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Case Study: Relationship Conflict in a Non-Governmental Organization

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Tämän kandidaatintyön tavoite on tutkia mitkä ovat johtajien tavat hoitaa ihmissuhdekonflikteja voittoa tavoittelemattomassa yhdistyksessä ja mitkä ovat johtajien, työntekijöiden ja vapaaehtoisten kokemukset niistä. Tavoittena on selvittää kuinka johtajat käsittelevät ihmissuhdekonflikteja voittoa tavoittelemattomissa yhdistyksissä, kuinka johdon ja työntekijöiden kokemukset ihmissuhdekonfliktien hoitamisesta eroavat toisistaan ja kuinka voittoa tavoittelematon yhdistys työpaikkana vaikuttaa ihmissuhdekonfliktien ratkaisemiseen.

Jotta tutkimuskysymyksiin voidaan vastata, laadittiin teoreettinen viitekehys empiirisen tutkimuksen pohjaksi. Teoreettinen viitekehys on yhteenveto eri tieteellisistä tutkimuksista liittyen konfliktiteoriaan, konfliktien käsittelyn tyyppeihin ja käytäntöihin. Empiirinen tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena semi-strukturoituja haastatteluja metodina käyttäen. Aikaisemman kirjallisuuden käsittely ja uuden datan analyysi ovat erillisissä kappaleissaan. Erillisten tarkastelujen ja analyysin jälkeen niitä heijastetaan toisiinsa.

Teoreettisen ja empiirisen tutkimusaineiston perusteella kävi ilmi että voittoa tavoittelematon yhdistys asettaa haasteita konfliktien ratkaisemiselle organisaatiomalliin liittyvän jatkuvan muutoksen takia. Muita havaintoja ovat mm. että työntekijät ja johtajat eivät aina ole samaa mieltä siitä miten konflikteja tulisi hoitaa ja että organisaatio on käyttänyt monia konfliktien ratkaisun välineitä.

ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this bachelor's thesis is to study what are leaders' ways of handling relationship conflict in a non-governmental organization and leaders', employees' and volunteers' experiences about them. The intention is to find out how the managers handle relationship conflict in non-governmental organizations, how do the experiences of management of relationship conflict differ between employees and leaders and how does non-governmental organization as a workplace affect the solving of relationship conflicts.

To answer the research questions, a theoretical framework was built to form a foundation for empirical research. The theoretical framework is a summarization of different academic findings related to the theories of conflict and types and practices of handling conflicts. The empirical research uses qualitative data collection method of semi-structured interviews. The analyzation and review of previous literature and new empirical data are in separate sections. Then they are reflected with each other to cumulate findings together.

The analysis of theoretical and empirical analysis exposed that a non-governmental organization poses difficulties for conflict resolution because of constant change inherent to the organization. Other findings are that the employees and managers don't always see the conflict management in the same way and that there have been multiple conflict management practices in use in the organization.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this bachelor's thesis is to study what are leaders' ways of handling relationship conflict in a non-governmental organization and leaders', employees' and volunteers' experiences about them. This subject is important because workplace conflict can lead to employees' sick leaves, less effective performance and even counter productive behaviour at work. These decrease organizations' efficiency and employees' well-being at the workplace. Managerial practice may have an important role how conflicts are resolved and thus also the health of employees (Hyde M., Jappinen P., Theorell T. and Oxenstierna G., 2006).

There is currently a shortage of many kinds of skilled professionals in Finland (Helsingin Sanomat, 27.9.2019). If conflict is better managed, this leads into smaller amount of sick leaves and improved well-being at work thus alleviating the shortage. Better well-being at work can also make it easier to recruit the best talent. As the working aged population has been declining in Finland since year 2010 (Official Statistics of Finland, 30.9.2019), it is important to make well-being at work a priority. Conflict at work can lead to long absences from work. Finland as a whole has to keep more and more people at work in order to maintain the welfare and pension systems.

Employer is mandated by law in Finland to take care of the well-being of the employees (Occupational Safety and Health Act). This is well accomplished on the physical safety side. There are all kinds of protective equipment and guidelines in place and the sanctions for not providing those are easily set. On the psychological side things are less easy and less established even though there also are legislation and guidelines. Those are regularly checked by the authorities as well. But lack of measures to ensure psychological well-being is not easy to sanction and the experiences of well-being may differ even inside the same team.

I'm investigating leaders' different types of handling relationship conflict in a non-governmental organization and how they affect the workplace as a community and the well-being of the members of the community.

Main research question:

How does non-governmental organization as a workplace affect the solving of relationship conflicts?

Sub-question:

How do the managers handle relationship conflict in non-governmental organizations?

Second sub-question:

How do the experiences of management of relationship conflict differ between employees and leaders?

The structure of the thesis is based on two sections: firstly, the theory section consists of theory about relationship conflict, effects of conflicts, and how conflicts are handled. In the second, empirical section, the theory is compared to the findings and topics raised in the interviews.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter introduces the central concepts underlying this study. The concepts are handled in detail through relevant scholarly literature.

2.1 Conflict

Conflict at workplace is inevitable (Burawoy M., 1979; Edwards P.K., 1992; Jehn, 1995).

The definition of conflict has evolved over time. Robbins (1978) defines conflict as any kind of opposition or antagonistic interaction between two or more parties. According to Jehn (1995) conflict is perceived incompatibilities or disagreements between two or more parties. Rahim (2002) sees conflict as an interactive process that manifests itself as incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance between or within individuals, groups, organizations etc.

Priem and Price (1991) say that there are two kinds of conflicts. According to them cognitive conflict is about different views to the tasks at work. Interpersonal conflict is defined as competition at work (for example getting a raise or promotion) or personal disagreements.

According to Jehn and Bendersky (2003), interpersonal incompatibilities are the cause of relationship conflict. Parayitam and Dooley (2009) see relationship conflict as person-related disagreement characterized by tension, animosity, and annoyance between colleagues. Jehn says that task conflict on the other hand is disagreements about the contents of a task, including different ideas, viewpoints and opinions.

