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## **Antecedents of Interpersonal Conflicts at Work-place**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a comprehensive view on the antecedents of interpersonal conflicts at the workplace that would facilitate development of a holistic framework of conflict resolution

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based on the root causes rather than the individual incidents on a piecemeal basis. The antecedents of interpersonal conflicts have been classified into four dimensions viz. individual differences, interpersonal issues, organizational factors and extra-organizational issues. Even within different sets of antecedents, there are several sub-factors that interplay with each other leading to a full-fledged clash at the workplace. This paper sets an agenda for more empirical researches on the antecedents of interpersonal conflicts as against the current focus on exploring the factors affecting conflict resolution styles of individuals. The researchers believe that the skewed focus of the researches on interpersonal conflicts has resulted in the casual manner in which conflicts are resolved today.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal conflicts, Individual differences, Organizational factors, Extra-organizational issues

### **Introduction**

Interpersonal conflicts are quite common at workplace as we spend long hours in the offices dealing with boss, subordinates and peer. Broadly speaking, moderate levels of interpersonal conflicts are received as sign of healthy and dynamic work culture. However, higher incidences of interpersonal conflicts are viewed detrimental to individual, team and organizational effectiveness. At times, interpersonal conflicts may jeopardize the otherwise conducive environment at workplaces. Thus, the overall impact of interpersonal conflicts may aggregate into deteriorating organizational climate, organizational culture, team spirit, morale, motivation, and productivity.

Often the employees voluntarily quit the jobs as a result of unceasing interpersonal conflicts at the workplace even though he or she may not be affected directly with the continuous brawl at the shop floor or the offices. Interpersonal conflicts invariably have negative consequences for the organization in terms of higher employee turnover/attrition, loss of time in peacekeeping negotiations/counselling, withholding of efforts (both discretionary and routine) on the part of the employees, lack of organizational commitment and lack of trust. So the seemingly minor scuffles between two or more employees have the spiralling impact on the fortunes of the concerned organization. Managers can ignore the incidence of interpersonal conflicts at workplace only at the risk of blunting the competitive edge of the firms.

Unfortunately, the interpersonal conflicts are generally handled by the managers in the most casual manner. They often prefer to resolve the interpersonal conflict as a peacemaker and the immediate purpose is to somehow douse the 'fires' engulfing both the parties. The managers hardly reflect on the roots of the mêlée. They focus on the individuals involved in the fracas. No wonder, most of the researches on interpersonal conflicts revolve around the conflict resolution styles of the managers as well as employees and the factors that might contribute/strengthen a particular conflict resolution style or the effectiveness of particular conflict resolution styles. There are only a few studies that actually examine the causes of interpersonal conflicts at the workplace and fewer researches on the antecedents of this menace. As result, the interpersonal conflicts remain a formidable feature in the firms despite the presence of some of the finest peacemakers.

This paper presents a comprehensive view on the antecedents of interpersonal conflicts at the workplace that would facilitate development of a holistic framework of conflict resolution based on the root causes rather than the individual incidents on a piecemeal basis. The antecedents of interpersonal conflicts have been classified into four dimensions viz. individual differences,

## **Defining Interpersonal Conflicts**

Generally speaking, interpersonal conflicts at workplace relate to disagreements, differences or incompatibility between an individual and his/her superiors, subordinates or peers (Rahim, 2001). Interpersonal conflicts may take the shape of task conflict when two or more organizational members disagree on their task or content issues or emotional conflict when two interacting social entities, while trying to solve a problem together, become aware that their feelings and emotions regarding some issues are incompatible (Rahim, 2001). Jehn (1997) has added a third dimension to interpersonal conflict typology by suggesting the occurrence of process conflict when the members differ on how task accomplishment should proceed in the work unit and who is responsible for what and how things should be delegated.

