Possible approaches to the solution of conflict situations in managerial practice

Možné prístupy k riešeniu konfliktných situácií v manažérskej práci

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Abstract: Strategies used in conflict solutions include: avoiding, adjusting, coercion, compromise and cooperation. Although in our sample of respondents the most efficient strategy (cooperation) ranked No.1, almost the same preference was achieved by the strategy of coercion manifesting the directive style of management, which is becoming ineffective under present conditions.

Key words: managerial capabilities, conflicts, conflict solution strategies, style of management

Abstrakt: K stratégiám používaným pri riešení konfliktov patria: vyhýbanie sa, prispôsobenie sa, donútenie kompromis a spolupráca. Hoci v našej vzorke respondentov sa na 1. mieste umiestnila najefektívnejšia stratégia (spolupráca), skoro takú istú preferenciu má stratégia donucovania ako prejav direktívneho štýlu riadenia, ktorý v súčasných podmienkach sa stáva nefunkčným.

Kľúčové slová: manažérske spôsobilosti, konflikty, stratégie riešenia konfliktov, štýl riadenia

Conflict situations are unavoidable in managerial practice. Nákonečný (2000), citing Zanden, defines the conflict as follows: "Conflict is such a form of social interaction in which people (individually or in groups) are perceived as engaged in a struggle for precious resources or social values".

The essence of the conflict is thus in discords. Conflicts in a workplace can be by their nature interpersonal (in dyadic relations) or conflicts within small work groups. Small work groups are defined as groups whose members know each other and mutually communicate and integrate in the interest of their common goals. Individual members of the group have a different status and mutual interconnection of roles.

A successful solution of conflict situations in managerial positions is closely related to the social capability (skill) of the manager. Between 1999 and 2003, the *Agricultural Economics* published six of our methodologies (approaches) advisable for testing the real social capability of managers, which would underline the training and implementation of the personal development of managers in this area. It should be stressed here that the concept of social capability (skill) is generally understood as such human behavior which can enable him/her to adequately express his/her views, needs and emotions and applying which he/she can achieve his/hers aims in mutual conflicts with other people. In managerial positions, this happens in the process of influencing one's employees and in the process of business negotiations (dealings, contracts).

PAPER AIM

The aim of the present paper is to:
1. Show a possible approach to the identification of virtually used strategies preferably utilized (subconsciously) by the manager in conflict solution.
2. Based on test results in a sample of 55 managers (of higher and medium hierarchy grade), define the sequence of strategies utilized.
3. Present a viable approach of the manager to the evaluation (analysis) of a particular (experienced) conflict, insufficiently mastered, with the aim of understanding its causes, course and impacts, and hence, to draw a lesson from it.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The problems of conflict situations solving were described in papers by Goleman (1997), Křivohlavý (1995), Nákonečný (2000), Šimek (1995), Godefroy, Luis (1994) etc. One of the possible (viable) practical approaches to the identification of the strategies used in conflict solution is the so-called Thomas-Killman inventory defining 5 conflict solution strategies:
– Coercion (forcing)
– Adaptation (adjusting)
– Avoiding
– Cooperation
– Compromising

All the above mentioned strategies are in principle certain combinations of assertivity and cooperativeness. The strategy of "conflict avoidance" cannot be applied in managerial practice as the conflicts (of opinions, approaches, solutions) are essential for the development of an organization. The other 4 strategies do apply and, according to the level of their social capabilities, managers prefer certain strategies.

Our respondents were required to answer how frequently (usually, sometimes, rarely) they applied the following approaches in solving conflict situations:

1. I explain the differences in our opinions without either abandoning or emphasizing my opinion.
2. I openly disagree and then try to open discussion on differences in opinions.
3. I try to seek a most viable solution for both parties.
4. Before letting the others decide, I make sure they understood my contribution and that I understood their standpoints.
5. I rather agree to a "golden middle road" than to be forced to seek a fully satisfying solution.
6. Forced to try to investigate the differences of opinion, I prefer to admit to not having been fully right.
7. I am said to meet my opponents halfway in negotiations about a half of their requirements.
8. I expect to achieve about half of what I have been attempting.
9. I much prefer to step back rather than to change the other person's opinion.
10. I rather agree than to be forced to quarrel about something.
11. I step back if the other party puts emotions into play.
12. I try to avoid any conflicting part of the problem.
13. I try to win.
14. I try to win at any cost.
15. I never abandon a good argument.
16. I would rather win than reach a compromise.

