

Internal Conflict Resolution between Employees: Methods Applied in Companies in the Czech Republic

Radka Lankašová

University of Economics in Prague

Abstract

Project management is an integral part of the life of companies. It helps them to manage projects of different sizes, scopes and financial value irrespective of whether it concerns new products, services, the implementation of new company IT systems, internal processes, etc. Regardless of the project circumstances, there is always a project team, with members drawn from various backgrounds—professional experience, seniority, work ethic, age, and usually gender. However, differences among team members can cause friction.

An important factor for success is good, healthy communication, which may include conflicts. Within this context, the project manager, among others, should be a very good conflict solver, or even a trained mediator who can lead constructive conversations. These conversations should enable team members to express their different opinions with the aim of achieving the best possible result, i.e. the prevention of unnecessary conflicts, the minimisation of bad ones, and the reduction of time lost to them.

The research presented in this paper shows that managers spend up to 30% of their time managing conflicts, in other words, not doing their job, as is the case for the employees involved in a conflict. As a result, companies suffer from lower productivity and spend money on conflict management activities that in many cases are avoidable.

Keywords: conflict resolution; mediation; workplace conflict; conflict management; project management.

Introduction

As we live in the real world, not an ideal one, it is only natural that during every project there is conflict. Whilst in the majority of cases conflict cannot be avoided, it can be managed if identified in time. Yusuf and Pretorius (2017) point out that swift action is necessary if conflict arises, otherwise the situation may lead to a deeper conflict and

jeopardise many project activities, which is something every project manager, organisation and stakeholder wants to avoid.

According to Kurtzberg and Mueller (2005), the nature of conflicts is either related to processes, tasks or relationships. Under process-based conflicts, it is critical that the aim of the project is well explained to team members. Ni et al. (2018) suggest this improves work efficiency and reduces failure risks. In their study, Kurtzberg and Mueller (2005) came to the conclusion that team members are particularly frustrated when it is not clear how they can accomplish their work and who bears responsibility for certain tasks. This lack of clarity may slow down the project, or bring it to a halt all together.

Under task-based conflicts, Ni et al. (2018) point out that it is helpful if responsibilities are evenly distributed among team members. Tasks should be clear and team members should be allowed and welcomed to come up with new ideas and discuss them. However, when their opinions are not aligned, it is very difficult for individuals to remain objective when they feel that others disagree with or even disapprove of their point of view (Jehn 1997). Kurtzberg and Mueller (2005) proved that task-based conflicts are the only conflicts that are partially beneficial in that they can help resolve problems as well as generate new perspectives.

Artamonova (2014) suggests that good work results are dependent on a good relationship between workers and managers. Relationship-based conflicts are seen as unpleasant and a distraction from work (Kurtzberg and Mueller, 2005). Li et al. (2018) suggest that they lead to counterproductive work behaviours such as a negative trend in task performance.

Regardless of the basis on which a conflict arises, it needs to be addressed and dealt with. Gagarinskaya et al. (2013) believe organisations should have comprehensive conflict management programmes for both managers and employees. Bendersky (p. 204, 2007) points out: "Three types of dispute resolution components are most commonly introduced or expanded when organisational leaders decide to formalise their conflict management practices: rights-based processes, interest-based neutrals, and negotiation or conflict management training."

Materials and Methods

The research focused on how employees in Czech companies deal with conflict – what are the most frequent reasons for conflicts starting, what methods do they use to resolve them, to what extent is mediation used in companies, and how much time managers spend on conflict resolution.

Hypothesis 1: The most frequent reason for internal conflict between employees is work related.

Hypothesis 2: Traditional conflict resolution techniques (peer-to-peer solutions, internal third party involvement) are used more than modern professional mediation techniques.

Hypothesis 3: Managers spend 20% of their work time resolving conflicts.

The research was conducted anonymously among 350 members of a professional group called HR News on the social network LinkedIn between April and July 2017. The selected members, both men and women from all regions of the Czech Republic, working in HRM and top management positions in privately owned companies (both Czech and subsidiaries of multinationals) employing more than 50 employees, were contacted individually by email and asked to fill in an online questionnaire.

The first part of the questionnaire focused on types of internal conflicts between individuals. Respondents were presented with a choice of internal conflicts they may have experienced relating to work, personal/personality issues, hierarchical (superior versus subordinate) problems, nationality and/or culture, age gap and gender.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the internal solutions that are used in Czech companies. Once again, respondents were presented with a range of choices. These included parties resolving conflicts themselves, or the involvement of a third party (HR department or senior management), company ombudsman, employee council, facilitation, mentoring, coaching or mediation.

The third part of the questionnaire focused on the collection of data with regards to how much time managers spend on conflict resolution. They could choose from one of five options: 0% - 10%, 11% - 20%, 21% - 30%, 31% - 40%, 41% - 50%.