According to De Dreu, Dierendonck and Dijkstra (2004), examples of relationship conflicts are: differences in personal taste, in political leanings, about values, and about interpersonal style. Difficult conflict may even lead colleagues to sabotage each other's work and play political games at the workplace.

Another transition in conflict thought has been about how conflict is seen in organizations. According to Robbins (1978) there have been three different stages, traditionalist, behavioralist and interactionalist philosophies regarding conflict in organizations. Traditionalists see all conflict as destructive and it should be eliminated. Behavioralists think that conflict is inevitable and this must be accepted, although they also see that all conflict should be resolved. Interactionalists on the other hand think that some conflict is good to the organization and avoiding conflict hinders positive change. This thinking is still going strong, for example Sanna Suvanto-Harsaae, a board professional told in LEADCAST (2019) that people who can handle conflict in a constructive way are good people to have in a company.

Wall and Callister (1995) on the other hand state that some writers confuse disagreement, debate and divergent goals with conflict and say that all kinds of conflict is detrimental to the organization. Rahim (2002) sees that Wall and Callister's approach leaves a lot to be desired as conflict may have also beneficial sides. According to Rahim there are three things that must be recognized when dealing with conflicts in an organization. 1) Conflicts that are caused by negative behaviour by members of the organization (like sexual harassment or bullying) have to be dealt with accordingly. 2) Task related conflicts have beneficial effects on the company, these have to be maintained at a moderate level. 3) The members of the organization have to treat each other with respect. This includes learning conflict handling skills.

According to different sources, interpersonal issues may be the most common job stressor. Wall and Callister (1995) state that conflict is frequent among employees. Hahn (2000) observes that relationship conflicts cover between 25 % to 50 % of conflicts any working day.

2.2 Effects of Conflict

Conflicts have been found to have a negative effect on well-being and satisfaction at work (Cooper C.L. and Marshall J, 1976; Sonnentag, Unger and Nägel, 2013). Conflicts are an important cause of stress, work disability and mental illnesses (Hyde et al., 2006). Conflicts have been found to cause a higher burnout rate, (Lee & Ashforth, 1996), cause emotional exhaustion at work (Benitez, Medina and Munduate, 2018).

Conflict with a supervisor had a significant correlations with sickness absence. This means that conflict with a supervisor is an additional health risk for employees (Hyde et al., 2006).

The stress caused by relationship conflict at work is difficult to avoid because it is not as easy to detect as physical health hazards like noise or dangerous machinery are. And as earlier discussed, there are also theories that some conflicts are actually good to the performance of the organization. Then there is the other positive side to conflict, it allows the team to develop their relations and solutions if they use the opportunity (Gilin Oore, LeBlanc, Leiter, 2015). That's why the organizations may not always be willing to tackle conflicts even though they are harmful.

Job satisfaction affects strongly behaviour at work. Interpersonal conflict (among them relationship conflict) has been found to affect negatively job satisfaction and correlates with counter productive behaviour at work. Job satisfaction has many positive effects like commitment to the organization and smaller likelihood of leaving the organization and hence lower turnover (Brown & Peterson, 1993; Penney and Spector 2005).

Relationship conflict has been found to be detrimental to the effectiveness of organizations, teams and individuals (De Dreu and Van Vianen, 2001). But on the other hand task conflict has been found to be beneficial morale and group performance (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003).

Relationship conflict has been found to have a negative effect on how productive and creative groups are. In addition to these relationship conflict has been found to have a negative effect on consensus building and satisfaction in groups (Jehn and Bendersky, 2003). Relationship conflicts have been found to be more detrimental to the performance of teams than task conflicts (Seong and Choi, 2014).

2.3 Types of Handling Conflicts

Leadership's active management of conflicts has been found to have positive outcomes when measured by productivity, rate of absences from work and employees' capability to handle change (Teague, P. and Roche, W.K., 2012).

Horney (1950) identified three basic conflict handling tendencies. They are moving towards, moving against and moving away from other people. According to Römer, Rispens, Giebels, and Euwema (2012), research has shown that all conflict management techniques represent these three tendencies.

Rahim (2002) uses two motivational orientations when dealing with conflict, concern for self and concern for others. Using these as dimensions for a grid, five different styles of handling conflict can be identified: integration, domination, obligingness, compromise and avoidance. These styles are more suitable when thinking of individuals as parties of conflict.

Römer et al. (2012) studied leaders' three third party conflict management behaviours: problem solving, forcing and avoiding that closely correspond to Horney's (1950) tendencies. They found that problem solving behaviour by the leader lessens significantly the stress caused by relationship conflict. On the other hand forcing behaviour increased stress caused by relationship conflict and avoiding behaviour by the leader didn't have any significant effect on stress.

Hyde, Jappinen, Theorell and Oxenstierna (2006) found that there is a significant correlation with conflict management style and general health, stress, sickness absence and exhaustion. Best results were with discussing about the conflict with employees. Worse results were by avoiding the conflict and forcing the conflict to stop was in the middle.

	Poor general health	Stress	Sickness absence	Exhaustion
<i>Sweden</i>				
By discussing	6.81	8.22	8.85	35.11
Using authority	11.82	15.55	13.75	52.46
No attempts	15.03	20.83	15.59	53.27
<i>Finland</i>				
By discussing	4.90	5.54	4.22	17.81
Using authority	8.10	10.02	6.83	30.85
No attempts	11.30	12.81	8.31	36.49

Hyde, et al. (2006), Percentages of employees in the Swedish and Finnish plants reporting poor general health, stress, sickness absence and exhaustion for each type of workplace conflict management.

2.4 Conflict Handling Practices

There are many ways of handling conflicts, like discussing about the conflict or ordering the participants to stop the conflict by using authority (Hyde et al. 2006). One of the most important requirement of efficient conflict handling is that the leadership knows about the conflict. One of the ways of handling conflict is regular meetings of the manager and the employees (Teague and Roche, 2012). By meeting the employees the manager can keep themselves updated about possible problems and the feelings of the employees.

