf and Norton (2011) suggest consequence-cause matching as a possible way to manage conflict. Consequence-cause matching suggests that people will normally match the cause with a specific consequence, meaning that a large cause, in this case a large cause of conflict, should most probably result in a larger consequence and *vice versa*. However, when working with people this assumption cannot always be true as all people have different personalities. A minor conflict situation might have serious consequences for one person versus a serious conflict situation that might have a less serious consequence effect on another. According to Leboeuf and Norton (2011) people can be influenced by similarities between situations and the expected outcome.

Conflict management strategies

Conflict can be resolved in various ways. Krutza (2012) refers to strategies such as avoidance, gentleness, diplomacy and “ending it once and for all”, while Antonioni (1998) refers to strategies such as integrating, dominating, compromising, avoiding and obliging. Thomas and Kilmann (2011) and Tsai and Chi (2009) describe the afore-mentioned strategies as follows: *Integrating* or *collaborating* means pairing up with a party and working towards achieving both party’s goals. This can sometimes be very difficult and a great degree of trust is needed in such a partnership. *Dominating* or *competing* refers to an assertive and aggressive approach and is sometimes also referred to as a ‘win-lose’ approach. This style does not include cooperation with other parties and could also be done at the expense of another party. This approach should only be used in emergencies or when quick decisive action needs to be taken. The *compromising* style may result in neither party achieving their goals and is in some cases also referred to as the ‘lose-lose’ situation. This style should only be used as a temporary solution or in a case where both parties have equally important goals. *Avoiding* aims at simply avoiding issues. In this case one will neither be pursuing one’s own objectives nor helping with other parties goal accomplishments. *Obliging* or *accommodating* means having a high-degree of cooperation with another party, sometimes at the expense of one’s own goals and objectives. This style will typically be followed if one is not the expert in the field or when one wants to build future ties with a specific party.

The afore-mentioned strategies were established based on two dimensions namely, assertiveness and cooperation. Assertiveness refers to having a high concern for one self and cooperation refers to considering other people (Antonioni, 1998). Recently, Morris-Rothschild and Brassard (2006) further explained the two dimensions by referring to internal working models. Assertiveness can also be referred to as the model of self and cooperation as the model of others.

Problem statement

Recently, organisations have been focussing more than ever before on conflict management due to an increase in workforce diversity, greater reliance on teams, diverse cultures and ethnicity, and restructuring of many business organisations (Song et al., 2006; Jehn & Mannix 2001). In addition, in South Africa many organisations experience conflict arising from differences in political affiliation and union actions.

Sport officers are appointed at municipalities for the purpose of improving sport and sport-related events. Among the tasks assigned to them are the coordination of sport events; sports research; selection of teams and athlete development programmes; community sport development, assist in facility development and communicating and reporting to senior management (Commonwealth Games, 2013). In addition, they are expected to facilitate the provision of suitable opportunities for athletes to participate in sport events as well as organise various sport programmes, classes and coaching development (AGCAS, 2012).

Given their extensive job portfolio, a major proportion of the job description of municipal sport officers requires them to interact with both internal stakeholders i.e. employees within the organisation where they are employed as well as external stakeholders such as federations, governing bodies of different sports and community members. In their different roles, it is highly likely that they will experience conflict which they will be expected to manage. Research on the management of conflict by sport officers is sparse. Hence the findings of the current study are expected not only to contribute to the limited knowledge base in the context of sport officers but also provide information to make recommendations to municipalities to prepare municipal sport officers adequately to manage conflict situations effectively.

Purpose of study

The purpose of the study was to investigate conflict management from the viewpoint of municipal sports officers at selected municipalities in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

Methodology

An extensive literature study on conflict management within the workplace specifically looking at different management styles, causes of conflict and possible strategies in resolving, eliminating or alleviating conflict was conducted.

A qualitative approach was used to gather data from different sports officers within the municipal work environment. This approach is mainly aimed at gaining a deep understanding of the topic being researched, not leading the answer in a specific direction, getting a better understanding through first-hand experience and receiving truthful and reliable quotations and reporting of conversations (Maseko & Surujlal, 2011; Surujlal, 2011; Woods, 2006). It is characterised by an open-ended and discovery-oriented method to gather information from the target audience (Pereira, Pedrosa, Simon & Matovelle, 2013). The advantages of qualitative research include, *inter alia*, (1) flexibility, (2) sensitivity, (3) ability to study social meaning, (4) increased opportunities to develop, explore and find the relevance of a topic (Ospina, 2004). It provides the researcher with rich, high quality and detailed data that is both versatile and useful (Surujlal, 2011). Therefore, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used as the primary source of data collection.