In total, 180 responses were received, of which 60% were from female managers, and 40% from male managers. In addition, 30 respondents (15 male and 15 female managers) were interviewed.

Results

Hypothesis 1: The most frequent reason for internal conflict between employees is work related. This hypothesis was confirmed.

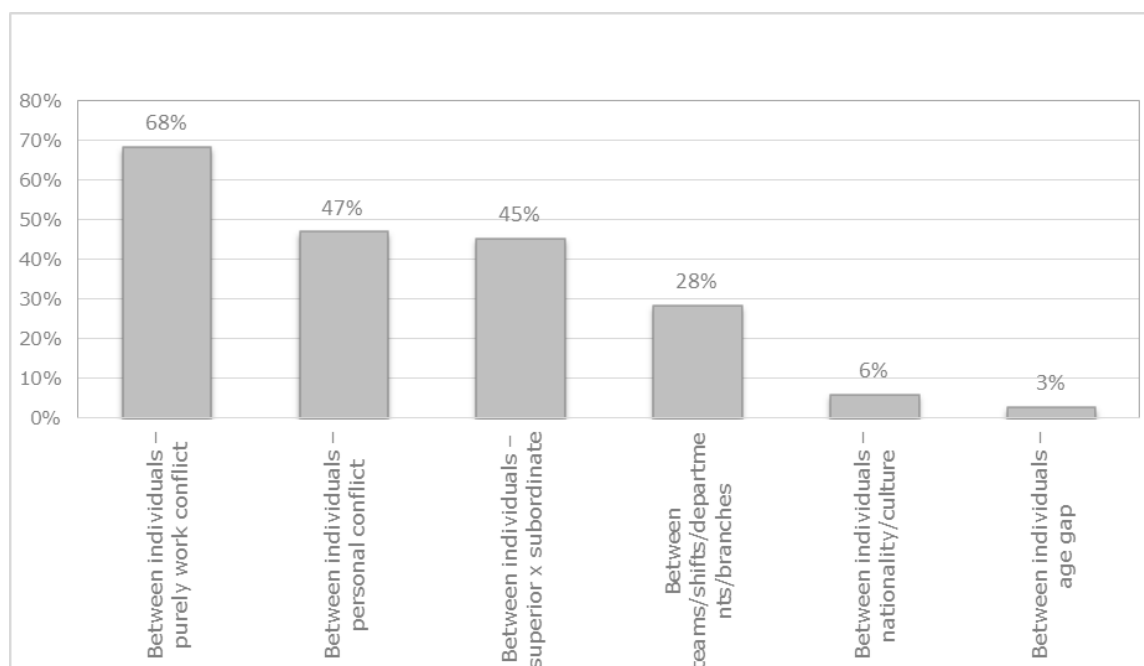
The results show that the top six most frequent reasons for internal conflict(s) in companies are, in order of rank:

- 1) Work issues- when colleagues do not agree on an approach to an issue, be it the solution itself, the execution thereof, or the resources (too much or too little time, too many or too few people, too little or too much money) required. Examples given during interviews ranged from complex strategic decisions about the future of the company to simple decisions such as the layout of work desks in a new office.
- 2) Personal/personality issues – these problems often go hand-in-hand with work related conflicts as a result of colleagues simply not liking each other as human beings, a problem that can persist for just a day, or over the long term. Examples of reasons for disliking someone included: different level of work or life

experience; different level of empathy; (un)willingness to cooperate; age gap; political opinions.

- 3) Superior – subordinate issues – although the basis of the conflict is very similar to that of work related conflicts, it has other aspects to it. This concerns hierarchical power. Conflicts arise when employees do not view their bosses as being fully competent, supportive, or experts in their field, or when they fail to share information or give necessary feedback. On the other hand, managers may not feel that employees are up to the task, unable to deliver the expected quality, lack innovation and cannot meet deadlines.
- 4) Team issues – between project teams, departments, branches and/or shifts. This concerns a combination of work related conflicts and personal/personality issues.
- 5) Cultural/nationality issues – these types of conflicts occur because the Czech Republic lacks a large enough local workforce. As a result, employers are being forced to employ foreign nationals, sometimes from very culturally different countries such as Vietnam or Mongolia.
- 6) Age gap issues – this primarily relates to differences in work ethic between millennials and older generations. Millennials emphasise the importance of work-life balance and excel in innovation.

