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Role of Religious Principles in Managing Conflicts with Higher Authorities in Higher Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Religion provides great guidelines in improving interpersonal relations at workplace. The present study aimed at exploring the role of religious principles in managing work place conflicts among faculty members. Participants of this study were 8 faculty members (4 males and 4 females) teaching in various disciplines of different higher education institutions. Participant's age range was 29 to 60 years ($M=44.5$, $SD= 8.3$) with at least two years of teaching experience. Semi structured interview protocol of 15 questions was developed to explore their experiences about conflict management in the light of religious teachings. The primary research question was: which religious principles do you use to manage conflicts with chairperson of your department? In-depth interview was conducted with each participant individually. Content analysis was used in the study to analyze qualitative data semi structured interviews. The most salient religious principles reported by the participants of the study in order to manage conflicts with higher authority were obedience, polite discussion and reasoning, submissiveness, respect, wisdom and use of religious examples. The study had strong implications in improving interpersonal relations for higher authorities of post graduate institutions and faculty members.

Keywords: Obedience, Polite Discussion, Respect, Wisdom and Use of Religious Examples Higher Educational Institutes.

Introduction

Background of the Study

Conflicts are part and parcel of organizational life. Conflict can either strengthen an organization or weaken an organization through war of words and actions. In higher education departments, conflicts are observed at different level e.g. conflict between faculty and students, faculty to faculty, faculty and administration and faculty with higher authorities. Conflict means 'a prolonged battle or collision,' 'the opposition of mutually exclusive impulses, desires, or tendencies,' 'a controversy, a disagreement, etc.' (Weeks, 1992). Conflict is also referred to as deviation, resistance or fight between two or more individuals or groups. Incompatible influence and power differences among individuals leads to conflicts among organizational members (Gordon, 1999). Conflict can arise anywhere when two or more individuals interact with each other. In any organization, conflict plays an important role in ensuring that organization works efficiently and effectively. Whereas, so many conflicts in any organization can weaken the bonds and unity of organizational members. It is harder to achieve organizational objectives without unity between the

employees. Mutual understanding and respect for each other opinions are part and parcel of healthy environment in any organization. Conflict plays a significant role in any organization. Conflicts in any organization that arise due to misunderstanding hinder the performance of organizational members. While, conflicts are also necessary to make an organization efficient and efficiently working. Therefore conflicts must be managed to enhance the effectiveness and productivity of any organization (Unus, 2004).

We are aware of the fact that religion plays an important role in making a civilized and peaceful society by giving certain laws. It helps in improving social behavior of individuals in any society. It also emphasizes on love and respect for elders, respect for strangers, forgiveness, tolerance, acceptance of responsibility, peacemaking, reconciliation, social justice, negotiation and respect of difference in opinions. Many references are found in Holy Quran on love, peacemaking and conflict management for instance. As said by Allah Almighty in holy Quran “O’ the Faithfull there is no authority to men make fun of other men, possibly they may be better than the other (group of men). Also, do not let women make fun of other women, as it may be that they are better than the other (group of) women” (Surat Al-Ĥujurāt 49:11).

Perspectives on Organizational Conflicts

Three basic perspectives of conflict management are there:

The Traditional View

According to traditional approach to conflict, conflict is bad. Conflicts viewed negatively and it was considered similar to destruction, irrationality and violence. Therefore conflicts were always avoided. In order to avoid conflicts one should try to direct his/her attention to roots of conflicts and accurate the faulty conceptions of individuals to improve group and organizational performance (Robbins, 1994).

Human Relation View

In comparison to traditional view, human relation view believes that it is natural to have conflict among individuals or groups in an organization. So conflict is unavoidable, therefore human relation view accept the occurrence of conflict. They try to reduce the existence of conflict but sometimes conflict can benefit the group performance (Robbins, 1994).

