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Rhetoric Communication to Handle Interpersonal Conflicts at Workplaces

Mitashree Tripathy

Abstract

Organisations are large platforms amalgamating people from diverse backgrounds, mindsets, experiences, opinions and beliefs. It is likely that at times there may be a clash in personalities leading to conflicts. While conflicts resolved create productive workplaces, on the contrary unresolved conflicts generate dissatisfaction and discontent among the people further leading to inefficiency among the employees directly hampering the organisation as a whole. Communication is understood as the most indispensable factors that moulds and reflects in our everyday relationships. Because of its dynamism and complexity, communication forms the essence of interpersonal relationships in organisational contexts. Understanding the vitality of communication, the concept this paper explores is how rhetoric communication, an Aristotelian principle may help resolving interpersonal conflicts, creating a win-win situation and further extending healthy interpersonal relationships at workplaces.

Keywords: communication, rhetoric, organizational, conflict, philosophy, management

1. Introduction

The concept of communication plays a major role in building interpersonal connections. The concept, the scope and the essentials of communication is dynamic and at the same time complex. Dynamic, because it involves and depends on the perception that feeds human interaction and that evolves over time and complex because it includes several steps before finally receiving a feedback from a receiver. Interestingly, its complexity does not merely gets restricted to individuals, rather expands to groups, organisations and cultures all around the globe. This dynamism and complexity in communication together form the essence of interpersonal relationships. Studies claim "through communication individuals describe and propose their preferred relationship to objects or others" [1]. Communication helps individuals to question and reply and it is in this fashion that they develop objectives regarding their favoured relationships and the manners for progressing with them. This is how interpersonal relationships sustain or abstain.

Particularly in organisational contexts, communication is more intricate where people spend a significant quantity of their lives. Working with others, sharing interests and activities form a work environment where a great deal of connections

takes place through correspondence. Transactions with superiors, subordinates, managers, peers, customers, clients and other members internally or externally linked at workplaces frame the day to day schedules making workplaces all the more collaborative and blended. This system is indispensable and inevitable as employees at workplaces need to understand what their organisations demand and how are they proceeding to meet the demands. While organisations demands may vary however, it is expected that the interpersonal relations at the workplaces remain constant, although may get stronger but should not feeble. This is because "achieving goals is possible only when employees form a strong bond between each other at workplaces" [2]. Stronger bonds create excellent interpersonal relationships thereby converting workplaces as a potential source of satisfaction and contentment. However, on the contrary, "relationships at work can be source of great distress and dissatisfaction when conflicts do occur" [3]. This is because while people spend a considerable proportion of time at workplace, they somehow tend to underrate this time and neglect the "the effect that their behaviour has on the way others behave and therefore on the achievement of personal and organisational goals" [4]. Communication becomes dysfunctional during conflicts. Ultimately, these intricacies may interfere in the business performances and smooth running of the organisation. Interestingly, it is communication again that resolves conflicts.

2. Literature review

Communication is an activity of relaying information from one source to another. Communication helps to create the world we live in. The way we interact, make relationships both personally and professionally, understand, develop, manage, lead, experience is all dependent on communication. In fact it is communication that offers strength and vitality to our existence. The concept of communication is very vast and means different to different people. For example, communication scholars will understand communication as a theory. Similarly, people from the business world understand communication as crucial information to be executed. In personal relationships communication would mean to share opinion, emotions and beliefs. For a vendor, communication may mean to present or persuade someone to buy their products. In short, communication is any such activity that includes exchange of views, information, messages, and opinions between two parties that are expected to promote a healthy relationship. However, there is no fixed definition of communication. Literature is replete with several definitions like "communication is a process of passing information and understanding from one person to another" [5]. Further studies claim "communication is essentially the ability of one person to make contact with another and make himself or herself understood" [6]. Still more definitions claim "communication is a process by which information is transmitted between individuals and/or organizations so that an understanding response results" [7]. Although, there can be indistinct definitions based on various studies on the theory and definitions of communication, it seems reasonable to summarize and assert that communication is an activity that is commenced by a source and gets executed to another to provide some meaning with a purpose to build a bridge between the two.

