# Types of Conflicts in a Work Team and in Personnel Movement

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## Abstract

Human capital management in sustainable development conditions means, in everyday practice, taking care of the welfare of employees, understood, i.a., as a friendly atmosphere in a team, stable, and free from stress and conflicts. The author has analysed several cases of conflicts in employee teams connected with personnel movement in order to answer the following research questions: What are the characteristics of employee teams susceptible to the emergence or escalation of conflicts to levels destructive for the organisation, what types of interpersonal conflicts escalate in the analysed situations, which factors are a catalyst and which factors block conflict? Conclusions from the analysed cases allow the author to describe the main threats of destructive conflict and put forward recommendations for human capital management.

**Keywords:** motivation, team, team formation, work arrangements, conflict

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Human capital management in sustainable development conditions means, in everyday practice, taking care of the welfare of employees, understood, i.a., as a friendly atmosphere in a team, stable, and free from stress and conflicts. The current approach of science to conflict in an organisation defines it as inevitable. Conflicts arise for many reasons, including organisational structure, unavoidable differences in goals, values, and the perception of employees with different cultural backgrounds. The task of the management is to manage and resolve conflict in a way that leads to optimal efficiency of the organisation (Stoner & Wankel, 1996). The term 'conflict optimisation' sounds euphemistic and does not change the fact that conflict is the main source of employee stress, it is the accelerated consumption of human capital, it is a long list of psychological, physiological, and social consequences. Does this have to be so? The aim of this study is:

1. Identification of the features of employee teams susceptible to the emergence or escalation of conflicts to destructive levels for the organisation;
2. Identifying the types of interpersonal conflicts that escalate in certain situations;
3. Description of the main threats of destructive conflict and formulation of recommendations for human capital management;
4. Identifying which factors are catalysts and which factors block conflict.

Among many definitions of conflict, the author has adopted an approach that exposes the emotional thread of this type of interaction. Conflict is a social situation in which there is a revealed conflict of interests, tendencies, views, and attitudes of individuals or social groups interacting in one place at the same time, causing a strong emotional tension and stimulating behaviours aimed at removing or minimising this state of affairs (Kowalski, 1992). According to this approach, conflict is a phenomenon occurring between people and not between organisational units, departments, sections. Friction in organisational structures is a normal phenomenon and results from the division of roles in organisations profiled for a specific field and specialisation, e.g. accounting, quality control, sales, and promotion. The set of objectives for these departments differs substantially from each other and only in the end makes up a positive result for the organisation. Conflict always has a specific object that a team is competing about. They include:

• conflict of interest;
• relationship conflict;
• conflict of values;
• structural conflict;
• displaced conflict;
• misattributed conflict.

A conflict of interest concerns a situation where material benefits, including earnings, are obtained, where one party wants to satisfy its needs at the expense of

the other party. The threat of losing one's job touches upon fundamental personal issues, the basis of employees' existence and is often the subject of conflict. A conflict causes so much discomfort to the parties that it is natural to consider extreme alternatives – "I quit or fire you". Conflicts of interest often develop outside the official communication stream, fuelled by gossip, speculation and fear. "They are hiring young people, they will fire the old ones" – this is a very serious line of reasoning.

The conflict of relationships is connected with the attitude towards the other person, especially when the opponent strives to gain more and more power, wants to gain a dominant position, raises their prestige at the expense of another employee. Who gives instructions to whom, how, do I take them seriously, or like a child or a novice? Young employees try to achieve independence in the team and their partners are not prepared to allow them to. This type of conflict is still susceptible to arising when other issues (salaries, workstation equipment) are rigid or stable. The second factor (and in a sense the channel) of conflict is personality differences. The competitive style in conflict and the potentially conflicting personality strongly correlated with it are risk factors, sometimes dormant, functioning properly only in specific conditions.

A potentially conflicting person (Bohm & Laurell, 2014) is characterised by the fact that:
- he/she falls out with many people;
- he/she has little empathy, i.e. understanding of another person, looks through the prism of his/her own needs and feelings, is unable to listen to others;
- lacks flexibility, quickly makes up his/her mind up about others and does not verify it even in the face of obvious facts which do not match this assessment;
- communicates in a way that is incomprehensible to the environment.