Figure 1: Issues that form the basis of conflicts in companies



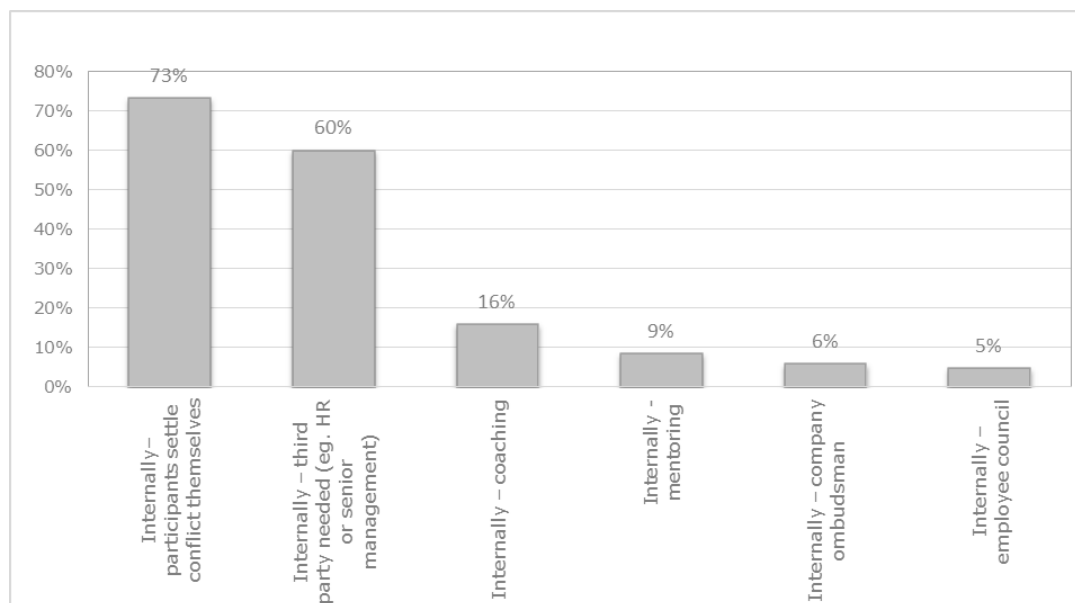
Source: Author

Hypothesis 2: Traditional dispute resolution techniques (peer-to-peer solutions, internal third party involvement) are used more than modern professional mediation techniques. This hypothesis was also confirmed.

The results show that the top six most frequent methods used for resolving internal conflicts are, in order of rank:

- 1) Resolution by the participants themselves - the parties in the conflict sit down and discuss the issue(s) and try to come up with a solution that all the parties can get behind. This approach relies on the maturity of the individuals, places the responsibility for conflict resolution firmly in the hands of employees, and reduces the number of situations in which managers need to get involved in what they consider minor conflicts.
- 2) Third party involvement- team members are not able to come to a resolution and therefore, depending on the issue, contact either their direct superior or HR department. Although many superiors do their best, they may not have formal mediation training and often use their intuition, apply their own preferences, and under time pressure, make decisions on the outcome of a conflict, rather than help to resolve it. On the other hand, some are natural mediators and can do a great job.
- 3) Coaching – managers decide that there is a need for a change in behaviour on an individual level and decide to help the individual by providing them with a coach, or by coaching the individual themselves.
- 4) Mentoring – senior staff provide support and guidance to more junior members of staff who are not used to company life and the intricacies of corporate culture.
- 5) Company ombudsman – large companies often engage a professional who is responsible for helping to resolve various situations in companies, including conflicts.
- 6) Employee council – the presence of such a body also tends to be limited to larger companies.

Figure 2: Methods used for resolving internal conflicts in companies



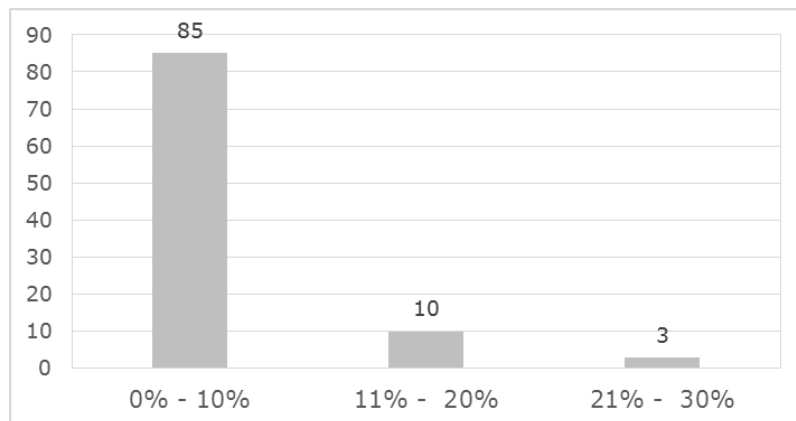
Source: Author

Hypothesis 3: Managers spend 20% of their work time resolving conflicts. This hypothesis was refuted.

