Organizational conflicts from a general theory of systems point of view

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Introduction

Over the years, the study of organizational phenomena has demanded an effort of a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches and methodological strategies. Such diversity, as shown by Bastos and Seidel (1992) obviously makes it difficult to theoretical integration. The analysis of organizational conflict is not immune to this feature. Allied to it is the deficiency of the literature, detected by Rahim (2002), to observe, fully, the importance and impact of conflicts within and external organizations. The presence of tension and the presence of conflict are essential features for proper knowledge of the organizations culture. (LUTHANS, RUBACH and MARSNIK, 1995).

Organizations viewed as open systems - in the classical conception of Ludwig von Bertalanffy besides their values, beliefs, symbols and rites themselves (formatting so a particular organizational culture), operate within a larger system, also with distinct beliefs, rites, symbols and language. Thus, beyond the cultural traditions of the external environment in which are inserted the organization, there are also effects of the internal culture of the latter, which are externalized in its day-to-day activities. Often, these cultures clash inside and outside of the organization, causing more conflicts of the most divers natures.

The intensification of the globalization process, bringing radical changes in the global economy drives the need for a profound adaptation of organizations and individuals inserted in it in order to remain competitive in the market. This adaptation of organizations is not limited to technical aspects of management. Organizations are facing a wave of cultural globalization in order that this process (irreversible) preaches the idea of a global society with a common destiny (BECK, 1999).

The aim of this paper is therefore to expose the observation of conflict in organizations through a theoretical model that can explain the elements that can enhance its appearance and the best chance of his administration.

The execution of the work demanded a literature review on the subject of study, seeking to present the main theories and key concepts related to the proposed theme, with the intention of discussing the use of this epistemological approach as a framework for future research.

Conflict

The conflict, understood as a "set of goals, differing methods or behaviors" (FOLBERG and

TAYLOR, 1985) is inevitably present in society or in groups, although from the psychological point of view, it should be agreed with Spinoza (2005), that, referring to the "intrapsychic," conflict, it states that "the man guided by reason is more free in the city where he lives according to common law, than in solitude, where no one obeys more than himself."

Conflicts are inherently present in all relationships: family, employment, social life, leisure. Throughout life, they increase in number and become more complex, especially in adulthood, after all, "the conflict is a growing industry". (FISHER, URY and PATTON, 1994)

The organizations, in turn, are unavoidable and inexhaustible sources of conflict because, according Jandt (apud MARTINELLI, 2002), "organizing is to introduce sources of conflict."

For that many factors contribute, including: a) the diversification of the aspirations of individuals and groups, b) the increasing complexity of tasks, c) people's awareness regarding their rights; d) the emergence of technologies that arouse to new possibilities, e) the messages in the media encouraging transformations, changes, between others. (FIORELLI, FIORELLO and KNITWEAR, 2008).

As Hall points out (2004):

> "Conflict is not inherently good or bad for participants, the organization or a wider society. Power and conflict are primarily responsible for shaping the state of an organization. A certain state of an organization sets the stage for the continuous processes of power and conflict that continually shape it. Thus, the conflict has an important role in the development of variations between organizations."

We cannot forget, moreover, that the conflict feeds the transforming energy, the energy that brings about change. It is opposed to stagnation and is a sort of springboard that allows organizations, for example, face the challenge of surviving in a fiercely competitive marketplace, where thousands of individuals and companies compete for spaces and limited resources (FIORELLI, FIORELLO and KNITWEAR, 2008).

The conflict should therefore be understood as full part of the conditions of existence. It seems the term 'conflict management' rather than 'conflict resolution' is more appropriate, since it has to live with it. (RAHIM, 2002)

The conflict is opposed to stagnation, feeding the driving energy of change, this being understood as any transformation, real or perceived, able to affect the relationship between people (SWEAT, 2002). Thus, it is possible to confirm that the "root cause" of any

conflict is the change, or the prospect that it will occur in relation to the previously established.

In the organizational field, beyond the financial aspects relating to the employment contracts of its employees, managersφ exchange and transfer of a production line are examples of real transformations, which can lead to conflicts among stakeholders. Organizations where there is no conflict or where they are minimal, they will stagnate (RAHIM, 2002).