While scholars have tried to define interpersonal conflict in varied way, the essence of their scholarship is summarized in the preceding paragraph. For example, Schmidt & Kochan (1972) have defined conflict as the interference by one individual or group in the attempts by another individual or group to achieve a goal. According to Robey (1994), conflict may be defined as manifest disagreements among group members. Conflict is the perceived incompatibilities by parties of the views, wishes and desires that each holds (Jehn, 1992). Conflict is likely to develop where there is a mix of collective goals, coupled with managers' self-interest, under conditions of interdependence (Ruekert and Walker, 1987). Further, interpersonal conflict is a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). All the researchers in fact indicate similar things in different manner. For the purpose of this essay, we will stick to the definition given by Rahim who happens to be the most quoted scholar on the subject.

## **Antecedents of Interpersonal Conflicts**

Conflicts may arise due to activities that are incongruent with needs and interests; incompatibility of behaviour; differences in attitudes and values; exclusive preferences in joint activities; contention for limited resources; and interdependence in the performance of functions or activities (Rahim, 2002). However, a holistic view on the antecedents of interpersonal conflict at workplace has not been taken in the extant literature on the subject so far. In this section, we have taken four types of potential antecedents viz. individual differences, interpersonal; issues, organizational factors, and extra-organizational issues that may be sources of interpersonal conflicts at workplace.

### **Individual Differences**

Every employee or manager has a different personality. Individual differences reflect in the manner in which conflicts arise at workplace. Besides, individuals also differ in terms of attitudes, opinion, beliefs, culture, emotional stability, maturity, education, gender, language etc. Hence their responses to particular stimuli at workplace also vary. As a result, people across all levels in the offices or shop floor tend to be incompatible or hostile when they view a particular matter to undermine their position or negate their worldview or value system. In fact, disagreements emerging out of individual differences often assume emotional or moral overtones. For example, a disagreement about who is factually correct may easily turn into a bitter squabble over who is morally correct (Whetten & Cameron, 1991).

It is imperative to study how people are drawn towards interpersonal conflict thanks to their temperament, aggressiveness, emotional instability and other dimensions of individual differences. Current literature is generally silent on the issue although a few scholars have tried to study the relationship between various traits of Big Five Factor model of personality and interpersonal conflict. However, more empirical researches may establish a definite connection between individual differences and interpersonal conflicts at workplace or elsewhere.

### **Interpersonal Issues**

The employees expect dignified interpersonal behaviour from their team leaders/managers based on mutual respect and equality. Similarly the supervisors also expect decent behaviour from the subordinates at the workplace. An absence of such behaviour generally leads to interpersonal conflicts. For example, hard influence tactics of the supervisors such as pressure, coercion, or authority may lead to a scenario of conflict (Tepper et al., 1998). On the other hand, refusal of the subordinates to carry out assigned tasks, using abusive language at the workplace, bullying the boss or the peers may also lead to interpersonal conflict between the boss and the concerned employees.

Psychological distance is another factor that leads to interpersonal conflict. When two managers are psychologically distant from each other, they are likely to approach problems differently, and disagree on important issues (Dawes & Massey, 2005). For example, managers sitting in different offices with restricted opportunities of face-to-face interactions may have different priorities and approaches to accomplish a task. They may also differ on resource allocation, resource utilization, use of technology, manpower requirements, project deadlines, etc.

Perceptual interface i.e. belief about another's intentions is a major factor that generally leads to interpersonal conflicts at workplace. According to Wall & Callister (1995), interpersonal conflicts arise when one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party. Perceptual interface is based on individual differences. It results in distrust, non-cooperation, withholding of efforts, withholding of information, and other regressive tactics. There may be other interpersonal issues contributing to workplace conflict and the researchers can very well attempt exploratory surveys on role of interpersonal issues as antecedent of workplace conflict.

### **Organizational Factors**

There are several organizational factors which contribute to interpersonal personal conflicts at workplace. In this section we have discussed bureaucracy and departmentalization, dysfunctional leader-member exchange, perceived organizational injustice harassment and sexual abuse, and bullying at workplace as potential antecedents of workplace conflicts.

