

Two Approaches to Organizational Conflict Management

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Purpose: *On the one hand, to characterize two approaches to managing organizational conflicts, i.e. classical and turquoise ones, and to compare their features, and on the other – their initial empirical verification, i.e. to analyze their application in a large local government administration office.*

Design/methodology/approach: *The theoretical characteristics of both considered approaches were developed based on a comparative analysis of the literature on the subject. The basic tools of the empirical research were two questionnaires addressed to managers employed in the considered office, necessary to identify their approaches to managing organizational conflicts.*

Findings: *As a result, a comparative analysis of both considered approaches to conflicts, i.e. traditional and turquoise ones, was made and the extent to which they are used in the analyzed office was assessed.*

Research limitations/implications: *Narrow scope of empirical research.*

Originality/value: *It may be expected that the author's original analysis will contribute to a comprehensive explanation of the features of both approaches as well as to a remarkable improvement of the conflict management processes in practice.*

Keywords: organizational conflicts, managing organizational conflicts, classical approach to organizational conflict management, turquoise approach to organizational conflict management.

Submitted: 29.06.2022 | Accepted: 06.06.2023

Dwa podejścia do zarządzania konfliktami organizacyjnymi

Cel: *z jednej strony scharakteryzowanie dwóch podejść do zarządzania konfliktami organizacyjnymi, tj. klasycznego i turkusowego oraz porównanie ich cech, a z drugiej – ich wstępna weryfikacja empiryczna, tzn. analiza ich zastosowania w dużym urzędzie administracji samorządowej.*

Metodologia: *teoretyczną charakterystykę obu rozważanych podejść opracowano na podstawie analizy porównawczej literatury przedmiotu. Podstawowymi narzędziami badań empirycznych były dwa kwestionariusze skierowane do kierowników zatrudnionych w badanych urzędzie, niezbędne do zidentyfikowania ich podejść do zarządzania konfliktami organizacyjnymi.*

Wyniki: *w efekcie dokonano analizy porównawczej dwóch podejść do konfliktów, tj. tradycyjnego i turkusowego oraz oceniono w jakim zakresie są one stosowane w analizowanym urzędzie.*

Ograniczenia/implikacje badawcze: *wąski zakres badań empirycznych.*

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Edition of that article was financed under Agreement Nr RCN/SP/0323/2021/1 with funds from the Ministry of Education and Science, allocated to the “Rozwoj czasopism naukowych” programme.

Oryginalność/wartość: można oczekiwać, iż oryginalna analiza autora przyczyni się do wszechstronnego wyjaśnienia specyficznych cech obu podejść, jak również do zauważalnego udoskonalenia procesów zarządzania konfliktami w praktyce.

Słowa kluczowe: konflikty organizacyjne, zarządzanie konfliktami organizacyjnymi, klasyczne podejście do zarządzania konfliktami organizacyjnymi, turkusowe podejście do zarządzania konfliktami organizacyjnymi.

JEL: H79

1. Introduction

Contemporary organizations operating in a turbulent environment are characterized by significant complexity and dynamics of the processes carried out in them with the use of more and more advanced information technology. They are oriented towards the improvement and the best use of employees' competences, creativity as well as permanent creation and implementation of innovations. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly search for more and more efficient management tools in all areas of the performance of contemporary organizations, adequate to the current challenges facing them.

The above statements also apply to conflict management in today's organizations. There are many different disputes, inconsistencies, discrepancies, etc. between cooperating employees and teams. This is mainly due to the significant diversification and variability of the tasks performed and the multiplicity of various types of relationships both between internal organizational units and with external stakeholders. Other typical reasons for conflict occurrence are different interests, resource shortages, time constraints, asymmetry of information, different roles, needs and values, and so on.

The most general ways to cope with organizational conflicts are specific approaches to them, represented and used by managers supervising the activities of teams as well as reflected by the attitudes of those managers. Two different but not completely opposite approaches of this kind can be distinguished: classic and "turquoise". It seems that the latter is more justified and recommended for use in contemporary organizations¹.