Alternative dispute resolution practices (ADR) give the management and the organization additional ways of handling conflict. The managers are seen as focal point in this kind of conflict-management system (Teague and Roche, 2012).

Alternative dispute resolution practices include for example:

- Open-door policies,
- Mediation,
- Ombudsman,
- Internal and external mediators,

- Review panels of managers or peers,
- Advocates for the employees,
- Arbitration,
- Assisted bargaining/mediation within procedure to make sure that the process goes forward,
- Brainstorming and other similar techniques,
- Facilitated ‘interest-based bargaining’,
- Private arbitration,
- ‘Speak-up’ and related systems,
- When there is a change, intense communications relating to it (Currie, D., Gormley, T., Roche, B. and Teague, P., 2017).

3. Research

This chapter introduces the case organization. After that the research design and strategy are discussed. The last part of the chapter introduces the data collection method in detail as well as the interview questions.

This study is conducted at a Finnish national level non-governmental organization. The purpose of the organization is to represent their members on the national level and also internationally. It has 25 member unions all over Finland. The organization has 8 employees and an executive committee of six persons who work full time at the organization's office in Helsinki.

The highest decision making power is with the yearly general assembly of the organization. The member unions gather then to agree on plan of work, budget and the executive committee for the next year. The general assembly decides also on the political goals and the strategy for the organization.

The organization's functions are very much organized by democratic decision making philosophy. There are several weekly meetings where the functions are planned and decisions are made. Even though the executive committee and the general assembly make the decisions in the end, all the members of the organization (including the employees) get to influence the decisions very much. The employees have extensive knowledge about the areas they are specialized in and they are expected to conduct their work mostly independently. It can be said that the organization is a participative workplace in Hodson's classification.

Five years ago there was a change in the organization as the employees had been hoping that their work would be better managed. So in the beginning of 2015 the managerial responsibilities were shifted from the previous general director to a new advocacy director. Based on the classification of Hodson it could be thought that the employees wished that the workplace would be less like disorganized and more like participative workplace.

Functions of the organization are: lobbying politicians, civil servants and other stakeholders; organizing events and offering services for member organizations. The organization conducts lobbying on the EU level and influencing on the EU level through an EU-level federation of the national organizations.

Every year the organization organizes about ten events, represents their members in more than 50 working groups and in more than ten organizations' decision making bodies, publishes more than ten press releases and more than 30 statements to ministries or the parliament about legislation. Representatives of the organization meet hundreds of politicians, civil servants and representatives of other stakeholders each year.

High turnover rate of volunteers and employees is one of the special features of the organization. Executive committee members spend typically only one calendar year in their position. Employees' typical career in the organization is about three years.

Another feature of the organization is that people are fairly young. Executive committee members are typically 21 – 29 years old. Employees are typically about thirty years old.

Third special feature is that almost all members of the organization are fairly active politically and thus quite opinionated. This may easily lead into tensions at the office.

3.1 Research design and strategy

Because the research topic is somewhat uncertain, the research method was a qualitative study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), qualitative researchers are interested in finding the meaning of a phenomenon, people's interpretations of their experiences and how they have constructed their worlds.

There are three different conditions to be taken into consideration when choosing the right research strategy;

- 1) research question's type;

- 2) how much control the researcher has on the behavioral events;
- 3) the amount of focus on current events as opposed to events in the past (Yin, R.K., 2017).

According to Yin (2017) case study is suitable research method if a researcher wants to study a contemporary circumstance. The research questions that begin with “how” or “why” are most appropriate for case study. Merriam and Tisdell describe case study to be a careful description and analysis of a bounded system made in great detail (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

When designing a research, five components are especially important:

1. Questions,
2. Possible propositions,
3. Case(s),
4. Logic between data and propositions,
5. Criteria of interpreting the findings (Yin, 2017).

3.2 Data Collection

The interviewed were present and former managers, employees and chairs of the executive committee. This was in order to get a bit longer perspective on the issue because the rate of employee turnover is quite high. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews. The time of the interviews was the end of October and beginning of November, 2019. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and recorded on a digital recorder. One of the interviews was transcribed by the author and the rest of them were transcribed by a transcribing service provider. The recordings and transcribed interviews are stored securely and all the interviewees were asked a permission to store the interviews according to the instructions given by the university.

Interview questions:

- What is/was your role in the organization?
- How long have you been/were you at the organization?
- Have you noticed relationship conflicts during your time at the organization?

- Were you a party in a relationship conflict?
- What was your role in the relationship conflict?
- Who were the parties?
- What were the approaches the leadership took in managing relationship conflicts during your time in the organization?
- What were the results of managing relationship conflicts?
- Should something have been done differently?
- How did the relationship conflict(s) affect your well-being/others' well-being?
- How did the conflicts affect your career plans?

4. Findings

This chapter introduces the findings of the interviews and compares them to relevant scholarly literature. Excerpts of the interviews are translated from Finnish to English by the author and are included in text in *italics*.

4.1 Conflicts

According to the people I interviewed, there had been many kind of relationship conflicts in the organization. Some of them had been between employees and the leadership, some of them between employees, some between members of the executive committee and some between employed leadership and members of the executive committee. There had also been relationship conflicts where there had been many parties involved. Almost all of the interviewees had been a party in a relationship conflict. And all of them had been either a party in a relationship conflict or intermediating in one. Many of the conflicts have had elements from both task and relationship conflict or they have escalated to relationship conflict after a task conflict. The symptoms of the relationship conflicts correspond to those stated by Parayitam and Dooley: tension, animosity, and annoyance.

“Maybe you could approach it so that there have been [conflicts] of many kinds and between different people.”

The severity of conflict has varied very much. Especially one relationship conflict between a member of the leadership and several members of the organization stood out in the interviews. It included for example intruding the other party’s personal space both at work and on freetime and mostly unfounded accusations of bullying at work. This relationship conflict lasted for more than a year and was very stressful for the whole organization. This is also congruent with many sources about the effects of relationship conflict.

“I would add to the conflicts with person Y that there was a conflict with some of the employees, for example with person Z and with one of the advisors.”