Different factors may be involved in a change. Depending on what they are and the characteristics of those involved (individuals or organizations), there will be the nature of the conflict. These elements may include, among others: a) assets, including heritage, rights, personal property and so on. B) principles, values and beliefs of any kind, including political, religious, scientific, and so on, C) power, in its various dimensions d) interpersonal relationships (FIORELLI, FIORELLO and KNITWEAR, 2008).

In general, these elements are combined because the events are not isolated: the exercise of power includes the struggle for ownership of assets, involves personal and collective values and manifests itself through interpersonal relationships. In other words, the situations of conflict (especially in the case already installed) are not simple: nor as to the present condition, nor as to the complex processes that led to it, which no one can fully know or predict with certainty the outcome (SUARES, 2002). It is observed therefore that these changes usually occur when something or someone involved in a "system" - which, as mentioned above, can be anything from an individual, a company, even a whole society - causes some kind of transformation.

According to Katz and Kahn (1987), "all social systems, including organizations, consist of patterned activities of a number of individuals.½ What makes you say that, before any modification, intervention or mere possibility that this occurs within that system, a conflict is installed. But how this possibility of change can be perceived, and administered by the organization? How the organizational theories can explain this phenomenon?

Organizational theories

As mentioned by Rahim (2002), the literature on organizational conflict is little (with small exceptions), considering that there is no theoretical framework that addresses, fully and clearly, both effects (positive or negative) and the need (or not) of solution or management of conflicts in (or between) organizations.

The conflict is an important and inevitable element in the life of organizations, so that, as highlighted by Chalvin and Eyssete (1989), "any organization theory to propose a consensus and an understanding as perfectly normal and natural in a company seems pretty unrealistic and even dangerous, therefore it will be a source of unjustified hopes and useless guilt."

By analyzing the theoretical treatment of the conflict as an organizational phenomenon, Bastos and Seidel (1992) make it clear that:

> "Throughout the process of constructing knowledge about the organizations, multiple approaches followed, bringing to the field of study different perspectives, conditioned by historical, epistemological and theoretical contexts. These differences manifest themselves even in the selection of the organizational aspects primarily studied. The issue of handling conflict, as it should be, is quite varied."

Organizational theories, many of them imported from Sociology, address the issue of conflict of a completely different way, including different perspectives, causes and treatments. Table 1 provides an overview of organizational theories and how they observe the conflict as a phenomenon of study:

Table 1: Treatment of conflict in organizational theories

questions	classical school	human relations movement	structuralism	behaviourism	systemic apporach	contingencial approach
is it a studied phenomenon?	Not the focus of study. Although denied, there is a concern to avoid it.	Not the focus of study. Although denied, there is a concern to avoid it.	Yes, it is a basic social process in organizations.	Yes, it is something intrinsic to decision making.	Yes, it is something intrinsic to organizations.	Yes, it is inevitable.
concept of conflict	There is identity of interests between employees and employers.	There is identity of interests between employees and employers.	Conflicts treated as dilemmas. The choice of alternatives that imply losses.	Collapse of decision-making mechanisms.	Incongruity between expectations and performance, roles / duties.	Product of processes of integration / differentiation.
studied conflict types	-	-	- Among organizational goals - Organization x staff - Coordinate communication x - Discipline x professional competence - Planning x Initiative	- Individual - Organizational - Inter-organizational	- Organizational: between systems - From roles: greater emphasis	- inter-departmental - how to integrate differentiated structures
conflict determinants	Errors by the administrator not to apply scientific principles	Little attention to motivational aspects of individuals.	Order and freedom. Formal organization and the pressures on individuals: lack of a complete adjustment.	Organizational factors: the environment. Personal factors: goals, perceptions.	Organizational factors personal and interpersonal.	The integration process is not automatic and rational: what direction to take?
conflict consequences	Disaggregates the organizations, causes problems, prevents optimum performance	Disaggregates the organizations, causes problems, prevents optimum performance	They are not only negative: they are sources of change.	Provoke reactions: - Solving the problem - Persuasion - Negotiation - Politics	They affect the performance of individuals via the systemic functioning.	They lead to difficulties that must be overcome.
forms of assistance (prescriptions)	The task is to eliminate the conflict through preventive and prophylactic measures.	The task is to eliminate the conflict through preventive and prophylactic measures.	It is specific to the types of conflict and context. The search for solutions generate new conflicts, in a dialectical process.	There are no prescriptions. Depends on the type of conflict and its determinants.	The system must develop mechanisms to equate them. There are no prescriptions	Several strategies. There is always the possibility of finding the best alternative.