The Interactionist View

It is the latest view towards the conflict. The interactionist view encourage conflict as human relation approach accepted conflict, and believes that nonviolent, pleasant and helpful individuals are likely to become nonresponsive, standing and unconcerned due to need for innovation and change. Therefore the major contributing factor of interactionist view is maintaining a minimal amount of conflict among the employees. This minimal amount of conflict is necessary to keep the group energetic, innovative and critical to self. On the other hand, individuals need to realize that conflict has a power to enhance or diminish the performance of individuals or groups working in an organization (David & Andrej, 1997).

Models of Conflict Management

The concepts of Syura, Ta’awun and Nasihah are quite prominent in history of Islam. These are very important in managing conflicts among individuals or groups. These concepts has been used and appreciated to make best decisions for management of conflicts since the lifetime of Holy Prophet (PBUH).

Syura

It is based on decision making process when then decision is made on consultative basis: where opinion of other people is taken before making a decision and resolving a conflict. According to Islamic scholars it is either desirable or obligatory. Some Islamic scholars who focus on Quranic Verse “ask others in the dealings” (Surah Al-Imran 3:159). For them Syura is considered obligatory. While, other scholars consider Syura as desirable rather obligatory, as they focus more on the verse “the people who ask others in their dealings are praised” (Surah Al-Syura 42:38). Syura is not simply limited to consultation, but a praiseworthy characteristic of a believer is constituted by it, so that they can achieve completeness as believers (Hassan, 1995).

Ta’awun

In order to avoid conflict one should practice cooperation. It basically refers to helping each other in accomplishing a task. Teachings of Quran are to cooperate with each other for forgiveness and integrity, and avoid indulging in misbehaviors and offenses. It is emphasized in Surah Al-Maidah “And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is severe in penalty” (Quran 5:2). Through this process of Ta’awun individuals would come to know difference between good and bad. Talking to each other in a proactive manner would also help in making a conflict dysfunctional.

Nasihah

Nasihah is basically sincere advice, but include all type of virtue. Prophet (PBUH) associated all the religion with process of Nasihah. It can be found by one of prophet (PBUH) Hadith:

Religion is Nasihah. People asked to Prophet (PBUH) to whom? Prophet (PBUH) replied to Allah Almighty, to book, to his Prophet (PBUH), to the leaders and common folk of Muslims (Narrated by Muslim 55). It is clear that the concept of Nasihah is important for every Muslim from bottom to top. As giving and receiving Nasihah is tradition of Prophets. When conflicting parties are given sincere advice the intensity of conflict is minimized. The parties come to know about each other views through Nasihah before the arousal of conflict intensity.

Research Objectives

1. To develop an understanding about different conflicts usually prevail in higher education institutes.
2. To explore the role of Islamic teachings used by faculty members in managing their conflicts?

Research Questions

1. What are the different Islamic principles used for managing conflicts in higher education institutes?
2. How are the Islamic principles used for managing conflicts?
3. What are benefits of Islamic teaching upon conflict management?

Research Methodology

This study was grounded in qualitative method, because it was accurate to explore the measures and methods used by higher authorities to manage their work place conflicts. Also to have a better understanding about the commonly used religious principles by authorities to manage their workplace conflicts.

Sample

Participants of this study were 8 faculty members (4 males and 4 females) teaching in various disciplines of different higher education institutions. Participant's age range was 29 to 60 years ($M=44.5$, $SD= 8.3$) with at least two years of teaching experience.

Data Collection Tool

The data was collected through Semi structured interview protocol of 15 questions. That was developed to explore the experiences of authority/faculty about conflict management in the light of religious teachings. The interviews for data collection were conducted physically. Interviews were conducted in Urdu or English as per participant preference. The ability to have the interviews conducted in Urdu or English allowed the participant to verbally communicate comfortably and allowed for the expression of rather sensitive views without fear and hesitancy. The primary research question was: which religious principles do you use to manage conflicts with chairperson of your department?