“The conflict with one of the advisors was about an internal discussion on one of these, I don’t remember what we had, Hangouts might have been the name. [...] Without remembering the content of the messages, but there had been a message that the advisor had written and which the person Y had not liked and that had lead into the conflict.”

Another quite destructive conflict included the whole of one year’s executive committee and some of the employees. The executive committee members couldn’t get along at all because of tensions created already when they were elected the previous year. There had been some disappointments during election and this created a tension in the executive committee. There was also political differences between the members and employees. This obstructed decision making and the normal functions of the executive committee as a part of the organization. The conflict between executive committee members and employees was based on differences related to substance in lobbying work but it manifested itself also as relationship conflict, especially during meetings including the whole organization. This conflict had the characteristics of political games at workplace stated by De Dreu et. al. (2004).

“... there were also tensions among the executive committee that were maybe the result of, so that naturally, like in non-profits usually, there had been a race about the position of the chairperson. [...] where one person has been elected and the other person has been elected as a member of the executive committee.”

One conflict had been going on for a long time between one employee and other employees and sometimes also members of the executive committee. It included task related conflicts that had escalated into relationship conflicts as well as some counterproductive behaviour at work. The opinion of other members of the organization seems to have been that this employee didn’t do their work and got too easily away from this.

“Well, there’s of course the case with person X. It has not manifested itself outside but when you came to work at the office you noticed quite soon that... well, beginning with how they [person X] behave. They give belittling and negative remarks. And especially in the beginning of the year when I was beginning my time in the organization [...] because I am a young woman, is this the reason why I am not good enough and can’t know things.”

Of course there are also smaller conflicts that easily are left in the shade of the bigger ones. Some of the interviewees differentiated between task-related conflicts from relationship conflicts and they also said that sometimes task conflicts are the spark for relationship conflicts. Also the task conflicts and relationship conflicts intertwine and there can be many kinds of conflicts going on at the same time according to the interviews.

“Well we were in the clinical group guidance [...]. And we went through the problems with task division and I told my worries about my experience how it is unpleasant to do work when the response is so negative. After this the communications from their side was really passive-aggressive the next weeks. [...] I lost my appetite for working with them after that.”

“... I experienced it as continuous attempts to backstab me in many ways. Starting from events where different important cooperation parties were present, there I heard from third parties or through other means that there had been thrash talked about me behind my back. And well, like spreading false rumours, how I conduct my duties as chairperson and as a leader and all these kinds of accusations.”

4.2 Effects of Conflicts

Conflicts have had many kinds of effects. They have weakened the well-being and motivation of the members of the organization, made the organization less effective and affected the career plans of the people involved. These findings are in congruence with the theory that conflicts have negative effects on on well-being and satisfaction at work (Cooper and Marshall; Sonnentag et al.). One of the interviewed said that length of the conflict is crucial. The longer the conflict is, the harder it is to tolerate. Also other interviewees said that the length of conflict has made it hard to cope.

“... the core of the problem is that the conflict just goes on and on. If the conflict is short [...] like a difficult situation or conflict starts from that you can see that it is going to end at some point. [...] the kind of [conflicts] that have multiple levels don't end at all but start all over again when the situation is difficult.”

“So it begins to feel like a chain of events and it is difficult to see why this is so hard again. It is hard to understand that what I did or said might have started a new [conflict] situation.”

The worse conflicts resulted into situations where small groups of people gathered to meet behind closed doors to discuss the situation and this happened almost every day for long periods. According to some of the interviewees this didn't actually make the situation better but worse in hindsight.

“...this behind the closed doors or that. It was kind of therapeutic that ‘well here I can talk about the situation’ but it took hours and hours every day. [...] We didn't realize that [it was wrong and it should have been stopped]. It helped in the beginning but that kind of [pointless talking about the situation] doesn't lead anywhere in the end. Or that we didn't have any solution [to the situation].”

One of the conflicts resulted in one of the interviewees to warn their substitute about the employee who was in the heart of the conflict and their counterproductive behaviour.

The occupational health costs of the organization increased manyfold during one of the prolonged conflicts. The increase originated mainly from the cost of occupational health negotiations between the parties of the conflicts but it can be presumed that the increase in costs is also due to other effects of the conflict. This is in line with the finding of Hyde et al. that conflicts are an important work disability.

4.2.1 Effectiveness of the organization

There has been different levels of influence that relationship conflicts have had on the effectiveness of the organization. Some of them have been quite disruptive, and some less so. But all of them have been negative, which is in line with the claim of De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) that conflicts have a detrimental effect on the effectiveness of organizations.

One of the general directors I interviewed said that they had had to spend a large amount of their work time as an intermediary in a conflict for a long period of time. This had impeded

development work included in their job description. Two other interviewees said that they had to discard partly or totally their previous plan what they intended on doing during their time in the organization because of conflict management. Conflict management took a lot of their time during their time in the organization and this was a disappointment. The conflict that included the whole executive committee resulted in weakened lobbying work and frustrated the employees as the executive committee is an integral part of the day to day operations of the organization. One of the interviewees said that this conflict had lead into a situation where the employees were wary of committing themselves into working with the next year's executive committee. These findings are in line with the writings of De Dreu and Van Vianen (2001) and Jehn and Bendersky (2003) about the effects of conflicts on individuals, groups and the whole organization.

“... year -1x was from the point of view of executive committee and the political influencing a catastrophe or there didn't happen anything... Although it could have been because [there were important processes going on on the national level] and there were lots of possibilities where we could have influenced. But we didn't achieve anything on that side.”

“Well I would say that the conflict lasting the whole year of 20xx was the worst when thinking of the activities of the organization and also the most demanding [...] because it paralyzed the executive committee's abilities to function, which is crucial in this kind of executive committee driven organization...”

4.2.2 Well-being and motivation

The conflicts have had negative effects on the well-being of the interviewees. The conflicts have caused a lot of anxiety and the feeling has been of a weight on the shoulders. This is in line with the finding of Benitez et al. (2018) that conflicts cause emotional exhaustion at work. Two of the interviewees said that one of the prolonged conflicts had been very stressful and after the conflict was over they felt exhausted even though they hadn't even been a part of the conflict.