Source: Adapted from BASTOS E SEIDEL (1992).

General Systems Theory

As explains Morgan (2009), from the moment you identify which organizations and individuals have specific needs, independently, that they must be met, the attention is turning to the fact that it "depends on a wider environment to ensure various forms of survival. "

Furthermore, so according to Morgan (2009), "it is that kind of thinking that is now understood in a 'systemic approach' of the organization that draws its main inspiration from the theoretical biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy".

The so-called General Systems Theory was developed by the Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, observing the need to consider the whole when studying all the parts because, in short (and in plain language), all things interfere in everything, just so what happens in the human body: each cell affects the entire body and is affected by it, each of the clusters of cells with specific functions affecting the other groups and so on. (BERTALANFFY, 2008)

According to this theory, in a system, understood as a set of interdependent elements or an organized whole: a) the whole has qualities that none of its parts have b) the qualities of the whole is reflected in each of the parts, c) what happens with the whole influences each part d) what happens with each part affects the whole and the other parts; e) each part reflects the whole and all interactions (BERTALANFFY, 2008).

The analogy with a company, or with an organization, allows a better understanding of the scope of general systems theory, because:

a) the organization has qualities or characteristics that none of its members, individually possess;

b) the characteristics of the organization are reflected in the behavior of each of its members, if it is united as a whole and each member acts in accordance with this standard;

c) an event involving the whole (for example, the entry of a new competitor in the market) affects each member. The extent to which this happens depends on the characteristics of the system;

d) an event that affects one of the members (for example, the emergence of a new possibility of employment for an employee in another organization) has an effect on the whole and on all others. These effects will be higher or lower depending also on the characteristics of the system;

e) each individual member of the organization, has behaviors and characteristics that lead to it. People outside the organization easily identify those points in common to its members, as is evidenced by the way people behave within it.

The General Systems Theory recommends that, in analyzing what happens to a person,

family or organization, the network of influence is to be considered. In turn, Sarat (1996) clarifies this systems view, making it clear that all relationships should be understood among the discussed topics because "you cannot resolve any conflict until they all understand and identify the principles that demarcate the resolution."

This network of influences concept allows including a single and comprehensive social system, subsystems consisting of companies, sections, families, groups and individuals. Each of these subsystems, in turn, can also configure a system in itself (a whole, with their respective parts).

In the words of Morgan (2009), "the organizations contain individuals (which are systems themselves) who belong to groups or sections that also belong to larger organizational divisions, and so forth."

It is important therefore to analyze organizations as integrated social systems, as organisms open to its environment and which it must interact "if they want to survive" (MORGAN, 2009). As explained by Bertalanffy (2008), this open organism is defined "as a system in exchange of material with its environment, presenting import and export, construction and demolition of the materials that composes it."

As explained Silva (2008), this adaptive nature and dynamics of open systems can be better understood after an examination of four of its basic characteristics: 1) interaction with the environment (lack of self-sufficiency of the systems), 2) synergy (the result of an open system is always greater than the sum of the parts involved), 3) economic balance (process of maintaining internal balance by obtaining resources from the environment), 4) equifinality (reaching the same result by different means) . This line of reasoning suggests that, for the study of conflict in organizations, it should be expanded the boundaries of the system. In other words, the causes and consequences of the conflict, to be searched and examined, should cover the neighboring systems and subsystems (FIORELLI, FIORELLO and KNITWEAR, 2008).