Sample

The study area was within a district municipality comprising three local municipalities, situated in the Gauteng province of South Africa. A sample of seven respondents which comprised municipal sports officers, whose main function was to develop and manage sport programmes within the community, were approached to participate in the study. The sports officers ranged from junior officers to managers. All had some type of formal training in sports management or administration and their experience ranged from 3 to 27 years.

Instrument and procedure

An interview schedule comprising questions pertaining to conflict management in the work place was developed based on the literature review. It was pre-tested with an experienced researcher to determine the clarity of the content.

Standardisation was ensured by asking all participants the same questions. In addition, all interviews were conducted by the primary researcher. Although the interviews were guided by the interview schedule, it was sometimes necessary to change the order of the questions depending on the responses of the respondents. This was, however, limited. A non-evaluative stance was taken by the researcher in order not to influence the responses obtained. All respondents were given the opportunity to ask questions and also to elaborate on the topic in a “free zone” period provided to them.

The respondents were contacted prior to the interviews and a pre-interview meeting was held explaining the objectives and background of the research. The interviews were conducted in a location chosen by the respondents. These locations were neutral and allowed the respondents to communicate openly and

freely without any interruptions. The process of data collection continued until the 7th interview when data saturation, a point where no new data emerged (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004), was reached. The interviews were recorded for quality purposes and also to help focus on the conversation rather than to take notes during the interview. This also eliminated the problem of missing important information or misinterpreting what was said by the respondents. The respondents' permission was obtained prior to recording the interviews. The recordings were transcribed by research assistants immediately after the interviews.

Ethical considerations

This study applied strict ethical guidelines such as objectivity, high technical standards regarding data analysis and referencing. High levels of values, norms and standards were maintained during the interview stage and research results were handled in a transparent manner (Meyer, 2013). All respondents consented to being interviewed, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that the interview could be terminated at any time.

Data analysis

The contents of the transcripts were subjected to content analysis. This involved listening, reading, rereading and summarising the initial data independently by both researchers through an interactive and recursive process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Meaningful categories within the data were identified and coded by assigning them descriptive titles. The respective themes identified by both researchers were then compared and discussed until consensus was reached that they represented the data set.

Validity and trustworthiness

As the original data were captured by research assistants, the principal researcher read the transcripts and listened to the recordings simultaneously to verify the accuracy of the captured data. Thereafter, member validation was used to confirm the correctness of the data collected during the interviews. In both instances, it was ascertained that the data had indeed been captured accurately. Finally, the independent researcher who assisted in the pre-testing of the interview schedule was provided with the recordings, transcripts and emergent themes, and was requested to provide comments on the themes. Feedback from the independent researcher confirmed the themes which emerged from the in-depth interviews.

Results

The analysis of the data yielded five important themes related to conflict management within the sport department at the selected municipalities in the Gauteng province. These themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes related to conflict management*

Theme	Operational definition	Excerpts from interviews (respondent number)
Negative consequences of conflict	This theme takes into account the possible negative consequences resulting from conflict within the organisation.	<p><i>“Lose passion for doing what you are supposed to do to the community”</i>(3)</p> <p><i>“Subordinates do not have a passion for sports”</i>(5)</p> <p><i>“working environment will not be nice and negatively affected”</i>(5)</p> <p><i>“If people don’t trust you they will never come with you”</i>(4)</p> <p><i>“It causes a conflict with myself”</i>(4)</p> <p><i>“Lack of interest and lack of passion are the main culprits which cause conflict in the work place”</i>(5)</p>
Benefits of effective management of conflict	This theme relates to the benefits that can come from effective conflict management in the organisation.	<p><i>“Consultation and involvement”</i>(2)</p> <p><i>“in my opinion there is also an element of respect between management and employees”</i>(1)</p> <p><i>“If everyone can express themselves freely and enjoying the job, higher productivity will be achieved”</i>(1)</p> <p><i>“Handling conflict will lower the fear”</i>(7)</p> <p><i>“It is important because people will understand that some of the things don’t have to be personal”</i>(4)</p> <p><i>“and even try to improve what you were doing”</i>(5)</p>
Training and support	This theme refers to the issues pertaining to conflict management training as well as the effects proper support regarding the topic will have on the employees in an organisation.	<p><i>“The sports field is really not run by people with expertise”</i>(3)</p> <p><i>“If you have this training you will have the knowledge to handle/deal with conflict situations”</i>(7)</p> <p><i>“Sports in the municipalities is not a requirement, they don’t take the sport seriously”</i>(3)</p> <p><i>“I would say, the support is not even enough”</i>(1)</p> <p><i>“Conflict result normally when people do not understand each other”</i>(2)</p>