“And well quite quickly when the new executive committee began their introductory period it became clear that there had been already longer a difficult situation at the office, that

concerned this [person], that had escalated to the point that they still were on sick leave when the executive committee started in the beginning of the year.”

One of the other interviewees who hadn't been a party in a conflict said that it had been very stressful and it had affected negatively their sleep and recuperation from work. They dreaded going to work during the conflict and coming back from vacation.

The time during one of the more severe conflicts had been stressful and also frustrating. The conflict had eroded interviewees' but also other members' of the organization motivation. The interviewee said that it wasn't easy coming to office when you never knew what kind of conflict was awaiting this time. During one prolonged conflict one of the interviewees felt that it didn't matter if they did their job or not because the leadership's attention was elsewhere. This of course led into diminished motivation. One interviewee said that one of the longer conflicts where task and relationship conflicts are intertwined had been very negative on the motivation of employees. According to the interviews there seemed to be two sets of rules in the organization in one of the conflicts. One set for the other employees and other set for one of the employees. This resulted in diminished motivation among the other employees. It seems that one employee got away from doing work by intimidating others.

Other symptom of the conflict was fear of meeting the other party of the conflict. And in such a small organization this is a terrible feeling because it prevents you from doing your work properly.

During one of the conflicts the situation had crept into the employees' freetime and this had severely affected their recuperation.

“...like that a colleague is a bit too much in contact for the whole summer vacation, it has been surely hindering coping with workload and recuperation if you can say so...”

“...it was like a little bit not respecting the freetime and privacy...”

“...so that when you come to work and you know that you have work to do, but you know that you get fairly little of that done because every morning we start [in a small group] going through what has happened last night and if anybody has received any messages...”

4.2.3 Career plans

Conflicts have affected some of the interviewees' career plans, but most of them said that there hasn't been any effect. On the other hand they said that they knew people who had left the organization because of conflict. One of the persons who said that conflicts had affected their career plan said that they didn't want to work in the organization or in the organizations member unions after the conflict. These findings are congruent with the statements by Brown & Peterson (1993) and Penney and Spector (2005) that relationship conflicts weaken job satisfaction and lead into higher turnover.

“So that year four people left the organization, which is quite a symptom of what happens when the whole organization is not feeling well.”

“But maybe the thought that you would be forced in the same kind of difficult situation as [a previous year] because of the executive committee not being able to work together and causing a continuous conflict and taking lots of time from the managing director, I would like to avoid that. So that's it.”

One of the interviewees said that they didn't want to leave the organization during a prolonged conflict because they didn't want to leave their position in such a disarray. The conflict had affected their ability to do the things included in their work description and they felt that it would be unethical to leave at that point. They also felt solidarity towards their colleagues.

Many of those in leadership position said that they feel now more confident in their careers when they have the experience of conflict behind them. One of them said that they have no patience for relationship conflict at work after their experience at the organization.

4.3 Conflict Handling Approaches

There are three possible approaches to handle conflicts: problem solving, forcing and avoiding the conflict according to Römer et al. (2012). According to the interviews there have been many kinds of leaders and many kinds of ways of handling relationship conflicts by the leadership in the organization. Employees' bosses have ranged from insensitive to conflict to those who have tried to handle conflicts very actively. It seems that there hasn't been any leaders who have wanted stop conflicts forcefully. The abilities of conflict management of the leadership, as well as the approaches have varied a lot.

“... the chairperson didn't have abilities to handle what happened in the executive committee. [...] On the other hand they were too nice and on the other hand I say that they didn't have any leadership skills. So that they simply didn't have any means to solve the conflict situations.”

According to the interviews, one of the longer sources of relationship conflicts has existed already before any of the interviewed were in the organization. They date it back to the time when the leadership was conflict avoiding.

Interviewees had somewhat differing ideas as to how the leadership had handled relationship conflict. All the leaders I interviewed thought they had handled conflicts very actively. Some interviewees thought that all leaders hadn't been as active but actually conflict avoiding.

The line between employees and the executive committee has been a sensitive one. Executive committee members spend typically only one year in the organization and often lack the experience and courage to tackle conflicts. It also takes a lot of time to get to know the situation in the organization well enough to make the decisions. This makes the handling of bigger conflicts difficult and slow. This is why one of the leaders had given an ultimatum to the executive committee, in whose power it was to do something about one bigger conflict, that if they don't do anything, the leader is going to leave the organization. After that the executive committee had started making the decisions needed.

4.4 Conflict Handling Practices

Relationship conflict has been handled in multiple ways. In addition to the traditional tools that the leadership have in their disposal, some of the conflict management practices mentioned by Currie et al. (2017) have also been used. Some of the leaders have approached the conflicts directly, talking with the people in the conflict and reminding them of good manners in the workplace. Some others have lacked the courage to tackle the conflicts directly and have even evaded the conflict. There hasn't been any leaders who have tried to force the conflict to end.

There is a difference how the leadership can handle conflicts if the conflict includes persons who are employees to if the conflict includes persons who are members of the executive committee. The legislation gives the leadership tools to remind the employees about how to handle themselves in an organization. These tools include for example a warning that they have to amend their conduct (Employment Contracts Act). These have also been used according to the interviews.

There however doesn't exist anything similar for the executive committee. The chairperson leads the executive committee but they don't have any formal tools to handle relationship conflicts. The chairpersons have tried to settle conflicts by discussing with the members of the executive committee. The results of these discussions have depended on the strength of the chairpersons position among the executive committee and also on the relationship between the chairperson and the executive committee member.

“The range of different approaches was quite large. One of the practices that was quite bad in hindsight in year -1x was using these kind of administrative and purely bureaucratic approaches, so it was tried to modify the bureaucratic surroundings like the structures of weekly meetings, and executive committee meetings and other ways of working at the office to better accommodate the seeming will of the executive committee in that situation. But the farther the year progressed [...] it was noticed that the common will also about administration wasn't to be found...”

“In those, like, bigger conflicts I would say that there were many conflict handling methods in use.”