While communication is inevitable and its value can never be disparaged, its expertise in organisational contexts holds of greater significance. The reason is the purpose of the organisations is focussed for long-term goals that are executed meticulously through equally efficient structures. The implementation of communication in such strategies certifies the result of the efforts given. One study claims "communication is perceived as a magical elixir, one that can ensure a happy

long term relationship and can guarantee organisational success". But at times, there arise discrepancies or misinterpretation of communication when people work for common goals that result in conflicts. Authors mention "a disagreement often begins when two people or parties have different interest and work against each other in pursuit of their own objectives" [8]. This can also be between subordinate and superior or between c0workers where superiors may coerce forced strategies using their power and co-workers may even become ugly so much that at times they "become destructive, leading to anger, burnout and stress directly affecting mental, physical and emotional wellbeing" [9].

Studies mention that "conflict management refers to the systematic prevention of unproductive conflict and proactively addressing those conflicts that cannot be prevented" [10].

Conflicts can take place at various levels in an organisation. For example, there can be conflicts between departments, teams and individuals as internal communication structure is concerned and between customers, clients and third parties when external communication is concerned. Interpersonal conflicts although inevitable can be hazardous. Its seriousness emerges when the consequences of conflicts are taken lightly and easy and for granted in similar ways just like conflicts are taken. Hence, a constructive conflict handling system in organisation is a must. Many studies argue that both conflict resolution and conflict management are same and that if an organisation lacks conflict this symbolizes that the conflict has already been solved but, for a temporary moment. However, "if the removal of the symptoms of conflict does not remove the causes of conflict, then the solution reached is an illusory one" [11]. Thus, it may be fruitful if a conflict is managed rather than simply solved for better results.

Blake and Mouton (1964) were first to develop a scheme for managing "interpersonal conflicts into five types like forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising and problem solving" [12]. Further these five modes were reinterpreted by Thomas (1976) where "he considered the intentions of a party through cooperativeness and assertiveness in classifying the modes of handling conflict into five types" [13]. Cooperativeness is an act that originates from within an individual in need to suit and agree to other's concerns while assertiveness to satisfy one's own concerns through respect for other people.

Many studies have also attempted to find if there could be an intervention of emotional intelligence in conflicts management. Or more possibly does there sustain any relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management. Results indicated that "individuals' conflict management preferences predicted actual conflict management behaviours and EI was found to moderate this relationship" [14]. More recent studies on emotional intelligence depict it is always advisable to know a person in person in order to anticipate challenges and avoid objectionable surprises. In such aspects emotional intelligence plays a major role as "knowing the confronter, one will need to understand and work through one's own feelings about the subject matter of the confrontation as well as one's feelings about those who hold opposing views" [15]. Comprehending how one feels and counters when confronted is a key element in emotional intelligence.

In the above studies one common link and a key factor in all findings is communication. Most of the times and most during conflict management if the sender before giving any message to the receiver gives a thought to the intended message and attempt to stimulate the receiver in a way that is intended to achieve a specific result, probably then not only the conflict is managed but also it would have long term effects in organisational growth as well. Such communication is known as rhetoric communication, a strong principle prescribed by Aristotle. This paper attempts to explore the relevance of rhetoric communication in interpersonal

conflict management in the organisation. This paper declares rhetorical communication is not simply a prudent approach to solve interpersonal conflicts but it's an instant win-win over an audience. The upcoming section will study interpersonal conflicts in organisational contexts in details and rhetorical communication as an intervention in the same.

3. Organisational conflicts

Conflict is as inevitable as breathing. It is a natural process. It takes place during when two or more individuals, groups, organisations or even nations interact with each other while attaining their objectives. Often during the process there might arise unavoidable inconsistencies or incompatibilities "when two or more of them desire a similar resource that is in short supply when they have partially exclusive behavioural preferences regarding their joint action; or when they have different attitudes values, beliefs, and skills" [16]. This suggests that during conflicts one of the parties have a differing perception of beliefs, opinions, interests, and aspirations from that of another thus causing an incongruity between the two. Although the concept of the conflict is not a novel one and has influenced out thinking process since quite a long time, its dealing and acceptance has been largely underrated. Efficient dealing with conflict is highly indispensable if it is realized that the changes associated with it will have immense benefits.