Theme	Operational definition	Excerpts from interviews (respondent number)
Sources of conflict	This theme identifies the possible sources of conflict between parties within an organisation.	<p><i>“they think I am an old man so I am old fashioned”</i>(5)</p> <p><i>“Internally its created by different schools of thought”</i>(2)</p> <p><i>“As well as the issue of communication”</i>(1)</p> <p><i>“Indirectly so, this badmouthing and gossiping plays a very crucial role”</i>(1)</p> <p><i>“I would say unequal treatment of the staff by subordinates, seniors”</i>(1)</p> <p><i>“People who are involved in sports, normally do not get to know these new evolutions”</i>(2)</p> <p><i>“Consultation and involvement of all relevant parties, they need to be together for that conflict to be resolved”</i>(2)</p> <p><i>“What comes first – sports or politics”</i>(2)</p> <p><i>“Biggest issue in SA is the balance between politics and sports”</i>(2)</p> <p><i>“The conflict that usually occurs is personality clashes”</i>(3)</p> <p><i>“There are a lot of opinions and perceptions that individuals are interpreting the policies”</i>(3)</p> <p><i>“the federations ended up fighting with each other”</i> (4)</p> <p><i>“As long as our management will consider and not come with a attitude of being power drunk and that I am the boss”</i>(4)</p> <p><i>“When the issue of money arises so too does conflict”</i>(5)</p>
Conflict management strategies	This theme identifies the most and least preferred conflict management strategies as pointed out by the respondents.	<p><i>“Consultation and involvement”</i>(2)</p> <p><i>“I would fall under the type of accommodating”</i>(1)</p> <p><i>“because sometimes you compromise the wrong thing”</i>(4)</p> <p><i>“the style that does not work for me is running/avoiding the conflict”</i>(1)</p>

* Numbers in parentheses represent individual sport officers who could not be named for the sake of confidentiality.

Discussion

The outcomes which emerged from the in-depth interviews emphasised the importance of conflict management in organisations.

Negative consequences of conflict

This theme highlights the negative consequences of conflict in the respective organisations. Respondents considered the negative consequences within the

organisation as serious. Among the consequences which appeared to be common threads in the different municipalities were: loss of passion for work, working environment being negatively affected, loss of trust and conflict within one self. In some instances, even when conflict appears to be resolved, the scars of the interaction between the parties remain. Ock and Han (2003) refer to this as residual conflict. Residual conflict remains with the parties even after a situation has been resolved. If the conflict is not managed effectively and professionally, it can have serious negative consequences on the future trust, passion for work and working environment in the organisation. Interpersonal conflict can seriously affect relationships. Dijkstra et al. (2011) refer to interpersonal conflict as clearly being a consequence of people interacting with one another. The authors assert that conflict affects not only the welfare of employees but also team and personal work performance.

Benefits of effective conflict management

Respondents were unanimous in their perceptions regarding the benefits of effective conflict management. Rahim (2000) posits that for individuals, groups and organisations, and other social entities to function successfully, they must manage conflict effectively. Most respondents perceived effective conflict management as beneficial to both themselves as well as the organisation. The benefits which were evident in the responses of the respondents during the in-depth interviews included increased respect for others, higher productivity, less fear, better understanding of one's colleagues, better communication, and improved productivity. These findings support those of De Dreu (1997) who reported enhanced creativity, better innovation, improved personal understanding as benefits of conflict. These benefits can only emanate from development of proper techniques to resolve conflict and by encouraging communication and cooperation between parties (Tsai & Chi, 2009). Since many organisations experience increased workforce diversity, a greater reliance on groups or teams, cultural issues, restructuring, union action and rationalisation (Jehn & Mannix, 2001), therefore the effective management of conflict is more crucial than ever.

