

Chapter 11

Managing Conflict in Workplace: A Case Study in the UAE Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The UAE has the largest migration rate in the world; its major workforce originates from numerous countries, including India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Australia, and the United States of America. While this workforce diversity contributes varied backgrounds and languages to the workplace, diversity can also present major challenges for management. Workforce diversity, tension, and conflict can result in the creation of invisible barriers, a lack in communication or coordination, and a lack of recognition of positive employee behavior. Yet, while organizations may suffer from internal conflict, the tension that accompanies diversity can also result in positive outcomes, like an increased competitive spirit, enhanced productivity, and gains in creativity of employees. This chapter focuses on assessing the benefits and liabilities of workforce diversity as manifest in the unique demographic context of the UAE. Qualitative methods employing interviews were used to investigate research questions about diversity. Interviews with 41 respondents were collected from 32 officials working in the UAE companies. The authors supplemented these interviews with quantitative methods, employing a questionnaire of 213 employees in selected local organizations. The research concludes that conflict, rather than positive outcomes, arises when workforce diversity leads to a combination of the following: a difference of opinion, a lack of coordination and communication, and a lack of properly defined responsibilities.

INTRODUCTION

As globalization has made workforces more diverse around the world, organizational conflict has been a major issue of concern. It is duty of executives and managers to understand the challenges that come with the workforce diversity

to avoid conflict. Success or failure in handling diversity is closely connected to an organization's environment and culture. Organizational structure and company policies can be adjusted to help avoid the negative effects of conflict (LLC, 2013). The UAE draws a large percentage of its workers from outside its borders, including Thailand, South

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Africa, India, Philippines, Pakistan, China, in addition to many western countries. This situation raises the potential for internal conflict (Rooyen, 2013) and internal communication barriers Q (Sarkin, 2000).

1. Purpose of Study

While challenges arising from workforce diversity in the UAE have been recognized in the literature, no substantial study has been produced to date to help explain underlying factors and offer practical suggestions. Are there organizations that are relatively free from conflict? How can conflict in the UAE organizations be controlled and managed? How can conflict be used positively to reap benefits to organizations? This article reports on the ideal behavior expected from employees, on major reasons for conflict arising UAE workplaces, and on the impact this conflict. It also provides practical suggestions for implementation plans to resolve conflict. The significance of this study focused on exploring the main types of conflicts that faced employees and how did they solve it. The main aim is to investigate the reasons and solutions of employees when they deal with conflicts.

Literature Review

Scholars like Alper, Tjosvol and Law (2000) have identified workforce diversity as a key factor underlying multiple conflicting situations that arise in an organization. Allen (2013) defines conflict arising from diversity in cultural views as difference in attitude towards achievement of work related goals, difference in needs that are not met in the same way.

Diversity places people into contact who have different attitudes, beliefs and value systems, and this impacts behavior. Employees interpret and perceive the same situations in different ways. Due to different personality types, employees find it “hard to coordinate with one another” (Bodtker

& Jameson 2001, p. 199). Jameson (2007) agreed that some demographic factors also can play a role in organizational conflicts, factors like gender, differing culture systems, and age.

Some researchers like Rupp, Baldwin and Bashshur (2006) maintain that organizations do not necessarily closely follow the patterns of their enveloping societies and cultures. Instead, organizations are seen as independent units with their own structure (Rahim, 2002) and culture, which they promote and encourage their employees to follow (Morgan, 2001). With these, there are a lot of types of conflict, but two main types, per (Simons & Peterson, 2000), are affective conflict and the cognitive conflict. “Where cognitive conflict is task-oriented and arises from differences in perspective or judgment, and affective conflict is emotional and arises from personal differences and disputes” (Amason & Sapienza, 1997 p. 495). So, in the cognitive type, often a conflicting situation arises if, for example, one employee is using harsh language with another. In this case the employees are not able to keep their “personal matters different” (Ishak & Ballard, 2012, p. 28) from organizational matters. Lang (2009) has noted that the expectations of employees, if not met, result in frustration and organizational conflict. Cognitive conflicts also arise when tasks and roles are not properly assigned or defined (Jehn, 1995). If conflict is not managed, disaster will result if management lacks the skill to handle stress and conflict in the workplace (Weber, 2000; Turner, Lynn, Richard, 2010). Rahim, Antonioni, and Psenicka (2001) identified two contributing factors to conflict: “Dominating is a coercive manager who forces their own way and avoiding is ignoring the problem in hopes that it will go away” (p. 196). Effective and efficiently managed, conflict can lead to constructive outcomes (Amason, 1996). Conversely, mismanaged conflict is disastrous (Baron, 1997).

In positive, healthy debates, people are tolerant, are able to listen to each other’s point of

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