Bureaucracies and departmentalization have often been linked to stifling basic human instincts of independence and self-actualization, thus causing hostilities and negative emotions. The problem arises as the authority of making decisions, allocating resources, rewarding the employees for good performance and punishing them for missed deadlines or poor quality rest in those hands which are remotely placed as compared to the actual worksite. A sense of frustration and helplessness at the level of employees responsible for implementation of a project lead to interpersonal conflict as each one of the employees tries to look at the issue from his or her singular worldview sans any peacemaker at the helm. Higher degree of departmentalization prevents cooperation and undermines interdependence. Thus organizational structure with rigid hierarchies, specializations and

Interpersonal conflicts between the supervisor and subordinate may persist due to a dysfunctional leader-member exchange arising out of supervisors' tendency to indulge in biased attributions. More specifically, in case the supervisor attributes negative outcomes to the incapacity and inefficiency of the subordinate as well as his lack of initiative, even the subordinate will react in a fitting manner in terms of non-cooperation, resentment, detachment and withdrawal. So the negative emotions both on the part of the supervisor and subordinate would continue to fuel interpersonal conflict for a longer period. Kim & Shapiro (2007) observed that the employees who were rudely (rather than politely) treated when receiving explanations for organizational decisions were more likely to engage in retaliation.

Perceived organizational injustice whether distributive, procedural or interactional are compelling antecedents of interpersonal conflicts at workplace. For example, unfavourable procedural justice could instigate the employees to not cooperate with organizational procedures, and consequently to a dilemma of compliance with formal rules (see Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2009).

Harassment at workplace is a major antecedent of interpersonal conflicts. Harassment constitute all those acts that constantly torment, wear down, or frustrate a person, as well as all repeated behaviours that ultimately would provoke, frighten, intimidate or bring discomfort to the recipient (Brodsky, 1976). Examples of harassment are sexual abuse, physical abuse, name-calling, excessive work pressure etc. Harassment often culminates into interpersonal conflicts.

Bullying occurs when someone at work is systematically subjected to aggressive behaviour from one or more colleagues or superiors over a long period of time, in a situation where the target finds it difficult to defend himself or herself or to escape the situation (Einarsen, 1999). Examples of bullying include intimidation, exclusion, abuse, humiliation and insult aimed at denigrating the ego and identity of the victim. Bullying is a significant source of interpersonal conflict. Initially the victim quietly accepts the bullying as a routine affair. However, after reaching a threshold of tolerance which varies from person to person, the victim retaliates with aggression or withdrawal.

### **Extra-organizational Issues**

Conflict may occur even when group members do not have differences in goals, interests, or motivations (Steele, 2009). Marginal issues arising out of personal, intra-organizational or external elements which may not be directly connected to profession in any manner, have led to interpersonal conflicts (Bousari, et al 2009). For example, conflicts at home, disputes with spouse, differences with in-laws, social exclusion in the community, disputes with the neighbours, marital status, loneliness, etc. may trigger an interpersonal conflict at the workplace quite indirectly. However, this suggestion needs to be verified through empirical surveys.

### **Conclusion**

It is assumed that there are four sets of antecedents of interpersonal conflict at workplace viz. individual differences, interpersonal issues, organizational factors and extra-organizational issues. While no single antecedent may be held responsible for triggering interpersonal conflicts at workplace, all the four sets of antecedent work in tandem towards eruption of a brawl. Even within different sets of antecedents, there are several sub-factors that interplay with each other leading to a full-fledged clash at the workplace.

This reflective essay is based on readings of extant literature on the subject and interactions/conversations with managers in varied sectors. So there is possibility of extending the study further by concerted efforts on developing a holistic model for explaining the antecedents of interpersonal conflicts at workplace and testing the same through empirical research. Moreover, each of the four sets of antecedents may be verified through empirical studies by discerning researchers.

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## **Demographic Profiles as Determinants of Job Satisfaction in Indian Insurance Sector**

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### **Abstract**

Growth of any organization depends on the employee willingness to achieve the objectives of the organization. The human resource of an organization play a crucial part and it becomes necessary and inevitable on the part of the management to ensure and nurture an atmosphere where the employees feel satisfied both with their work and with their standards of living. The HR strategies need to be molded according to the demographic profile of the employees in order to understand their drivers and motivators. In this research, efforts have been made to study the dependency of job satisfaction on the demographic profile of employees. The research is exploratory in nature and it has been carried out in the entire insurance sector.

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