The success of every organisation either large or small largely depends on the profit it makes. Many business organisations mostly centre on daily functions and operations and extend strategies and standards to proceed in order to achieve the desired results. However, these objectives and plans disappear when there occur conflicts between one or more parties that impact everyone associated with the organisation so much that at times, when conflicts are unchecked they can bring down an organisation's moral and image in the market. Hence organisational conflict can be described as "a phenomenon that depicts disagreement within or among individuals or group working together in an organisation over means or ends; or in an attempt to establish their views in preference to others" [17]. And when the conflict takes place between two or more individual, it is termed as interpersonal conflict. It's true that sometimes perception of interference from others can act as a reason of conflict; however, perceptions are not always true. Studies reveal that organisational conflict commonly originates because of "power, relationships, substantive and task issues, emotion, information, structure, values, and styles" [18]. Power struggles, perceptual differences in relationships due to roles and responsibilities, conflicts arising from tangible items, disagreement on the accuracy of or withholding a data or information, hurt feelings associated with various relationships, are some of the common reasons behind the instigation of organisational conflict. Interestingly, each of the reasons is unique in itself and demand different management application and strategies.

There may be various reasons behind organisational conflicts however, the impact that conflicts create are at times hazardous as sometimes they can be life threatening. Employees may have commitment issues resulting to reduced turn over and complete absenteeism. Put differently, workplaces seem like war spaces as employees continue to be on stress gradually, that impacts their problem-solving, decision making and thinking abilities. Studies indicate that "enduring stress further increases irritability and tendencies to distance oneself from social environment" [19].

Many organisations have already learned how unproductive conflicts can hamper their success and adapted fruitful methods to develop a structural

framework to conflict management there are still many organisations that are struggling to find out suitable ways out. While destructive conflicts act as a barrier in workplace performance and many employees at their workplaces in fact are inclined more towards destructive conflicts sometimes voluntarily or involuntarily, with absolutely no approach towards developing constructive manners to resolute the issues between them, organisational theorists and researchers are still struggling to probe deep into what can be the only, if not, probably be more appropriate solution to manage conflicts apart from what the literature provides. The following section will explore if rhetoric communication as an Aristotelian principle be considered as a constructive and practical approach to handle interpersonal conflict. The following section studies in details about the same.

4. Rhetoric communication

The word rhetoric means "the art of persuasion" [20]. As an art rhetoric is of utmost importance to every part of a society. And that's why perhaps, rhetoric as a subject has been written in every age and realm wherever and whenever the study of arts and sciences have been encouraged. Ancient studies believe that "the power of pleasing and persuading those whom we address has excited every faculty in the mind of man, to detect, if possible the secret springs of that pleasure and persuasion, which give us such dominion over the feelings of our fellow creatures" [21]. It in fact speaks about the production of belief that one creates in the mind of an individual while persuading in considerations with fact and its possibility that also provide pleasure.

Good contributions to the rhetoric emerged with the intervention of Aristotle views and his contributions in the subject where he explored the unexplored realm of the art. In fact it was his treatise on the art of rhetoric that acts a structural and a systematic treatment of the subject so much that it remains as the quickest and the most direct form of any works related to any subject. Aristotle in his book Rhetoric focuses on the use of language in persuasive argument. He detects that if there is an appropriate blend of both practical and aesthetic elements this will lead to an effective presentation. On the same grounds Aristotle writes "proofs that depend on the spoken word fall into three categories that are the speaker's character or ethos, putting listener in a certain frame of mind through emotion or pathos and through demonstrating or seeming to demonstrate something through argument or logos" [22]. Many studies understand this concept as "the triadic classification of arguments that persuade by virtue of an appeal" [23]. The mode of communication through ethos, pathos and logos is a crucial discovery reflecting a standard classification of a practical discourse contributing to conflict management. The following sections will traverse through all the three modes of communication to unravel the contribution of the same in conflict management.

5. Ethos

Ethos "is a Greek word meaning character that is used to describe the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community, nation, or ideology" [24]. And as Aristotle elucidates ethos is related to the character of the sender or the speaker in the process of communication. A character is a key trait that frames the personality of an individual. Aristotle defines character as "what shows a man's disposition the kind of things he chooses or rejects when his choice is not obvious" [25]. Hence character can be understood as any such act by an individual in terms of goodness

and badness of the morals and values. Studies mention "the core characters are respect, responsibility, honesty, trust, caring fairness, perseverance, self discipline, courage, citizenship and life skills" [26]. And in fact these moral and values build a character of an individual and put a claim on the conscience of an individual to act in a certain manner.

During an interpersonal conflict at least one party or one source lack character or in simpler words when at least one party fails to exhibit morals and values interpersonal conflict happens and sometimes fails to get managed. While managing conflicts it's very essential to understand and evaluate the ethics of the source because ethics inspires credibility and credibility promotes belief. An individual with moral character would always gain trust and belief from others. Hence, the credibility of the individual would provide a quick help in assessing the wrongness or rightness of situations thereby offering solutions to conflict management.