Data Analysis

The study focuses on the subjective experiences of faculty members regarding conflicts and the religious principles they use to manage work place conflicts. The qualitative content analysis was chosen as data analytic method. The analysis basically involves an in-depth interpretation of personal perception of an experience or event. The transcribed data was analyzed under content analysis. In initial step the verbatim was thoroughly studied several times for clear understanding. When the verbatim was understood left hand margins were used for writing the initial themes or the things found significant in the verbatim. After finding the initial themes left margin was used to found the emergent themes evolved from the initial themes. Finally major themes were extracted from the emergent themes also known as super ordinate themes.

Key Findings

Content Analysis was employed on the data gathered through semi structured interviews. Several emergent themes were found by analyzing the data through content analysis.

Super ordinate theme	Subordinate theme	f (%)
Islamic Principles for Conflict Management	— Obedience	8 (100)
	— Polite discussion and reasoning	
	— Submissiveness	
	— Respect	
	— Wisdom	
	— Use of Religious Examples	

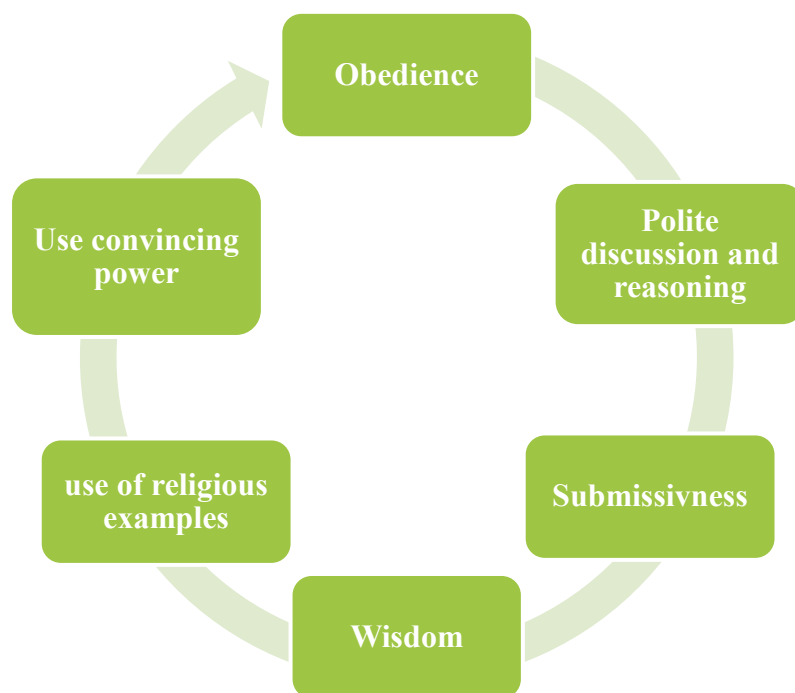
Figure: Conflict Management with Higher Authority

Figure describing the factors that can help in conflict management with higher authority.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The present study aims to explore the common problems faced by teachers working at higher educational institutes. Quantitative research method was used to conduct the study. In-depth interviews were taken from the teachers working at higher educational institutes to know about the basic issues or problems that cause work place conflicts and which techniques or religious principles are used by teachers to manage those conflicts?

Conflict Management with Higher Authority

Conflict with higher authority emerged as the second major theme. Participants of the study reported various techniques in order to handle and manage conflicts with higher authority. The basic sub themes emerged under the shade of conflict with higher authority were: obedience, polite discussion and reasoning, submissiveness, respect, wisdom and use of religious examples.

Obedience

Obedience is very important in order to manage conflicts, especially with higher authority. Many participants reported that one must be obedient towards the higher authority in order to manage conflicts effectively. The following narration of teachers represents the importance of obedience in conflict management.

It's also my duty to obey the elders and superior.

I use to obey my elders.

You have to obey the higher authority.

Same was the viewed in the following statements as well:

I think I am quite obedient of her.

We have to obey our seniors.

The younger should keep quiet and obey.

My obedience should be for her.

It's in Islam to obey the higher authority.

Allah Almighty also commanded to obey the superior:

O believers obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. If you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in result (Surat An-Nisa 4:59).