The objective of the paper is, on the one hand, to characterize these approaches in theoretical terms and to compare their fea-

tures (theoretical task), and on the other – their initial empirical verification, i.e. to analyze their application in a large local government administration office (practical task). Therefore, the paper poses two basic research questions. Firstly, an indication what are the main differences and similarities between the two considered approaches. Secondly, determining what approach to conflicts is used in the analyzed office. Therefore, the author's intention was to check whether and to what extent the two considered approaches could be useful as conflict management tools in that office².

The structure of the paper reflects its objectives and research questions. Firstly, the definitions of the basic terms are presented. Both approaches are then characterized. In turn, they are compared in terms of their specific features. Then, the methodological assumptions, the course and the results of the pilot studies concerning their application in the selected organization are presented. The summary comprises conclusions from the research.

2. Subject Literature

Regarding the current state of knowledge on organizational conflicts, it should be stressed that their analysis constitutes one of fundamental issues within managerial theory and practice, especially within organizational behavior studies. A considerable number of works was published in the field of research, including both classics (Killman & Thomas, 1978; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Rahim, 1986; Thompson 1960), contemporary ones (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011; Ramsbotham et al., 2011; Proksch, 2018; Roche et al., 2014) as well as the latest publications (Algert, 2021; Pollack, 2020; Liddle, 2023). Within these works, several typical issues concerning conflict management are discussed, such as types of conflicts, their

reasons and effects, both positive and negative, and tools for resolving them.

However, it must be stressed that extensive comparative analysis of related literature is not necessary in the paper for two reasons. Firstly, the problem considered in it is very specific and unique. Secondly, the issue of comparing the two considered approaches to conflicts is discussed for the very first time in the literature on the subject. Therefore, the author believes that filling this research gap at least partially may be a promising research task. It must be added that the description of the turquoise approach to organizational conflicts is based on the pioneering work by F. Laloux (2015). Only several other studies on turquoise organizations have already appeared in the literature (e.g., Blikle, 2017; Tabaszewska-Zajbert & Sokółowska-Durkalec, 2019).

3. Definitions of Basic Terms

Recognizing broader terminological discussions as unnecessary, the author's interpretations of the three key concepts appearing in the article were adopted as follows.

Organizational conflict may be defined as any kind of misunderstanding, discrepancy, contradiction, disagreement, dispute, antagonism, etc., both between positions (managerial and executive) as well as organizational units and teams operating within an organization in connection with both processes and individual tasks. The basis of the conflict, its nature and course translate directly or indirectly into the efficiency of the implementation of tasks and processes in an organization and affect the mutual relations between individual employees and their teams performing various functions and specific operational tasks. Within all areas of an organization's performance, all available methodological concepts and tools are used for the description and analysis of conflicts and managing them.

Managing organizational conflicts comprises a number of activities consisting in identifying the types of conflicts, their context and nature, analyzing their various conditions (internal and external), determining their positive (constructive) and negative (destructive) effects, preventing them and using tools to manage them, i.e.

their limiting, stimulating and solving, as well as three methods of alternative dispute resolution, i.e. negotiation, mediation, and arbitration. The managers of the teams in which conflicts arise are responsible for performing these activities, i.e. the managers exert active influence on conflicts.

Finally, an *approach to organizational conflict management* is a general manner of perceiving and dealing with them by the employees, especially the managers' attitudes and their ways of managing conflicts in the organization. Therefore, an approach to conflicts is a synthetic tool for conflict management, defining the key stages and basic courses of action in the event of their occurrence (indications, recommendations), based on their characteristic features and specific regularities and conditions of their course. That approach is concretized through more specific tools, i.e. methods and techniques applied in the considered area (mentioned above) in order to manage conflicts effectively enough.

4. Traditional Approach to Organizational Conflict Management

The first of the two considered approaches comes down to one of the best-known management techniques in managerial theory and practice, namely "management by conflicts or by conflict-solving" (Rahim, 1986; Killman & Thomas, 1978). It comprises all activities of an organization's management, on the one hand, focused on identifying, analyzing and assessing conflicts occurring in the organization, in terms of their specific features, phases, types, causes, effects and functions, and on the other hand, on managing these conflicts using three typical courses of action, i.e. limiting, stimulating and solving them.