Such a person is a 'potential conflict' in the team, often having many other assets, personal charm, initiative, hard work, but burdened with this important disadvantage in functioning within the environment.

A conflict of values arises from different value systems and concerns fundamental issues, including beliefs, religion, culture and tradition. When a male employee treats women with disregard because he wants to build a higher position, it is a conflict of relationships, but when it results from his upbringing and tradition, it is a conflict of values. Working in a multicultural environment naturally gives rise to complications, e.g. different dates of religious holidays.

Coordination, interdependence and shared responsibility for successes and failures create conflicts between interacting participants and groups of organisations. The saying "we are all in the same boat" sometimes takes on a declarative form, real cooperation is pretended, and engagement is unequal. When it takes the form of an organisational dispute, we are dealing with an organisational problem, but when

personal threads are revealed, there is a conflict of values – considered to be the most difficult to solve.

A structural conflict is most often connected with the structure of the organisation and material environment of the company in which the participants in the conflict are located. This may result from the roles that the participants in the conflict have in the organisation, time constraints, division of tasks to be performed at the same time, access to the infrastructure.

A displaced conflict occurs when objective misunderstandings occur and are noticed, but the parties do not try to mitigate them and, for various reasons, argue about other issues. The true contentious issue is being replaced by another, and its resolution does not change the tension between the underlying issues (Balawajder, 1998). Usually, these key issues are blocked by senior management (payroll policy, savings), organisational culture and business pragmatics. Frustration is, therefore, revealed in other fields.

In the case of misattributed conflicts, the parties see objective reasons for the conflict, but unconsciously fall into conflict with the wrong people (e.g. someone blames a colleague from the team for what his or her superior ordered him/her to do). People introducing ferment in the team can hide for a long time when they work in a team where there is a so-called consent paradox, i.e. negative messages are blocked, often in order to create a good team atmosphere. The latest Polish research on this issue, conducted using a survey method, focuses on the causes and effects of conflicts for the company. In the study, there were randomly selected employees in three companies in Bialystok (Krajewska, 2019). The most common source of conflicts was poor circulation of information and bad communication, followed by bad rules for bonuses and rewarding subordinates The dominant factor was explained in the organisational culture of enterprises characterised by high internal competition, in which information important for the company was hidden or the activities of other employees were sabotaged. In another survey of the industrial environment with a high percentage of employees among the respondents (Nowak, 2018), excessive demands on employees regarding work efficiency were the main source of conflict. The survey method allows little insight into the conflict mechanism at the level of the team, whether in the last case it was about insufficient remuneration when increasing standards (conflict of interest), or too directive a way of introducing changes (relationship conflict) or the scope of communicating changes (data conflict).

Pilot case studies conducted by the author provided a description of 3 frequent professional situations that trigger conflicts or not. Conflict case descriptions were obtained from the participants or observers. The conflict was to be interpersonal in nature, employee-employee, boss-employee, boss-boss, embedded in the recognised

organisational culture, containing details necessary to interpret the style of behaviour in the conflict, such as gender, age, professional experience, personal situation.

Destabilising situations:

1. **New employee in the team.** This natural phenomenon in personnel movement entails various threats to the well-being of the employee. One of the threads is the behavioural profile in conflict dominating in the team and the profile of the new employee. The non-assertive profile of the new employee can create a difficult adaptation situation. An interesting variable is the acquisition of a team member from another department of the parent company, e.g. from a cooperating department. It may be important if he or she had previous organisational experience, in how many teams he or she learnt to cooperate and what type of assertiveness it was. Below is a brief description of 3 cases displaying this type of situation.