“Well, like the managing director said ... they were trying to isolate the [conflicting parties] from [the rest of the organization] by intermediating in the conflicts that were between two or multiple parties, partly during working hours and partly outside it, for example in instant messaging applications.”

The leadership has handled conflicts by giving verbal feedback to those who have behaved inappropriately and trying to settle conflicts by discussing with both/all parties of the conflict.

There has been an ongoing process of clinical work supervision by a trained outside professional from the beginning of the year 2015. This process started when the employer realized that there was a conflict that needed to be resolved.

“Face to face discussions and then there have been tried to give directions to the whole organization. And then there have been the clinical supervisions, but not all of the people have been there.”

“For sure it has been, like, good that we have had the work counseling going on.”

“Well in my opinion they have generally, at least the face to face discussions have resulted in some kind of positive outcomes. So it often, when you discuss privately and talks as a human to another, it helps both parties to understand each other [better]. So. Those are good, but they haven't solved the problems. It demands a long process.”

Some of the leaders have approached the conflicts directly, for example by interrupting a heated discussion in an instant messaging application or a meeting or by taking the issue under discussion in a formal meeting. There has also been a culture of approaching the issue indirectly in a group situation by stating that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable but not addressing anybody directly.

“It was maybe, I remember from the spring, when there seemed to be a lot of conflict among the employees, when X was still [in the organization]. So I remember one time when X interfered in [one of the cases].”

“But then maybe like the next approaches I think were such that when there were these kinds of outburst in instant messaging application at work, then the person in charge said that now you all stop talking about the situation. This discussion has to stop now.”

“Well I consider that I gave them a verbal notification about the [conflict] situation.”

“[Managing Director] ... has been able to guide, firstly to motivate the employees with new ideas and on the other hand to guide the conflict causing person to behave differently.”

“And then I also approached this member of executive committee and in many instances we agreed that, well everything is fine. And they said they were sorry and we agreed. I’m not a person who holds grudges for a long time. But then quite soon I noticed that the situation hadn’t really come to an end.”

“Mediation, which was conducted by [an outside] professional and where then was these, which was practically a, like, such a method with which the conflicts were tried to resolve. And it was from the employer side such, that they were the only tool that the employer could obligate the participation.”

“Because these kinds of close call -situations or those that were clear cut [conflict situations] where people were like “Why did they say like that?” and “That wasn’t nice!” were so many, so those had to be interrupted one by one.”

The leadership has also met with all employees and executive committee members twice a year to follow their progress at work and to gauge their feelings.

One of the leaders had been forced in a situation that they were negotiating an open conflict between members of the executive committee. They were trying to end the conflict and lessen its effects on the organization through face to face meetings and constant instant messaging with the parties. They were forced in the position of the trusted third party.

Some of the leaders had guided the employee after discussing about the conflict to contact occupational health services. This happened in mutual agreement in order to find help for the personal problems the employee was having.

One of the conflicts was tried to resolve by using mediation by a neutral third party. In that case the occupational safety representative tried to organize negotiations according to the advice given by the local Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. The resolving of the conflict never succeeded because one of the conflict's parties was on constant sick leaves. The sick leaves postponed the resolution of the conflict by several months.

This same conflict was tried to handle through negotiations mediated by the occupational health services. This was because the situation had become so heated that it couldn't be handled otherwise and because this is one of the strongest formal ways of handling conflict in Finland. The parties were ordered to be present in the negotiations by the leadership. First there were separate interviews for every conflict party by an occupational health psychologist and then a negotiation where the conflicting parties and the psychologist and the responsible representative of leadership were present. After all these meetings there was one meeting where all the employees, the psychologist and the responsible leader were present. The aim of these negotiations was to formally agree on what had happened and to try to settle the conflict.

There has also been a practice of agreeing on a code of conduct for the workplace. The idea here is to get people to agree on some ground rules for the workplace. Abiding by these rules would lead into everybody treating each other with more civility. The code of conduct hasn't been updated or used in the last two years.

One of the interviewees had been very hesitant to come forward with their suspicion that what had happened to them wasn't correct behaviour at workplace. This leads into conclusion that the workplace doesn't have such policies and culture in place that relationship conflict can be identified and talked about easily

“And then X was pushing Y to come inside [my office], they were like characters from a comic or some [tv-]series, because it was like X egging Y on and then eventually telling half of the story. It would have been endearing in a way if the message wasn't so grave. I didn't understand [the message] at first because the situation was a bit comical. And X:s way of expressing themselves was dramatic when they wanted. And then when I started to get the hang of it, it became clear that it was [a case of] harassment or almost harassment. And I understand, also distressing.”

“But using [the many conflict handling methods] was hindered by the fact that I for example wasn't very active in bringing forth these kinds of problems between two people.”

4.5 Results of Conflict Handling

Results of conflict handling by the leadership have varied. The conflicts that we discussed with the interviewees ended in many ways. Many of them went unresolved and then people left the organization. One source of conflicts has remained even though most of the people have changed. On some of the conflicts a considerable amount of resources was invested in and the results were not as good as expected.

Smaller conflict handling has been successful, leadership has managed to resolve conflicts just by talking with the conflicting parties and reminding them about proper behaviour in the workplace. But also here the results vary somewhat.

“Well I think that these mostly, at least the one on ones have had some kind of positive results. It is often, when you discuss with a person and is a human to a human, it helps the both parties to understand each other better.”

“And I approached this executive committee member and we agreed on many occasions that [everything was ok]. Yes and they apologized. And I am not a person who holds a grudge for a long time. But fairly soon I noticed that this isn’t going to end.”

The twice a year meetings between leadership and employees/executive committee members have been a good practice but they haven’t been frequent enough in order to react to conflicts. Nowadays the leadership meets with employees and executive committee members monthly, and it seems to be better in managing conflict as well as work load.

According to the interviewees some of the leaders have handled conflict too indirectly. One of the interviewees said that the leadership has condemned conflict too vaguely for it to be effective. This has happened in common situations in such a way that the party who started the conflict could think that they were not at fault in the situation. It has also seemed that some of the leaders haven’t been able to handle conflict directly even in private conversations with the people who have been the cause of conflict.