The listed activities must be undertaken in such a way and to such extent as to ensure efficiency of an organization. The role of conflicts in the implementation of all types of tasks, projects, processes, etc., is emphasized, especially in implementing organisational changes and limiting their negative effects. This approach may therefore be called classical due to many years of experience in its application.

The related literature includes numerous varied types of organizational conflict

management process models as part of the classical approach. For the purposes of further analysis, the following six stages in this process were distinguished, concerning individual conflicts, based on an example concept contained in the paper (Meining & Hess 1991), supplemented with the author's own statements.

1. Conflict identification – means recognizing it, preferably early enough, i.e. before it starts to exert a negative impact on its parties and their surroundings. It happens that disputes are hidden, especially interpersonal ones. Growing conflicts may be quickly transferred from the factual to the emotional dimension, so it is important to recognize them early. Therefore, it is necessary to build a sort of early warning system guaranteeing permanent exchange of opinions on difficult issues. Personalization and escalation of a conflict should not be allowed.
2. Conflict definition – it is of great importance because it designates the method of intervention. It includes determining the participants of conflict, its nature and significance as well as its type, subject and intensity, e.g. what roles its parties play, how important it is for the organization, whether it concerns interests, roles or competences, if it is conducted in an essential or emotional way, etc. It is also necessary to identify its conditions and anticipate its potential effects (positive and negative). One should strive to obtain the possibly objective image (reflection) of the conflict (if necessary, confrontation of opinions about it) in order to adapt its solution to the nature of the persons participating in it, the specificity of the conflict situation and the broader organizational context.
3. Conflict disclosure – actions taken to control the conflict bring the better results the earlier they are undertaken. Expecting participants to resolve the conflict themselves may lead to high costs, so the manager should use their authority to bring the parties to the conflict to open discussions. The manager should say how they assess the conflict from the point of view of the effectiveness of the entire organization and present its requirements and interests, as well as make the parties aware of the

potential consequences of this conflict, especially those of a negative nature. Such explanations may sometimes stop the further development of the conflict, provided that the manager's arguments convince the parties and they demonstrate constructive and integrative attitudes.

4. Conflict management – stages 1–3 create an important background for effectively addressing the conflict through proper intervention by the relevant manager. Proper selection and use of specific tools in the conflict management process is essential.
5. Monitoring the effectiveness of the applied approach to the conflict management – it is necessary after a set period of time because the used method is not necessarily the best if it has caused the transfer of the conflict to another plane, provoked new conflicts, had a negative impact on its participants, etc. In this case, phases 1–3 must be repeated.
6. Team consolidation (integration) – the end of the conflict (in the previous phase) does not mean that the potential possibilities for resumption will disappear. Therefore, employee achievements should be integrated by fostering cooperation and conducting periodic assessments and analyses to obtain information about the attitude to the previous conflict and draw conclusions from its occurrence and resolution.

5. Turquoise Approach to Organizational Conflict Management

The second approach may be treated as a contemporary and specific alternative to the classical approach, while developing an interactive view of organizational conflicts. The paper proposes to identify a distinctive process in turquoise organizations, characterized by a new, coherent organizational model and a new paradigm of teamwork. This approach entails managing organizations from a higher level of awareness (Laloux, 2015, p. 17).

A turquoise organization determines its appropriate approach to conflicts. First, it starts from the premise that a conflict is inevitable, but any hostile behavior is not such at all. Any disagreements among employees are resolved through a process

called “direct communication and agreement”. A multi-level formal practice is followed in this regard. Workplace culture limits conflicts to stakeholders and mediators, without third parties. There is a regular time spent on bringing conflicts to light and dealing with them. This process is so important to collaboration where there is no hierarchy that many self-managing organizations train each new employee to resolve conflicts. It may be a matter of diverse opinions about technical decisions in each situation, interpersonal conflict, violation of values, or problems of work quality (Laloux, 2015, pp. 138–140, 173, 185, 232, 387).

Whatever the subject of the dispute, this process begins when one person is asking another to reach an agreement and includes the following phases.