   **Case 1.** *An American company operating in Poland has employed a new male member of Turkish origin in a three-person team. Other departments of the company also employed people from Turkey. The team consisted of a specialist with many years of experience, known for her sceptical approach to foreigners. From the very beginning, the specialist was disturbed by the fact that the colleague speaks his mother tongue at work and maintains contact only with the Turkish minority. The dispute quickly escalated, and the attacking party was the specialist who went as far as creating fictional tasks with incorrect data to discredit the Turk. We are dealing here with a competing style of the specialist, and accommodating style of the adversary. The case was escalated to the Department Head and the HR (mutual complaints). Manipulations of the specialist were discovered and astonished the boss.*

   In the analysed case, the conflict has more than one component, the conflict of values seems to play a dominant role and is accompanied by the conflict of relationship. The occurrence of two components of the conflict favours the phenomenon of a spiral, i.e. an automatic escalation. Conflicting individuals (competitive style) within a team should communicate in a controlled environment, especially in a situation where members of the team are again getting used to each other, and the new employee from a different culture is one of those individuals. These people are often a challenge for managers, but a challenge they have to face. In conflicts between employees, managers seem to wait for the dispute to resolve itself, which seems to be an unprofessional strategy. The lack of intervention in a conflict rather escalates the conflict by strengthening the more aggressive side in the belief that it will go unpunished, that there are no rules or that their behaviour is accepted. The lack of reaction, when the situation has developed into an open conflict, indicates incompetence and the lack of imagination, misunderstanding of the meaning of the organisation.

**Case 2.** *Local government administration, social department. The manager, due to the heavy workload of the existing employees, decides to employ an additional social worker, who is to join the existing three-person team. She chooses a young, friendly girl with specialist education – Agnieszka. She is an intelligent, dutiful person with a sense of mission, but at the same time withdrawn, sensitive, not defending her own interests, avoiding direct confrontation (avoiding style). The second participant in the conflict is a specialist, middle-aged person with extensive experience in social work, valued and respected by the manager, with whom she had a very good relationship. She was known for expressing her opinions directly, not hiding her attitude towards others, impulsive and willing to criticise and discredit people whom she did not like (competitive style). The manager distanced herself from this situation. A sentence from the description of the situation is telling. Agnieszka complained more and more to employees from other departments, avoided being in the same room with the specialist, and often cried.*

A similar case where the 'driving force' of the conflict is not visible at first glance. The social section is overburdened with responsibilities, so an additional person, with substantial preparation and willingness to work, is a valuable relief, but this is not the case. We are dealing here with an informal structure, which means that the specialist 'feels like' a vice-manager and is ready to fight to maintain this position. Two other employees have adapted to this situation, for the sake of peace and quiet. But the new employee demonstrates the avoiding style that communicates badly, does not know how to flatter or falsely smile, which is perceived as rebellion and the lack of willingness to recognise the dominant position of the specialist. For the competitive style it is important who gives commands to whom, how, whether the weaker manifests submissiveness. A characteristic feature of the competitive style is the communication exclusion of the adversary, and for the avoiding style – inactivity in communication. If we believe that someone's behaviour is unacceptable, we come to the conclusion that this person is not worth the time and effort: "after what she's done, I'll never speak to her again." (Fisher & Brown, 2010). Such a formula sounds like a call to fight and is challenging for the working environment.

**Case 3.** *An apprentice in Germany, in a young, fast-growing company. The relationship with the founder and the owner of the company became a problem. The beginnings were promising. They also got along very well in non-business matters, had a similar sense of humour and similar worldviews and were often joking with each other. A close and open relationship with the boss indicates a cooperative style of the apprentice. From the very beginning, the apprentice tried to organise his work and emphasise it to other employees. His sense of humour, as well as his innate ease in establishing contacts with other people, quickly gave him the status of a very popular person, whose jokes were repeated by the whole company. Unfortunately, over time, problems*

*arose, which he was not able to control, because working in a young start-up company is burdened with a lot of chaos. Young founders often experience difficulties in dealing with the pressure of responsibilities and the lack of skills to manage people. The boss very often changed his mind about the duties, not knowing what he wanted from the employee. Every step on the way, the apprentice encountered indecent, aggressive jokes about himself, as well as unfounded accusations of inefficiency at work. Even during ordinary conversations of strictly business nature, he encountered unnecessary slurs and comments. This is clearly indicative of the competitive style of the boss, who was overcome with negative emotions when his positions of a 'genius' and 'guru' began to fade in the face of the feisty young man.*

We are dealing here with a case of a conflict of relationship with elements of a displaced conflict. The boss assessed the behaviour of the new employee as competitive and conscious, which is a necessary condition for the development of the conflict. However, this was not the case. The open and assertive behaviour in the team, supported by high self-esteem and high competence ("so young and already so skilful?"), in the absence of a longer history of the relationship leads to misinterpretation. When we know someone longer, we have a basis for predicting and understanding their intentions and behaviours, and here we lacked the professional and life experience of the boss. Studies on family businesses have identified the following (4 out of 7 described) behaviours and attitudes of board members (Mesjasz, 2013):

- I want to be important and independent, I keep part of my knowledge to myself in order to have an advantage.
- I don't want to hurt anyone, I'm afraid of judgement and criticism.
- We do not like each other.
- We do not want to talk about difficult subjects.