“So I’m not sure how directly the managing director, who is the representative of the employer towards employees, has talked to the person in question. Because their way of talking was quite, they themselves described that they were, quite politically correct and that they didn’t like, that they were a bit conflict avoiding as a person.”

4.6 How Do the Experiences Differ Between Employees and the Leadership?

Those who had been in a leadership position thought that that they had handled the conflict as efficiently and directly as they could. This doesn’t mean that all of them thought that the conflict was handled in the best way. There had been many aspects hindering the leadership from achieving best results.

The opinions of the employees and other people interviewed differed on some of the conflicts. They thought that some members of the leadership lacked the ability and will to listen to the

worries of the employees and also they couldn't read conflict situations correctly. The employees thought also that the leadership was unwilling to handle conflicts directly.

One interviewee who had been in a leadership position saw one of the conflicts only relating to task division and differences in work load. The employees on the other hand thought that in addition to those there was improper behaviour at workplace and conflict caused by that.

"X conducted these face to face discussions. I'm not sure if Y ever conducted them properly".

"Probably then, like firstly the behaviour of this person should have been interfered a long time ago."

"... you just have been forced to trust when the [person in charge] says that the situation will be handled [with a person who is a party in conflict]. But then, when nothing has really changed, that has eroded the employees' trust [in the leadership's willingness to handle the situation]. So have there really been any discussions and why not, and then people have been left to wonder why nothing changes. "

"But there has been conflict among the personnel from time to time but in my opinion they have been mostly about unequal task division."

"But I would say that there are no ongoing conflicts in [the organization], they are more like about the, let's say, structural problems or special features that are typical for this kind of work and community."

4.7 How Does Non-governmental Organization as a Workplace Affect the Solving of Relationship Conflicts?

The interviews lead into a conclusion that the constant change inherent to the organization makes it prone to relationship conflicts. The executive committee changes every year and this results in the need to each year build trust between the members of the organization all over again. Relationship conflicts are inevitable if the differences in personalities, political leanings

and ways of working are different enough and they are not made easier by the different positions in the organization. Also the employees and managing director change often and that doesn't make the situation any easier.

“Everything like changes from all sides every time. So it is, like, different than in other places, I believe”

“And then also, when the managing director has changed, there's already fourth managing director [in my time]... So it is always like that that when managing director changes, the situation returns to where it started.”

“The big challenge here was that because the executive committee members have changed every year and thus the conflict has gotten so bad.”

“And the one thing leading the organization was that if there is a longer continued conflict that would have to be dealt with, so the executive committee changes every year and the personnel have to wait that how long it takes for them to catch up, to get in the yearly rhythm, or in the rhythm how things are done, or in the flow of the work, what is the work culture, and after that if there is anything or anybody that bothers that culture and the everyday work.”

“So there was discussion in autumn that there should be a meeting about creating a code of conduct, but it's not worth it anymore for this executive committee because of time running out. There is maybe five weeks left after this? Maybe.”

“Or it feels like that it, the ways to, how conflicts are handled and how they are approached, varies very much based on who are working or in executive committee in the organization.”

The members of the organization are fairly young and inexperienced. According to some interviewees this resulted in conflicts that would have not occurred otherwise and also their lack of experience in handling conflicts.

“And only the fact that, you sit in all these meetings [about resolving a conflict situation] planning and thinking and sort of like, so it is also mentally for a 21 year old person that you weren’t so eager to conduct lobbying the next day.”

“And if you think about the roles, then we had these 20 – 25 year old people at the office that make the [executive committee]. [...] When usually you haven’t been in a leadership position, or as an employer before, or if you have, it has been only in very small organizations.”

The constant change of executive committees and also managing directors means that resolving relationship conflict is harder also among the employees. If there is a difficult conflict it takes a lot of courage from the executive committee to trust the managing director to take the necessary steps as the employer. Also the ever changing managing directors need some time to get acquainted to start handling the situation.

Many of the conflicts are left unresolved because people leave the organization. One thing is that the executive committee typically spends only a year in the organization and all of the members of the organization assume that the problem will go away after that. So there never is a proper effort of tackling the problem.

“And then some of the accused persons had already left the organization, the chair person had changed...”

“X, who was the main adversary from among the employees had already left. So there should have not been anybody else. But the tension remained.”

“Well it’s a bit of a pity that, I feel like that conflicts are resolved mostly when, well, they end when people change.”

4.8 Recommendations for Preventing and Handling Conflicts

The interviewees had lots of ideas about preventing and handling of conflicts. These concerned the ways how the leadership should behave differently and what changes to the culture and rules and regulations regarding the workplace were needed.

Some interviewees thought that the leadership should act quicker when handling conflict. One of the interviewees said that they would have wanted more openness and honest discussions about the conflict. One of the interviewees said that there should be more direct handling of conflict in the organization.

“And then when the situation was never discussed openly, so that it went always so that you had to go talk to the [person in charge] if you had something to say about the behaviour of [this person].”

“I would have hoped, like, talking about the situation directly, the whole office together ... so like directly and openly tell that we really don't treat each other like this workplace requires and how we should behave...”

On their opinion there should have been also more one on ones about the conflicts between parties in order to get to the same page about the situation and how the parties should conduct themselves in the future.

According to the interviewees, there should be a debriefing after conflicts that have covered many members of the organization and that have lasted a long time. That way there would be a possibility to get a mutual understanding about what has happened and there would be a possibility to learn from that.

There were no questions about preventing conflict but there were suggestions also about that. The interviewees would have wanted more discussion about how people should behave in a working place. At least one interviewee brought up that some years before there had been a

set of guidelines on how to behave at the organization. The previous guidelines have been made under the guidance of the professional work supervisor. The process has been such that everybody has been able to participate in it and commit to the outcome. The guidelines haven't been updated in the latest years. One of the interviewees said that the leadership should also enforce the guidelines after they have been made and remind people about them regularly.