1. The involved parties sit together and try to resolve the problem privately. The initiator must make a clear request (not a judgment, not a demand), and the other person must respond clearly (‘yes’, ‘no’ or by counterproposal) to the initiator’s request.
2. If the involved parties cannot find a solution, they should indicate a colleague whom they trust to be their mediator. The colleague supports conflicting parties in finding an agreement. But they cannot impose it.
3. If the mediation fails, a panel of colleagues is convened. The role of the panel is to listen and help in reaching an agreement. Again, no decision may be enforced, although usually the moral strength of the group of colleagues is enough to resolve the conflict and bring the matter to an end.
4. As the last resort, the organization’s founder/managing director may be invited to a panel to raise its moral status.

When the conflict is private, all parties are expected to respect confidentiality during and after the process. Confidentiality and discretion also apply to those at the center of the conflict. They need to overcome the controversy rather than exacerbate it. Dispute resolution is an essential element in the puzzle of overlapping self-management practices. It is the mechanism by which colleagues make each other accountable for their mutual obligations.

The process is only effective if there is an appropriate culture in the workplace in which people feel safe and are encouraged to expect responsibility from one another. Then, employees demonstrate social skills and use the available processes to work through conflicts maturely and tactfully (Laloux, 2015, pp. 140–141). As for the specific turquoise conflict management tools, three forms of classical conflict management, i.e. limitation, stimulation and resolution, are fully applicable here.

6. Comparison of Both Approaches Under Consideration

For the purposes of comparative analysis of the classical and turquoise approaches, the following features were used, which the author of the paper distinguished as benchmarks (reference points) for his analysis.

1. The key role in the process of conflict management, i.e. which of the employees are the most important in it.
2. Subject matter in this process, i.e. key issues on which it is focused.
3. Orientation (attitudes) of its participants (implementers) – static or dynamic.
4. Place (location) in the organizational structure in which this process is carried out.
5. Tools used in the process of organizational conflict management.
6. Formalization of activities performed in this process.
7. Scope of employees training in the field of organizational conflict management.

According to the author, such features provide a comprehensive description of both approaches to conflict, fully reflecting their essence. By applying those features, a comparison of the two approaches was made (see Table 1).

It can be noticed that the turquoise approach respects the principle of the command hierarchy to a much lesser extent than the classic approach, significantly expanding the participation and importance of executive employees in the conflict management process. They play a key role in this process. The turquoise approach is also less formalized than the classical one, relying more on immediate and intuitive activities, and not on an established organizational routine (with its positive and negative aspects). To a lesser extent, it fol-

Table 1. Comparison of Two Approaches to Organizational Conflict Management

Feature	Classical conflict management technique in a traditional organization	Conflict management concept in a turquoise organization
Key role	Managers at the appropriate level supervising employees as parties to the conflict (the leader has the initiative).	Only conflicting employees with the possible help of a mediator (direct confrontation).
Subject matter	Content – disputes resolved in the frame of procedures.	Process – approach well-known to all employees.
Orientation	Static – focus on objectives and tasks.	Dynamic – focus for actions and behavior.
Place	At the appropriate levels of the hierarchy.	Directly at the place of conflict origin.
Tools	The tools of identifying, analyzing, limiting, stimulating and solving conflicts, as well as three methods of alternative dispute resolution, i.e. negotiation, mediation, and arbitration.	
	Used systematically and in a planned manner.	Used ad hoc and spontaneously.
Formalization	High – regulations, scopes of activities, instructions, etc.	As far as necessary – a clear process and practice known to all.
Scope of training	Focus on improving managers' skills in the conflict management.	Training all employees in interpersonal skills that allow them to resolve conflicts amicably.

lows the rules and guidelines, and in return exposes the important role of using and improving employees' competences and performance.

The fundamental similarity between the two approaches is the fact that both are intended to reach the same effect, i.e. to guarantee efficient conflict management in an organization, and thus to support its achievement of the desired level of effectiveness. In addition, identical detailed tools are used for both approaches, although they are used in a different manner.