Training and support

Training and support forms an integral part of any management discipline, and it is therefore not surprising that this was one of the themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews. Although all respondents indicated that there was a lack of training and support, most perceived that there is a lack of expertise and support to address conflict situations at their respective organisations. Deutsch (1994) asserts that in order to eliminate or prevent conflict it is important that employees have the requisite knowledge in conflict management. Ma and Chang (2013) support this assertion by pointing out the importance of training

within firms and organisations to provide high-quality services to its stakeholders. In order for an organisation to maintain its competitive advantage, or as in the case of a municipality its service delivery standard, excellent human resource management should be maintained. This can only be done with continuous and proper training. Some of the results of training identified by the authors included improved job performance as well as greater organisational commitment from staff members. Large investments should be made by organisations regarding training as this can positively benefit the organisation by increasing the knowledge, skills and abilities of its employees (Franke & Felfe, 2012). Support from various levels of management within the organisation is just as important. Seo, Teeters and Bush (2013) indicated that some of the most important support functions that can be offered to an employee are adequate time and budget.

Sources of conflict

Deutsch (1994) indicated that individuals differ from one another and in some cases considerably in terms of their personalities, character, perceptions, and social behaviour. One of the main sources of conflict perceived by the respondents was personality differences. Other sources of conflict included different schools of thought, not communicating enough, gossiping, unequal treatment, lack of knowledge regarding policy, racial differences and budget allocation. The misuse of power or control over another person was also mentioned and is referred to as win-lose conflict. Conflict can also become an excuse for internal problems and hostility. Furthermore, it can influence the level of excitement one has for a specific job (Deutsch, 1994). Interpersonal conflict can be defined as a mild form of aggression such as rudeness, or spreading rumours (Spector & Jex, 1998). Guidroz, Wang and Perez (2012) state that interpersonal conflict has become more prevalent within working environments. In their study it was revealed that two of the most traumatic events reported in the workplace were non-supportive behaviour and violent language by a superior or colleague. They identified various consequences that may arise from poor management of conflict, namely emotional exhaustion, degradation of physical wellness, intentions to quit and career withdrawal.

Conflict management strategies

The manner in which conflict was managed emerged as one of the significant concerns expressed by the respondents. Individuals tend to have different styles or strategies of solving conflict. It is interesting to note that while negotiating was the preferred style of managing conflict, there existed high levels of conflict at the different municipalities. When using the negotiating technique to manage conflict, one can be referred to as a problem solver having concern for other parties in the conflict situation (Tsai & Chi, 2009). Accommodation was

the other most preferred conflict management strategy. This may perhaps be the reason why conflict continues to exist in some municipalities as, in this approach, one normally has a low concern with personal goals and higher concern for relationships with other parties (Tsai & Chi 2009; Ock & Han, 2009). Individuals using this approach may possibly experience conflict within one self. The strategies most preferred by respondents in this study were negotiating and accommodating. If one prefers using a negotiating approach, also called collaboration, to solve conflict, one will usually have a high concern for one self as well as for other parties involved. People using this approach are also referred to as problem solvers. In the event where one follows an accommodating approach, one will normally have a low concern for personal goals and a higher concern for relationship with other parties (Tsai & Chi 2009; Ock & Han, 2009).

The strategies least preferred by the respondents included compromising and avoidance. People who predominantly compromise are mostly trying to break even as they will have a moderate concern for personal goals as well as relationships with others. If one tends to mostly prefer avoidance as a strategy one will have both low concerns for personal goals as well as relationships with others (Tsai & Chi 2009; Ock & Han, 2009). The minimal use of the avoidance strategy may be good for an organisation as past studies (e.g. Desivilya & Yagil, 2005; De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001) have reported that the use of avoidance strategies increases negative emotions. However, depending on the level of the conflict and the possible consequences thereof, one may resort to using this strategy.

Strengths, limitation and implications for further research

A notable strength of the current study lies in the appropriateness of its sample, which ensured that data were collected from respondents who experienced the phenomenon being researched. However, a limitation of the study is the small sample size within a small geographical area which restricts the generalisability of the findings on the wider population of sports officers in South Africa.

Future studies could investigate conflict management over a larger geographical area. The relationship between the prevalence of conflict within an organisation and its relationship with employee commitment and performance could also be explored.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings of the study are a few recommendations. Respondents in the study suggested that training in conflict management should be provided for all levels of employees on a regular basis so that they

acquire the necessary skills to solve different conflict situations. The knowledge and skills gained through training could also help employees to anticipate potential conflict situations and deal with them proactively. Organisations should have clear conflict resolution procedures to address conflict situations which employees should be aware of. Therefore, it is incumbent on all new employees to undergo training in conflict management before assuming duty.

Conclusion

The current study laid the foundation for future studies on conflict management at municipalities. Conflict is an inevitable occurrence in organisations in which diverse groups of people perform diverse functions. How conflict is managed within the organisation will ultimately determine the ethos that prevails at the organisation.

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