The results of the research into the amount of time managers spend resolving conflicts in companies are presented in Figure 3.

In total, 85% of respondents spend 0% – 10% of their work time resolving conflicts, respectively 10% between 11% – 20% of their work time, and 3% between 21% - 30% of their work time. Of all the respondents, 2% did not answer the question.

Figure 3: Amount of time managers spend resolving conflicts



Source: Author

Discussion

Gagarinskaya et al. (1998) suggest that current socio-economic conditions increase the level of conflict and work stress in the workplace for demographic, economic, social and psychological reasons. Research results show that the majority of conflicts within the working population are either process or task related and are linked to team members not being able to agree on a task as such and/or on the processes necessary to finish a project. The interviewees (both men and women) identified clear job responsibilities and deadlines as critical points for creating a calm working atmosphere. As a result, team members do not duplicate each other's work and nothing is left undone.

Very important factors for creating a zero conflict environment are the availability of sufficient resources, experienced project managers with very good leadership skills, and open two-way communication – from the manager to the team members and back.

A lack of any of the above can lead to frustration among team members and therefore conflicts. Some conflicts can repeat themselves, or even worse, can spiral out of control. One very good tool with which to break this cycle is to label it as an ineffective process (Brett et al. 1998).

Interestingly, the interviewees also saw the company and project benefits of a portion of the conflicts that fall into this category; team members have to openly address obstacles and are therefore able to move things forward and come up with new solutions.

Relationship conflicts arise on two levels, namely between peers and between a manager and an employee. The first is primarily the result of differences in values, backgrounds, and levels of experience. Since 1989, the Czech Republic has opened up its borders to foreign employees at all levels, from operators on the shop floor to CEOs. The differences in culture, traditions and work ethic can sometimes cause friction. The second is often the result of employees feeling a lack of support, motivation and feedback from their boss, as well as their inability to listen to details, failure to give good advice and be an expert in their field, and an unwillingness to protect them from attacks or finger pointing from colleagues in other departments.

When it comes to conflict resolution, team members try to settle conflicts themselves. Despite relying on the maturity of the individuals involved, placing responsibility for conflict resolution in the hands of employees, and managers having to prioritize what they focus on, many of the interviewees agreed that they did not like conflict and tried to avoid it. In addition, they indicated that they had neither received any specialised conflict/mediation training, nor possessed strategies and techniques for managing such situations. The author of this paper provides mediation training to managers, after which managers state they feel confident in their ability to prevent conflicts and spend less time dealing with them.

When a team member fails, they contact their superior for help. This, depending on the issue at hand, would typically be their direct manager or HR department. Neale (1986) proved that trained professionals outperform amateurs. There are managers with great natural talent for resolving conflicts, managers who are trained, and also managers without talent or training, and in the worst case scenario, without empathy. Within this context it is therefore surprising that mediation is still not a part of standard training programmes for managers. In fact, the research presented in this article shows that only 3% of companies in the Czech Republic use mediation as a conflict management tool.

Conclusion

The research conducted for this article shows that majority of conflicts in companies in the Czech Republic are task or process related (68%), followed by relationship (47%) related. On the whole, employees try to resolve conflicts themselves (73%) and that when this fails, managers are called in to help them (60%). In total, 85% of managers in Czech companies spend 0 – 10% of their work time resolving conflicts, respectively 10% of managers 11% - 20% of their work time.

Conflicts can be very beneficial for projects when managed well because they tend to “clear the air” among team members and, more importantly, usually result in new ideas and solutions. However, if managed poorly, they can be detrimental, causing delays in project deadlines, poor quality of work, or complete project failure.

Managers spend time managing their people, which inevitably involves some kinds of disagreements. Most managers spend up to 10% of their work time resolving conflict situations. In general, companies in the Czech Republic would benefit from preparing

conflict resolution training programmes for managers and employees. Provided that all team members are trained, less time would be spent on conflict management, the work atmosphere would improve and, most importantly, team members could focus on their project(s).

Acknowledgement

This paper is a part of Project No. IG308026 on “Mediation as a conflict management tool in companies in the Czech Republic.”

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Contact address of the author:

Mgr. Radka Lankašová, Department of Human Resources, Faculty of Business Administration, University of Economics in Prague, nám. W. Churchilla 1938/4, 130 67 Praha, Czech Republic, e-mail: info@radkalankasova.cz

LANKAŠOVÁ, R., 2018. Internal Conflict Resolution between Employees: Methods Applied in Companies in the Czech Republic. *Littera Scripta* [online]. České Budějovice: Institute of Technology and Business in České Budějovice, **11**(1), 93-101 [accessed: 2018-06-29]. ISSN 1805-9112. Available at: http://journals.vstecb.cz/category/littera-scripta/11-rocnik-2018/1_2018/.