Some interviewees thought that there should be lots more effort in building the community even before the new executive committee has started their mandate. This would give people a possibility to get to know each other and get used to each others' ways of working. One of the interviewees said that the employees should make an effort to work together with the executive committee members and support them with their work. The lack of things to do has lead to conflicts before. One of the interviewees proposed that the employees and executive committee members working on the same area should get together around some recreation activities. This would build community and trust between the parties and make it possible to get to know each other. This concerns also the chairperson and the executive director.

One of the interviewees said that a weekly meeting between the chairperson and the executive director is very important generally, but it also makes it easier to monitor and handle conflict situations. There seems to have been different approaches to these meetings, sometimes they haven't been a practice but now they are in the calendar every week.

6. Discussion

In this study the aim was to figure out what are the different types of handling relationship conflict in a non-governmental organization and how they affect the workplace as a community and the well-being of the members of the community. Research was done by studying the theoretical literature and conducting interviews in a Finnish case-organization in the autumn of 2019. In this chapter further discussion and conclusions are presented which are not already mentioned in chapter 4. Firstly there are answers to the research questions:

“How Does Non-governmental Organization as a Workplace Affect the Solving of
Relationship Conflicts?”

Based purely on the interviews a conclusion can be drawn that the continuous change and relative youth of members of the organization are factors that lead into conflicts to be handled poorly. The fact that there have been many difficult conflicts in the timeframe of this study (about five years) seems to support this conclusion.

“How do the managers handle relationship conflict in non-governmental organizations?”

As previously stated, managers can be avoiding, problem solving or forcing in their conflict handling approaches (Römer et al., 2012). There have been at least two leaders in the organization who have been at least somewhat avoiding in their behaviour. The rest have apparently been more towards problem solving. There have been many conflict handling practices, which shows that the leadership has realized that there is a conflict and that it needs to be handled accordingly.

“How do the experiences of management of relationship conflict differ between employees
and leaders?”

It seems that the management hasn't always been on the same page about conflicts with the employees. The leadership should be sensitive enough to notice when there is a conflict that

they should interfere in. It seems that the leadership hasn't always been able to notice the conflicts in the organization and thus they haven't been able to do anything about them. And this in turn leads in diminished trust in the leadership's ability and willingness to do anything about the conflicts. The leadership has also applied conflict management strategies that haven't been successful. Effective conflict management strategies are essential (Sonnentag et al. 2013).

6.1 Practical Implications

The practical implications concern especially those organizations that have similar kind of structure as the case organization. There are implications for handling of conflicts and how the organization should be functioning as a whole in order to prevent conflict from ever to appearing.

Workplace civility is one of the answers to reduce the amount of harmful conflicts at workplace. Workplace civility reduces anxiety, stress and frustration. In order to achieve an atmosphere of civility there should be trainings for the employees and the leadership and also encourage respectful dialogue in the workplace (Potterton, D., 2018).

Psychological detachment helps well-being during relationship conflict (Sonntag et al. 2013). This means that it is easier to cope with relationship conflict if you don't have to experience it all the time.

There seems to be a need for a holistic programme for prevention and handling of conflicts, a workplace dispute resolution system, and there exists many models to help in designing one (Gilin Oore et al., 2015). This should at least include the familiarization of newcomers (executive committee as well as new employees), conflict management strategies, open door policy, workplace civility, code of conduct and how work and freetime are separated in the organization.

Here's a list of things that should be included in the workplace dispute resolution system:

- Code of Conduct should be updated every year and the management should make sure that people abide by it,
- There should be a strong effort in building the community in order to prevent conflicts,
- There should be freetime activities to let the members of the organization get to know each other.
- There should be direct approaches to conflict and more open discussion what kind of behaviour is appropriate,
- Such policies and culture should be promoted in the workplace that no-one is afraid to come forward with their worries,
- Leadership should act quickly and directly when handling conflict,
- Cooperation between the general director and the chairperson has to be maintained because it is one of the most important arenas for discussing the conflicts and also noticing them early enough,
- Freetime should be respected more,
- There should be rules when and how the common messaging systems are used and when they are not,
- There should be one on ones about the conflicts between parties,
- There should be a debriefing after conflicts that have covered many members of the organization and that have lasted a long time.

6.2 Implications for Future Research

There are many possible further research possibilities available.

One avenue would be to compare other non governmental organizations with the organization. It would be interesting to compare the organizations especially how the different types of structure affect the types of conflict and handling them. This would possibly bring some new insights into what kind of organization structure best when thinking of ability to handle relationship conflicts.

Other possibility for further research is studying how the constant change affects the effectiveness of organizations in getting results. the organization is not unique in the world when thinking of the rate of change so there should be lots of possibilities for studying the ways how organizations handle change.

One subset of handling change is the ways organizations use when familiarizing new people into their positions and welcoming them in the organization. In my opinion this is crucial in the organization and also one of the points where failure is most damaging. Employees and the executive committee members are typically in the organization only for a comparatively short time. Thus they have to be familiarized quite quickly after which they have to start working very independently. They also have to get acclimatized to the organizational culture and get to know the closest co-workers quickly in order for them to be able to use the short time in the organization as good as possible. It would be interesting to study how different organizations do familiarizing and what could be learned from that.

I didn't include conflict prevention in my interviews, but it would be interesting to study how to maintain a community with minimum amount of relationship conflicts. the organization has some of the prevention mechanisms in place but some are missing. This avenue of study should also include other non governmental organizations.

One interesting possibility for further research is to study how new ways of communicating affect the conflicts. One of the conflicts in the organization had manifested itself in an instant messaging application. The use of instant messaging had also made it possible that the same conflict had spread outside working hours and also to vacations.

Another interesting possibility for study is how conflicts affect the reputation of the employer. Both as a cooperation partner but also as when recruiting new people. Some organizations recruit only people from inside the organization or only people who are somehow already close to the organization. This has had some negative effect on their recruitment possibilities. It would be interesting to study if conflicts have same kind of an effect.

The quick pace of change in the organization puts strain on team building. It would be interesting to look at the organization through the theory of team work.

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