The respondentsdo not know the system of evaluation prior to the test. Their individual strategies are clustered into groups of 4 approaches (opinions) each, namely:
– Cooperation strategy: 1–4
– Compromise strategy: 5–8
– Adaptation strategy: 9–12
– Coercion strategy: 13–16

Respondents are evaluated using points as follows:
– Usually   5 points
– Sometimes   3 points
– Rarely   1 point

The number of points achieved evaluated the preference of strategies used by individual respondents as follows:
– 17–20 points   strong preference
– 12–16 points   medium strong preference
– 7–11 points   slightly lower preference
– under 7 points   low preference

RESULTS

In evaluating the preferences of strategies used in conflict solving, we are first of all interested in the sequence of individual strategies for the whole set of tested persons. The sequence here was the following:
1st place: cooperation ($x = 17$ points)
2nd place: coercion ($x = 16$ points)
3rd place: compromise ($x = 11.5$ points)
4th place: adaptation ($x = 9$ points)

From the above, it results that although the 1st place was covered by the most suitable conflict strategy corresponding with the so-called people management paradigm, yet almost the same preference was taken up by its counterpart – coercion, as a form of manipulation paradigm (ordering style). Our hypothesis that the 2nd place will be taken up by the cooperation strategy has not been confirmed.

What do the first two, most frequently used strategies, represent in symbolic form?

Cooperation strategy represents:
– assertive + cooperative behavior
– non-avoiding conflict solving
– "two heads know more" (than one head)
– attempt at cooperation in problem solving
– identification of the "background" interests
– attempt at finding new solutions

On the other hand, coercion strategy represents:
– assertive + non-cooperative behavior
– selfish interests
– "who has the power, has the truth"
– using any form of power
– attempt at domination – victory

The test is predominantly significant for the individual. It is he/she who must consider and weigh up whether the strategy preferred is efficient or will be efficient in the future.

A change in the approach to strategy uses is a complex problem. A kind of directions for realizing our mistakes in solving conflicts situations can be seen in our suggestion for the analysis of conflict development and drawing a lesson from it.

The methodological procedure of such an analysis is given here:
1. The solution of what problem gave rise to the conflict?
2. How long did the conflict last?
3. Who, beside me, was (were) the participant(s) of the conflict?
4. What were the identifiable reasons for the conflict?
   a) particular causes (e.g. inadequate pay or promotion, insufficient time to solve tasks etc.)
   b) problems in human relations (e.g. people management style, behavior of certain people, non-acceptance of certain tasks etc.)

c) ideological and value-oriented background (e.g. different values, non-acceptance of political orientation etc.)
    d) moral problems (e.g. feeling like a victim of injustice, protectionism etc.).
 5. Was I the cause of the conflict?
 6. Did anyone try to draw me into the conflict?
 7. What has been done for:
    a) conflict prevention?
    b) mitigation of the already existing conflict?
 8. In which point and for what reasons might the conflict have indicated a peaceful solution or, vice versa, a stronger outbreak?
 9. What was the management's attitude to this conflict? Were the superiors drawn into the conflict? Were they capable of dealing with it?
10. Was the conflict a consequence of
    a) personal interests?
    b) failure of organizational relations?
11. Looking back at the conflict, were there any real reasons for its outbreak?
12. What solution was finally taken in the conflict?
13. Which factors (people, information, real conditions) decided on the chosen form of conflict solution?
14. Was it in my opinion a good solution?
15. What lesson can be drawn from the conflict by our organization (enterprise)?
16. What is my personal lesson drawn from the conflict?

CONCLUSIONS

Conflicts cannot be avoided in managerial practice. If we consider the succession of strategies suitable for conflict solving, then No.1 should be cooperation strategy, No. 2 compromising strategy. However, the condition attested by our test sample brings other results. Coercion strategy still occupies an important position. This topical problem connected with the managerial style is to be investigated in detail in our further research of the medium and top management. The results of the presented paper are a methodical starting point for such a research.

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