



Conflict and Organizations

Wolfgang Reiber

1. Organizations actively exist in complex environments and therefore widely-varying and many times contradictory demands are often placed upon them.
2. In order to cope with this complex external situation, organizations are often forced to generate a certain degree of internal complexity. This primarily takes place through the establishment of multi-dimensional organizational forms; for example, business units, matrix organizations, tensor organizations, project teams, network structures or virtual organizations.
3. Sub-systems within the organizations must be able to differentiate themselves from other sub-systems in order for them to function correctly. They think and act in an independent manner and, in the course of time, develop their own professional standards, their own language, their own rules and regulations, values, thought processes and behavioural models, etc. They also develop selective criteria for their method of perception, specific ways of interpretation for their behaviour within their environment and criteria for the appreciation of meaning. Such innate logic can potentially lead to narrow-mindedness that can be prone to conflict.
4. Multi-dimensional organizational structures introduce contradictions and dilemma into the level of the organization as a whole, which can often be difficult to resolve. The conflicts that result are an expression of not only the external, but also the internal complexity and serve as important signal markers.
5. The resolution of conflict situations can best be achieved through the active participation of the individuals involved. A decision from a third-party (for example, the general management of the company) always entails the danger of failing to achieve the desired goal, often because the close proximity to – and therefore understanding of - the problem itself is usually not given.
6. The productive resolution of a conflict demands an adequate understanding of the complexity that led to the conflict, as well as the highly-developed ability to resolve conflict on the part of the individuals involved and organization-related cognitive and behavioural patterns of all of the participants.

7. One form of conflict resolution that is quite common, irrational in nature and therefore inappropriate in its application is that of blaming the lack of tangible results on the inability or unwillingness of an individual person: This is the personalization of the problem. Another method of conflict resolution, just as inadequate as it is "liked", is trying to find the "cure" for the conflict purely in methodological or structural problem solving techniques: the rationalization of the problem.

8. A constructive method of dealing with conflicts needs to emphasize, from the onset, differentiation; for example, through the use of a fundamental analysis of roles or stakeholders. A good consensus or compromise can certainly combine the most important viewpoints with one another, especially if they were preceded by a thorough and often times rigorous dispute. The arrival at a feasible consensus or compromise, however, is by no means guaranteed. Irreconcilable differences pertaining to which goals and interests are to be sought after may indeed prevent the reaching of an amicable solution. For this reason, modern, multi-dimensional organizational structures need a hierarchical framework, in order to enable the organization's continuity of action through the forceful dissolution of the blockades that prevent agreement.

9. Aside from the conflicts that typically occur in multi-dimensional organizations, other typical pressure points can be observed of a fundamental nature. These stem from the combination of technical reality and human stubbornness and represent a particularly demanding and constant challenge for the tasks performed by managers:

The employee as a subject	The employee as a object
Consideration of the uniqueness	Consideration of the uniformity
Enable freedom	Insist on orderliness
Encourage and trust the employee	Control and make demands on the employee
Develop openness and closeness	Maintain reluctance and distance
Encourage cooperation	Encourage competition

All of these and other similar areas of tension are quasi innate to the nature of organizations. They cannot be "solved once and for all", rather sensibly perceived and kept in balance, depending on the specific situation.