A concrete example of organizational conflict between employer and employees, whose detailed analysis can be improved through the application of general systems theory, was brought by Hitt, Miller and Colella (2007). It involved the state of the U.S. company of United Airlines aircraft. Since 1994, the company had been managing conflicts with various sectors of its activity. Even in a period of financial problems, the company granted a salary increase for its pilots (according to the authors cited, around 28%), while it sought, in negotiations with their unions, the temporary reduction of salaries of mechanics and flight

attendants. Then came the fateful episode of "11/09" with acts of terrorism that shook the world and with a strong and direct influence on the negotiation process between the company and its employees. The conflicts between employer and employee at that time ceased. The needs of individual systems (or subsystems) have changed. The concussion produced in the larger system (society) has generated clear and direct consequences on their subsystems.

An internal organizational conflict involving two different areas (production and sales, for example) will cause reflections in others, not directly related to the disagreement (customer service, relationships with suppliers, etc.). It is common that difficulties with customers occur due to a lack of synchronization between production, collection and sales, between sales and projects, between marketing and planning, and so on. These are examples of the importance that systemic analysis of the organization has for the management of conflicts.

Observing the theoretical framework, it is understood that the functional areas of a company, as a grouping of processes that allow the goals that are met, represent truly subsystems of a larger system, the organization. In this sense, Silva (2008) points out that the analysis of an organization could be based on all the departmental structure and could be functional in subsystems with their own processes of inputs and outputs and with the necessary interaction between them.

For Martinelli (2002):

> "Each unit, department or division of an organization will develop objectives, goals, values and procedures appropriate to their mission. Of course, it begins to be some friction between those goals and procedures, which can often be confusing, because, although part of a whole, each area of enterprise search, at first, meeting their basic objectives, which in certain cases clash with those of other areas. "

The more limited is a system, the lower are the chances of negotiating and managing potential conflicts in the organization. Extending the system is a basic rule to identify alternative actions in order to generate possible solutions to the problems.

Once again seeking to support the lessons of Morghan (2009):

> "All this has fundamental implications for organizational practice, emphasizing the importance of having the ability to search and feel changes not only in relation to the task, but also in the environmental context, to have the ability to connect and manage the critical limits and interdependence areas, as well as being able to develop appropriate policy responses."

The expansion of the system includes in its limit, the consideration of the social system as a whole, because we cannot forget that many organizational conflicts are derived from the delay of the subjects (in a broad sense, including individual, family, organization or even society groups) in relation to social, cultural and technological transformations.

The social and economic transformations, according to Fishman (1998) "have been linked to tensions within families, making the coexistence between people more difficult." This finding extends naturally to the business and organizational context in general, because the complex society-organization-family is so intertwined that it applies to the phenomenon of dysfunctional isomorphism: the individual expands a pattern of behavior for who attends all environments and in which it operates.

Moreover, Muzkat (2005) teaches that "from the point of view of social constructivism, the facts are not isolated things 'in themselves'; they are the product of a 'collective consensus' of cultural and social character." This means, for example, that the offense today may tomorrow mean nothing. Call a child by a nickname ""piá"" may, in southern Brazil, represent a tender call at the same time that, in the north, could be intended as a provocation or an abuse.

Homeodynamic in systems

A key feature of any system is the property of seeking to remain balanced, while evolving in some direction. For Katz and Kahn (1987), this is called dynamic homeostasis, or simply Homeodynamic. This feature requires flexibility from the system to reorganize itself to face different demands and requirements it imposed. Organizations are continually evolving, and when the change is felt, there are automatic behaviors of reaction. Thus, the organizational vision must include the treatment of conflicts as something inherent in the dynamics of its subsystems and as a whole.

The demands stem at the same time and in varied ways, of two environments: one internal and one external to the system. In the latter prevail interactions with other systems, and that flexibility is demonstrated by its ability to adapt, to transform the environment or both. Moreover, as explained Katz and Khan (1987):

> "In order to adapt to their environment, the systems seek to overcome the external forces, ingesting them or controlling them. Linking the physical to the unique organism only means that such attempts to take control of the environment affect the system behavior and not the individual's biological system. However, social systems will move to incorporate within its borders external resources essential for survival. Again, the result is an expansion of

the original system."