This theme falls in the model of conflict management called Ta'awn. In this the participant cooperates with the higher authority in order to avoid conflicts.

Polite Discussion and Reasoning

Polite discussion and reasoning is the tool that contribute effectively in minimizing the conflict arouse at any workplace. Many a participants reported the use of this tool. The importance of polite discussion could be viewed by the statements of Participants:

Polite discussion and reasoning should be used.

We have discussions and within six months she was a changes person (ALLHAMDULILLAH).

I was talking in a polite manner.

Whereas, one participant narrated in different manner.

After discussion the final decision goes to the chairperson.

This could be handled and I have handled it with discussion with argument with positive argument and the arguments with some logic.

In Holy Quran Allah Almighty also orders that:

Do not shout. Speak politely keeping your voice low (Surat Luqman 31:19).

According to conflict management approach the emerged theme fall into the category of collaboration as the participants solve the problem together. Both parties are treated fairly and are committed to a common solution at the end.

Submissiveness

Submissiveness is also a technique that can contribute positively in conflict management. Especially when one have to deal with higher authority. As reported by many participants.

We have to follow the higher authority.

I obey my elders in all matters.

One has to survive on yes madam.

I prefer to accept the opinion of higher authority.

I put forth my idea if others listen ok otherwise I remain silent.

We can also know about the role of submissiveness in conflict management from Holy Quran by this verse:

They are the regreters, the worshipers, the praisers, the peacekeepers, the bowing and prostrating, the advocators of righteousness and forbidders of evil, and the keepers of GOD's laws. Give good news to such believers (Surat At-Tawbah 9:112).

According to conflict management approach the emerged theme falls into the category of Accommodation as its objective is not to disturb the other person. Its top priority is to maintain harmonious relationship.

Respect

It is believed by many participants that one must be respectful to the higher authority in order to manage conflicts if any. It is reported by Participants as:

So there should be respect for every opinion.

Every body's opinion must be respected.

Other Participants also reported that.

Yes, primarily I always tried to bridge that gap but if it is not possible then respect from my side.

We love to respect and honor our teachers from the core of our heart.

You should respectably try to convince him.

We people respect each other we honor the feelings of others.

Respect and obedience should be there.

I like to be in respectful manner.

We should give full respect to our teachers and to defend them.

Allah Almighty ordered to respect others at several places in Holy Quran:

Respect and honor all human beings irrespective of their religion, color, race, sex, language, status, property, birth, and profession/job and so on (Surat Al-'Isrā' 17:70).

According to conflict management approach this theme falls in the category of Accommodation as the person in this is always ready for help and do not disturb the other person. The top priority is always to give advantage to other person (Thomas, 1975).

Wisdom

Many participants also reported wisdom as one of the technique they take into consideration while managing their conflicts at work place. One must try to manage conflicts with wisdom. As reported by Participants

Solve different matters with wisdom and understanding.

There should be a wisdom that how to react at different situations.

I would handle conflict with wisdom and considering the nature of conflict.

Also narrated in Holy Quran:

Choose best words to speak and say them in the best possible way (Surat Al-'Isrā'17:53).

Use of Religious Examples

Many participants reported the use of religious examples while managing their workplace conflicts. They believed that elucidating religious examples while managing conflicts can have positive impact on relationship. According to participants they said that:

As the holy prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had said to learn is the basic obligation for both males and females.

I bridge that gap by quoting the saying of Holy Prophet (PBUH) speak the language which is understood by the people who are in front of you.

Holy prophet (PBUH) said that we have to obey our seniors.

The teaching of our holy prophet is forgiveness and forgetfulness.

Allah Almighty said in Quran cooperate in the work of goodness and virtue; do not cooperate in the work of evil and badness.

Surely in the Allah's messenger you have a good example for him who looked unto Allah and the last day, and remembered Allah much (Surat Al-'Ahzab 33:21).

Conclusion

Faculty members in universities can manage their conflicts with higher authorities by showing respect and obedience, engaging in Polite Discussion, practicing wisdom and quoting religious examples.

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