To sum up, it can be stated that the second of the considered approaches to conflict management can be considered more forward-looking than the first one. On the other hand, despite their inconsistency with the principles of the turquoise approach, several tools developed under the classical approach can still be successfully used, as they have been proven to be effective and useful in practice on numerous occasions.

7. Pilot Empirical Study

1. Object and period of research – a large local government administration office located in one of the biggest Polish cities. The research was carried out at the end of last year and lasted about a month.

2. Scope of research – two opposite approaches to organizational conflict, i.e. traditional and turquoise ones reflected by their characteristics (variables) listed in Table 1.

3. Research objectives. The study consisted of two stages. The purpose of the former one was to identify and prioritize managerial approaches to conflict, while the latter was aimed at assessing (evaluating) this approach, which turned out to be the dominant one in the office, based on the results of the first stage.

4. Methods of gathering data. In order to achieve the objective of the first stage of research, a questionnaire was developed,

which was the most important research tool. Its structure was very simple as it was only two-page long and consisted of two short parts. Firstly, the descriptive one, which comprised the characteristics of respondents (independent variables) such as the name of the managerial position, seniority in this position, level in the organizational hierarchy as well as age and gender. Secondly, the main part of the questionnaire was relevant to the assumed scope of research, i.e. it comprised 14 statements reflecting the features of both considered approaches to organizational conflicts, elaborated on the basis of Table 1 and listed in the left column of Table 2. That part of the questionnaire had a form of one-page table. Those statements were arranged in random order, presented in the form of sentences facilitating the formulation of the respondents' opinions and without using the names of the two approaches in order to ensure that the respondents' preferences concerning the discussed approaches to conflict are relatively objective, i.e. to avoid potential suggestions as to which one of them to choose. In other words, no suggestions were made to the respondents in order to avoid the possibility of a direct choice of one of the analyzed approaches, but to identify them indirectly. Therefore, the respondents were not aware that their indications would be analyzed in terms of comparing the two approaches. The second questionnaire contained two semi-open-ended questions about the advantages and disadvantages of the approach to conflict dominating in the office.

5. Respondents to the questionnaires. For obtaining responses to the first questionnaire, no statistical sample was taken, as is usually the case in this type of research. The first questionnaire was just addressed, i.e. sent via e-mail, to all 50 managers employed in the surveyed office, including 4 top managers (management board), 18 from the middle level of hierarchy, and 28 front-line ones. 47 managers returned completed questionnaires, 3 did not, because two were on a leave, and one strongly refused to participate in the study. The reason for such a high percentage of responses very rarely occurring in practice was primarily the very limited scope of the questionnaire, which meant that its completion took a maximum of 10–15 minutes. Very good relations between the author

of the article and the managers in the office were also significant. The author was a consultant in the office in the field of process management. The third reason for the positive attitude and reaction of the respondents to the conducted research was the fact that the office is very well organized and effectively managed, which ensures a high level of self-discipline of the employees. In the second stage of the research, those managers took part who favored the approach to conflict dominating in the office (selected in the first stage of the research).

6. The rules of replying to the questionnaires. In the first questionnaire, the respondents were asked to choose exactly four (neither more nor less) most important statements from among all 14 included in the questionnaire, reflecting in the best way the preferences of the respondents regarding their approach to organizational conflicts applied by them. By assumption, such a strict selection was to ensure that the most important statements were selected, limiting unnecessary discussion of the remaining ones. In the second questionnaire, the respondents were asked to list the positive and negative features of the approach to conflict dominating in the office.

7. The principles of evaluating (rating) the answers. In the first questionnaire, the respondents were asked to grade the 4 selected features of the approach to conflict by assigning each of them a number of points (in integers), adequately to their importance (validity), assuming that the sum of the points awarded must be exactly 10 (neither more nor less), e.g. 4-3-2-1, 3-5-2-3 and so on. Such a way of evaluating responses was considered better than traditional ranking, because it allowed for strong expression of opinions. In the second questionnaire, the respondents only identified the advantages and disadvantages of the dominating approach to conflict.

8. The results of the research. The findings from the first stage of the research are presented in Table 2, i.e. it summarizes the overall scores (sums of the respondents' responses) for the individual features of the approach to conflict, arranged in descending order.