There is a lot of rivalry, fear, and excessive attention to mutual evaluation between people in the described behaviours, when the main goal is productivity and satisfying the needs of the market.

2. **Internal and external promotion.** Vertical promotion, which is very typical in companies, carries significant risks if it possesses characteristics of competition. The winner 'feels the breath' of the rival, who stays in the team often with a sense of regret and in competitive situations looks for potential dirt – just in case. The loser's sense of criticism grows naturally. It is difficult for him or her to accept the 'old role' in new circumstances. A similar mechanism is triggered by an external promotion, i.e. a boss acquired from outside of the company. If there was an informal leader in the team, he or she will consider this situation as an omission from promotion and launch competitive actions that could lead to conflict. What works better here? The long preparation of a successor and natural succession

after the former boss, or a slow game stimulating the candidacy and a short competition time at the last moment?

**Case 4.** *The situation took place in the Human Resources department of one of the largest FMCG companies operating on the Polish market. A 28-year-old graduate of the Faculty of Management (specialisation: human resources management) of one of the best economic schools in Poland. Despite her young age, she had 6 years of professional experience. She completed her first internship during her studies and spent the last 2 years in London, where she worked as HR Specialist in the HR department in one of English transport companies (responsible for the implementation of the company's HR policy and strategy). She was a scrupulous, compromising person who usually easily connects with people and likes to work in a team. After 2 years, she decided to return to Poland and started looking for a job in the HR department. She was offered the position of HR and Payroll Manager which had just become vacant after the departure of the previous manager. On the first day of her work, the new manager was introduced to the team of 6 people with tasks and duties clearly assigned by the previous manager. While she quickly established rapport with 5 employees, she faced difficulty in communicating with a 33-year-old specialist. The specialist had the longest track record in the human resources and payroll department of all 6 employees. He has been working for the company for 6 years (as a recruitment and training specialist for the first 2 years and then in the HR department). His experience and knowledge were appreciated by his colleagues, he had an opinion of an accurate, systematic and punctual person. He usually got along with his team without any issues.*

The term 'a compromising person' in relation to the new manager turned out to be the adjustment style that ended in an escalation of the conflict in the face of the competitive style of the specialist, driven by his high temperament. The conflict ends with great emotions and the transfer of the specialist to another department, leaving 'deep wounds' in the psyche of everyone involved. We are dealing here with a conflict of relationship strengthened by a displaced conflict. The specialist has nothing to reproach his new boss, but he has a huge regret for not being promoted. He expresses this regret by attacking the person that he can attack, not the person he wants to attack. According to the definition of conflict provided at the beginning, the individual must react in some way to restore his or her mental balance – in this case through aggression. Otherwise, the reaction would be to withdraw from the dispute or from the organisation altogether.

3. **The threat of job loss**, redundancy due to an external factor. A difficult financial situation of the company is a factor strongly affecting the welfare of its employees and strongly stimulating conflicts from inactive levels. An important variable may be the informal structure of the team: strong with a dominant leader or a group within the team, or weak – shallow relations within the team. When

relating to the issue of the threat of job loss to groups of employees, the status of people over 50 who are experiencing what is known as the 'crisis on the objective level' as a result of constant changes in technology, computerisation and automation is particularly special (Bańka, 1995). In the first 20 years of the transformation, this group experienced hard treatment before the period of employment protection. The second group at a greater risk of losing their jobs were women, which is partly due to stereotypes that women can always return to their family roles and that men should support their families.

The sense of the threat of job loss modifies negatively the professional and social behaviours of the employee, in particular: disturbed cognitive and emotional processes, loss of concentration, disruption of the decision-making process, dissatisfaction with oneself or one's surroundings (Borucki, 1990). Such a state is a breeding ground for conflict.