The conflict may be due to a lack of flexibility to deal with systemic change. Similar reasoning can be applied to changes of the systems provoked by internal forces. The systems homeodynamic and therefore the subsystems that compose it, is directly associated with the appearance of conflicts in critical moments of transition between stages, called "life cycles", as noted below.

Understanding this phenomenon requires a careful evaluation of the history of the conflict. These, in addition to the arising of transactions from the life cycles, other elements emerge and perhaps may help to explain the nature of disputes between litigants. Among them is, for example, the inadequate performance of the individual's role in the system or subsystem to which he belongs. In organizations, the role is represented by the performance expectations of the person in the position and function for which he is assigned. Furthermore, it includes not formalized elements, and yet, established by enterprise culture.

According to Katz and Khan (1987) in their organizational form, which they called "pure", the roles are characterized by "custom configurations of conduct required by all persons who play a part in a given functional relationship," however, "without being taken into account the personal desires or irrelevant interpersonal obligations to such relationship."

The concept of a role, because, "it alludes to an abstract form," i.e., "can be played by various individuals in similar ways" (LUHMANN, 2009). The poor performance of the role causes, maintains or enhances conflicts. The individual begins to perform actions or presents behaviors not consistent with the role, he is expected within the subsystem to who he belongs. There is also conflict when an individual of a subsystem plays a role referred to another subsystem and reacts to the change allegedly corrective.

Life cycles of systems

Every system has what is called life cycle consisting of steps, each leading to a new state of the system, with own characteristics and attributes.

The life cycle of the human being, for example, can be understood as the succession of the following steps: 1) intrauterine (where there is the design, development of the embryo, fetus and ends with the birth, birth is therefore the first major conflict of man, caused by a severe and inevitable change), 2) growth (stage divided into childhood and adolescence), 3) productive and reproductive (corresponding to adulthood), 4) aging, which depletes the

productive and reproductive capacity until the final situation which is death, the final change and the last conflict (FIORELLI, FIORELLO and KNITWEAR, 2008).

Loosely speaking, organizations have a life cycle that can be considered similar, within an organic metaphor, in which they are created, develop, mature, multiply and vanish.

The moment of the life cycle is directly correlated with the lines of action appropriate to deal with the inherent conflicts in life. It is expected that a person present in the adulthood behaviors consistent with it. If this not happens, some form of imbalance becomes clear.

In a step in the evolution of the life cycle to another comes the time or transitional stage in which occurre imbalances, which are changes that generate unavoidable conflicts. Such points of transformation, the behaviors that previously produced satisfactory results lose their effectiveness and the person becomes unsafe. Arise then mechanisms for protection of the psyche. Many conflicting processes result of this instability, which can be transient or not.

Some examples of critical moments in the life cycle of organizations are: acquisitions, mergers, change in technology, change of place of operation, deployment of new processes, change of management, collective layoffs, and so on. For some, the change in technology represents a loss of job stability, while for others it is a development opportunity.

Every crisis or during the course of a new stage of life cycle cause transformations: a) changes in the subsystems, for the incorporation of new members and exclusion of others, and the profound role changes b) changes in the permeability of borders with other subsystems and systems (as some become more permeable, others are tightened by modifying the levels of dependence and independence among participants), c) establishment of new coalitions and abandonment of others already exceeded d) use of new forms of communication; e) profound changes in language and way of thinking, with a direct and accented impact on the expressed behaviors.

There are many causes for a moment in a life-cycle to exert substantial influence on the behavior of organizations and their agents, which should be well understood by all, as far as possible, so that it can be established an appropriate context.

Conflicts and systemic vision

The systemic vision has advantages for the study of organizational conflicts, especially

with regard to the actions of those concerned with their management and/or resolution. Through it, you can see, for example, situations in which conflict at work is consequent or antecedent to what happens in the family (FISCHMAN, 1998) or, inversely, that the disagreements in the home result from stress at work.

As defined by Luhmann (2009), "conflicts are, par excellence, the construction of catalytic systems, which for some reason, are formed inside other systems, and do not acquire the status of major systems, but parasitic" (2009). Luhmann (2009) sees the conflict as a "system" in itself, since it allows "that the other is treated as an enemy, as an opponent against whom they may act aggressively, violently."