As can be seen, four features of the turquoise approach and one of the classical

Table 2. Course of Action in the Conflict Management Process in the Respondents' Opinion

Statements regarding the course of action in the conflict management process	Total number of points
Participants of the conflict focus on the process of resolving it, based on the well-known and recommended course of action.	58
Conflicting employees play a key role in conflict management, with the possible help of managers as mediators.	53
Conflicts are resolved at the place of their origin.	49
Formalization of the conflict management activities is limited to the necessary minimum, based on a clear, well-known process and everyday practices.	48
In conflict management, emphasis is placed on the accomplished objectives and tasks.	43
In conflict management, the substantive content of conflicts is emphasized, and contentious issues are resolved within the framework of applicable procedures.	36
In conflict management, the importance of an employee's actions and behavior is emphasized.	32
Methods for limiting, stimulating and resolving are used systematically and in a planned manner.	29
Methods for limiting, stimulating and resolving conflicts are used on an ad hoc and spontaneous basis.	25
In conflict management, managers at the appropriate level who supervise employees as parties have the initiative.	23
All employees are trained in interpersonal skills, enabling them to resolve conflicts amicably.	21
Emphasis is placed on improving managers' skills in conflict management.	20
Conflict management is highly formalized, based on regulations, scopes of activities, instructions, etc.	18
Conflict management takes place at the appropriate levels of the command hierarchy.	15

one outweigh the others. It can therefore be concluded that the turquoise approach dominates in the analyzed organization, especially in the opinion of lowest-level leaders (22 out of 28) and many middle-level managers (10 out of 18). It seems that the main reason for that is the mixed type of organizational structure of the examined institution. Although the core of this structure is the classic staff-line model, in the field of operational activities there are project and process teams, i.e. forms favoring the use of the turquoise approach to manage conflicts. That is why all project managers and process teams' leaders follow this approach. It should be added that in the case of the remaining characteristics

of the respondents, no significant correlation of these characteristics with the preferred approach to conflicts was found.

In the second stage of the study, 31 managers strongly preferring the turquoise approach were sent a second questionnaire in which they mentioned the following positive features of this approach (the number of responses in brackets):

- speed of action in conflict situations (22),
- higher quality of solutions to conflict problems (19),
- better working atmosphere and mutual trust among people (16),
- more efficient interpersonal communication (15),

- more accurate decisions (12),
- higher, mobilizing competency requirements (10),
- more effective motivation to work (10),
- greater level of employee involvement (8).

The respondents also pointed out several minor drawbacks of the turquoise approach. Some employees are reluctant to engage in the conflict management process, leaving the initiative to their superiors. They do not want to take responsibility for the results of this process. They do not have the competences appropriate for its implementation. It happens that this process can be laborious, taking the form of endless meetings and debates.

8. Conclusion

Concluding, as a result of the pilot studies, it was found that the turquoise approach is a promising tool in the process of managing organizational conflicts. To a large extent, it positively influences both the efficiency of this process, especially communication and decision-making, as well as interpersonal relations and the organizational climate. Ultimately, it contributes to an increase in the overall operational efficiency of the organization.

However, further, in-depth research on the considered approach is necessary, of a much wider scope, based not only on the opinions of superiors but also subordinates and covering several organizations with different activity profiles. This would enable us to obtain more objective results. In addition, not only general approaches should be considered but also more specific organizational conflict management tools.

Although the turquoise approach to conflict management seems to be more adequate to the needs of modern organizations than the classic one, due to the limited, previous experience with its use (the turquoise concept has been discussed for only a few years), the aforementioned advantages of the turquoise approach have a relative character. It is worth noting, however, that the rejection of the classical approach proves the growing awareness of employees and that reducing the importance of the command hierarchy in conflict management makes it possible to shape partnership relations between employees and teams in an organization.

Endnotes

- ¹ It must be stressed that the term “turquoise approach” was invented by the author of the paper, inspired by F. Laloux’s (2015) concept, which provided promising insight into contemporary organizations.
- ² The publication was financed from the funds granted to the College of Economy and Public Administration of Cracow University of Economics, as part of a subsidy for the maintenance of research potential.

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