6. Pathos

Pathos in Greek is associated with emotional appeal. However, many studies consider that "a better equivalent might be appeal to the audience's sympathies and imagination" [27]. This is because through emotional appeal, an audience doesn't merely respond emotionally but also attempts to identify and understand about what the points the speaker intends to convey. This emotional appeal instigates a feeling of pain and misery in the mind of audience creating an impact on the audience. It would not be counterfeit to express that emotions do an important work while negotiating particularly during interpersonal conflicts. Many observational studies reveal that "negotiators rely on emotions to overcome obstacles such as initial mistrust and interpersonal friction" [28].

During interpersonal conflict management, pathos acts as a powerful principle as it connects its sources through emotions. Although the emotional appeal depends on how it is conveyed, however, its impact necessarily overcomes much of suffering. One must have a concrete grip over one's passions. One of the studies refers that "passions matter in real- life deal making and dispute resolution". [29] One ought to have clarity on the medium of communication and discover what the emotions are conveying in order to adapt to the situation thereby engaging others successfully. This indicates one must be prepared to negotiate or manage conflicts through emotions. Although it is obvious that anxieties and resentments may skulk under the surface, however, once festered the communication can go out of control and may not be acceptable. Hence, emotions have to be used judiciously while conflict management, to arouse empathy and not tense up.

7. Logos

Logos in Greek "means reasoning or argument" [30]. It is associated with logical appeal and is used to persuade an audience by the use of rational claim in order to support an argument. Studies suggest that "*logos* refers to the internal consistency of the message, the clarity of the thesis, the logic of its reasons and the effectiveness of its supporting evidence" [31]. The main motive of the use of logical reasoning during an argument is to create an impact on the audience through validation of proof in order to support the argument by substantiating it.

During an interpersonal conflict management, although the speaker is able to provide an apparent proof in order to convince the audience. Most of the time during an interpersonal conflict lack of proof or essential evidence may either give

rise to conflicts or deepen the existing conflict. However, through the valid appeal of logic, the speaker tends to prove his/her point and bring truth to the surface. Evidently, a speaker may be able to provide facts, statistics, figures and analogies as proof in order to showcase his/her views before the audience.

However, the point is focusing only on one mode of communication and rejecting the other two would make the purpose of conflict resolution dilute and the outcome may largely seem vague. For example, if one only focuses on the credibility part, even if the morality of the individual appears right, but if he/she lacks the emotional approach or fails to provide sufficient proofs to keep the views, the speaker may not be able to manage the conflict. Similarly, if one focuses only on the emotional part and disregards the integrity and the logical reasoning appeal of the individual still the conflict won't be managed. Likewise, if the emphasis is given to the scope through logical argument excluding the emotional and the ethical aspect of the communication the conflict may not still be managed. Hence, during an interpersonal conflict management one must be able to blend all the three modes of persuasive communication in order to make it more effective.

Discussing all the three modes of communication in order to handle interpersonal conflicts it must be understood that at the core, the conflicts need to be handled also considering the fact that how during conflicts the needs of the people get affected by the conflicts. Hence, "for a solution to be lasting, it must meet the needs of all those involved in the conflict" [32].

8. Conclusion

The most important element in interpersonal conflict management at workplaces is communication and the usage of persuasive approach in the communication process. Beyond the ethos versus pathos versus logos according to the Aristotelian principle of communication, the key factor that helps in interpersonal conflict management is identifying the aspects of the managing the conflict sensibly. The element of ethical, emotional and logical standards cue must be well picked during interpersonal conflict management so that one knows exactly how to strike the bull's eye. Interpersonal conflicts can be well managed when all the three modes of persuasion are appropriately influencing each mode of communication over the other. Focusing on only one of the modes and implementing only one agenda creates more incoherency and incoherency during the conflict management. Communication without ethics or character can be manipulative. Communication without emotions can lead to coercion and inflexibility and communication without facts, logic, reasoning and argument can be misguiding during interpersonal conflicts. After analyzing the derivatives of ethos, pathos and logos, in the paper, we now have the residue of reinforcing a richer appreciation of how all the three modes of persuasion must work in consistency during an interpersonal conflict management. Hence, ethos pathos and logos, can provide a braided thread that is not only strong but also sustainable in interpersonal conflict management.

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