This systemic view is far from being impersonal. Such an approach does not neglect feelings and emotions that make up systems and subsystems. The understanding of any conflict becomes not satisfactory unless they understand the game of emotions present in it. There is also considering the complexity of understanding people's emotions. When the observer dives into the emotional labyrinth in which litigants are caught (and people and organizations of their relationships), he runs the risk - to be part of that system - to get involved personally.

You cannot leave aside, for the emotional factor in this organizational process, in which the conflict encounters a large field to emerge, like the "parasite" cited by Luhmann. In this sense, Fineman (2001), concerned with the fact that organizational scholars "have been slow to incorporate emotions into their thinking," recalled that:

"For those who spend much of their time in organizations, to talk about emotions is something taken for granted: mourning, anger, anxiety, frustration, fun, happiness, boredom, shame and despair. These people are part of creating social and personal expression in work and organizational life. Specific job activities - to take decisions, persuade, negotiate, advise, sell, attend meetings, interpret data, hiring and firing people, fight, resist, survive - is more than a set of automated responses. They are experienced and trained by feelings. "

Moreover, the work of Fineman (2001) drops the myth of the "rational organizational actor," including standing out evidences about the operation of emotional processes on organizational behavior. Far of the dreamed neutrality (or coolness) of the behavior of organizations, the human being cannot be forgotten: even in the organizational environment, we cannot withdraw the individual will, his feelings, his emotions. For the Systems Theory, as stated by Luhmann (2009), "the human being is a phenomenon of a

non-transparent self-organization, impossible to empirical verification, and not just as an abstractum that must be postulated as the guarantor of the normative structure of society."

According to Fonkert (2000),

"the person is not an isolated being, but an active and reactive member of social groups," and that "the systemic approach not only observe how to organize the interactions between people and their reciprocal effects, but that patterns of problematic relationship and organization conform the context of each situation. "

Nor can we forget the role that power plays in the relationship of social actors, even more present in the relations between capital and labor, where conflicts are the most beautiful lawn to get home. For many, power is taken as a form of management or conflict resolution, to represent, as Weber pointed out, the ability to "make others do what you want done, if necessary against their own will" (HARDY and CLEGG, 2001).

Normally, it is this skill that permeates job relations, either managing potential conflicts, either maintaining the homeostasis of the system, and that ends up being developed by both participating actors in the contract, either through the employer's power to direct how the power granted by protective law of the work to the employee - "the fundamental rights of workers and limiting the power of the employer" (ROMITA, 2005).

However, although this was not the aim of this work, it should be emphasized that the mere exercise of power by any of the actors of the employment relationship cannot be taken as a method, technique or simple way to manage conflicts, but as a true subjugation of wills, needs or interests, which obviously will only transfer the problem to the future.

Final thoughts

The administration or management of organizational conflict, as well as any other, is to identify it, understand it, interpret it and use it in order to benefit the survival, the development and the evolution of individuals, families, social groups, organizations and, ultimately, society.

The management of conflict becomes effective when it tries to identify its causes, understand its evolution, when it worries about the "whole" and the "parts" that it composes (MARTINELLI, 2002). Anyway, when it is adopted a truly systemic view in order to apply a methodology, rather than hide it or repress it, it makes its protagonists learn

from it and to qualify to apply knowledge acquired in other situations, similar or not, generalizing and extending the acquired knowledge.

The general systems theory finds fertile ground in organizational studies precisely because the organizations represent a place of intersection of several distinct social worlds (many other systems). They have their own cultural beliefs and values, and its members "have different interests, different goals and seek to fight, proposing or undoing political alliances to achieve their goals" (Berger, 1989).

For the study of conflict in organizations, it is necessary for the researcher to have as its premise the search of the real meanings of the words and intentions of the actors involved. We need rather to understand the individual, and to understand the culture of the group or the larger system in which he is inserted and / or related. Only then it will be possible the actual control of the discussed conflict causes and its possible ways of their solution.

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