**Case 5.** *A separate unit of the research and training company is the approximately 20-person ESF department, which is responsible for the implementation of projects co-financed by the European Union. The project coordinator in the ESF department located in the company's headquarters in Warsaw is responsible for the supervision and control of the implementation of 3 projects, including one implemented in the Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship, with the project office in Szczecin. The centre does not have a formal leader in place, after the previous one has left for maternity leave. Individuals employed there report to the director of the ESF implementation department in the education function, who works in Warsaw. One of the specialists is responsible for 2 projects on the purely implementation side – contacts with project participants, completing training documentation, ordering training and support materials, preparing reports, etc. He is a very determined, assertive and dominant person. The office in Szczecin was temporary (it was established temporarily for the period of the implementation of ESF projects) and all the people employed there worked every day with the perspective of the inevitability of losing their jobs after the completion of the projects. When reporting to the Voivodeship Labour Office in Szczecin on the progress of the project, the coordinator uses reports drawn up by a specialist from Szczecin in which the same mistakes appear regularly. In her opinion, this causes a lot of additional work. The coordinator informed her superior and the specialist's superior about the situation. However, none of them was particularly interested in the subject. During the audit carried out by the public administration bodies, a number of errors, mistakes related to the area for which the expert was responsible, came to light. The coordinator called on him to supplement the training documentation and to prepare correct reports on the project implementation. The specialist was clearly offended by the fact that the coordinator commissions tasks and sets deadlines for him, even though she is not his superior and they do not even work in the same organisational units.*

The coordinator represents the cooperative style, is constructive and assertive at the same time, sets tasks and standards for improvement when errors occur. The conflict of relationship with a competitive specialist begins. The catalyst is also the temporary nature of the team's activity, which may be interpreted as the lack of perspectives for the team after the end of the project, when the headquarters does not even see the need to fill the position of the leader. And the specialist feels competent for this role and fulfils it informally, which seems crucial here. When you have two superiors, one substantive and one organisational, at a distant location and no direct communication (only remote), the resulting free decision-making field poses both opportunities and risks. The reaction of such a system is naturally delayed, which is crucial in the event of an escalation of conflict.

## Conclusion

1. Early signals are usually omitted and underestimated, and may be invaluable as they warn of the 'disease' of conflict. In the analysed cases, the conflict signals were clear and directly stated. How can you not notice that good colleagues from the department sit at opposite ends of the canteen, that antagonised groups are unable to sit at the same table, even when there are no available seats (which was what happened in one of the cases).

2. As long as the employees' behaviour is in accordance with the company's procedures, there are no problems with a good atmosphere. Free space, not regulated by the organisation, is a chance for the creativity of employees. At the same time, however, the open formula of tasks brings the possibility of a conflict being born. The unchecked adaptation of the new employee creates conflict instead of the expected benefits. A mere declaration of cooperation and assistance is not enough when mental predispositions and skills are lacking.

3. The team leader should build an attitude of neutrality towards his/her subordinate staff, thus securing access to information bottom-up. When he/she is perceived as biased, he or she does not receive information because it is strictly regulated. In conflicts between employees, when one of the individuals was perceived as the favourite of the boss (informal structure of the team), the flow of information was completely disrupted (the wronged employee complained to people from other departments, but not to his boss).

4. A manager involved in a conflict with an employee or a team (e.g. imposed on a team) is emotionally involved and thus poorly motivated to resolve the conflict. He or she often manifests strategies of conflict rivalry, which is considered more destructive, i.e. he or she attacks and destroys his/her opponent.

5. The composition of reaction to conflict styles of the members of a given employee's team may take different variants, relatively unified or diversified, at a higher or at a lower level of assertiveness. A team of rival, highly assertive traders is a battlefield and at the same time a challenge for the leader, especially when strong external destabilising factors appear, such as a decrease in sales or a radical change in the company's strategy. A team unified at a low level of assertiveness requires subtle tools and protection against external factors. An assertively diverse team with strong, ambitious individuals and withdrawn, reliable employees will have a more diverse amplitude of mutual emotions. Each of these teams will have their own type of balance. This is a fascinating field for further research.

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