Exploring the Conflict Management Process: A Case Study of the Department of Labor in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is a phenomenon of negative emotional feelings and reactions that arise between parties with different opinions, ideas and views. Conflict in an organization is almost unavoidable. Conflict might happen between an employer and an employee when there is dissatisfaction or disagreement between them towards certain work situation. The employee sometimes does not have a mutual understanding with his employer regarding certain issue until the end. This will lead to the involvement of a third party to help them resolve the problem. In Malaysia, the Labor Department is responsible for managing conflict between an employee and his employer. To ensure that the conflict is being handled effectively and efficiently, it is crucial for the Labor Department to have a set of strategies to help them in the conflict management process. However, our preliminary investigation shows that no standard or specific work process is being used by the department. Every officer used their method in managing the conflict assigned to them. Thus, it caused the department not being efficient in handling the cases. To address this issue, this study explores the process of conflict management carried out and proposed a standard procedure of conflict management that can be used by the Labor Department. This research adopted the qualitative method using a case study approach and aimed to understand the elements involved in the process of conflict management. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews involving five respondents consists of officers in the department. The results of this research have identified nine elements in the conflict management process. Results from this research could be used by the Labor Department in strategizing their method of managing conflict handled by the department. By having a standardized method, officers could handle the task more smoothly, thus increase the efficiency of the department and customer satisfaction and help the department to continue to be competitive and able to serve their customer better in the future.

Keywords: *Conflict Management, Labor Department, Conflict Management Process*

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a communicatively expressed tension characterized by a struggle between two or more relationally dependent individuals or entities. Wilmot and Hocker (2007) defined conflict as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent from others in achieving their goals. Conflict is a natural part of human interaction and most of the times it is unavoidable (Turkalj, Fosic, & Dujak,

2018; Wahl & Maresh-Fuehrer, 2009). Conflict can occur for many different reasons, for example when someone challenges our goals, or when we perceive someone as competing with us for resources (McKibben, 2017). When a conflict happens, the most important decision to make is how best to manage the conflict. This decision can change the interaction between the two parties involved in the conflict (Ellis & Baiden, 1991). In an organization, conflict might happen between an employer and an employee when there is dissatisfaction or disagreement between them towards certain work situation (Isa, 2015; Nwokocha, 2015). The employee sometimes does not have a mutual understanding with his employer regarding certain issue until the end. This will lead to the involvement of a third party to help them resolve the problem. To ensure the industrial peace and harmony, it is important to manage the relationship of the employer and the employee through an effective and efficient conflict management process (Adu, Muah, Sanda, Sarfo & Box, 2015).

In Malaysia, the Department of Labor, firstly known as the Department of Manpower was established in 1912 and is one of the 12 Departments and agencies under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Human Resources. It was established with the function to safeguard the interests of workers in the industrial sectors. Besides that, the Department of Labor is also responsible for maintaining the welfare and interests of workers in establishing peace and harmony between employers and employees. In managing conflicts that occur between employer and employee, the Department of Labor also acts as a middle man to resolve any conflict that arises between the employer and employee. Thus, they need to be fair and cannot take any other side while taking the cases made by the employee. However, currently, there is no standard work process used by the department in managing conflict cases handled by the department. Each officer uses his/her method in handling the case which could lead to the question of whether the case is being handled correctly and efficiently. To ensure that the conflict handle by the Department of Labor is handled effectively and efficiently, it is crucial for the department to have a standardized work process so they can maintain the fairness of the process. Unfortunately, the current process used is not standardized thus could lead to the ineffectiveness of managing the conflict that handled by the Department.

This research aims to explore the current work process used by each officer in the Department of Labor in Malaysia. By understanding how the conflict cases are being handled currently, the researcher can recommend the best and standardized process that that can be used by the Department. Thus, this research's objectives are 1) To investigate the process of conflict management in the Department of Labor and 2) To develop a model for conflict management for the Department of Labor.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many perceptions regarding conflicts which are the reality in everyone's life and should be known as a natural process that happens every day. According to Robins (2003) as a group performs it assigned the task which is where the conflict arises. Conflict is known as natural due to life uncertainty and it is good and necessary that can improve the innovative thinking in the right way. It is also allowed for the necessity of actions and thoughts. According to the traditional view that occurs in 1930 – 1940, the conflict must be avoided between the groups and viewed as negatively that lead to the poor communication and lack of trust between people but it can be eliminated only at the high level of management. To improve group and organization performance the cause of conflict and also how to improve performance and group, performance needs to be paid more attention. Rahim (1986) said that whether the effect of conflict is good or bad it depends on the strategies that used to deal with it. Besides that, according to Human Relations or Contemporary View (1940-1970), conflict is a natural occurrence in all groups. The human relations school accepts conflict. It believes that conflict may benefit a group's performance (Robbins, 2005). Conflict also may give benefits to the group performance because any dispute may happen from time to time and it is not necessary to put many efforts to prevent the conflict. Thus, it cannot be viewed as negative only but positively as a potential force for the performance of individuals (Robbins, 2003).

The Definition of Conflict

Conflict is very important for the manager, that is not only rooted primarily in the field of business, psychology, sociology but also in the field of education or communication. It is hard to define conflict as it is difficult when it comes to the definition for this term. Scholars have been trying to define conflict inconclusively. To understand the definition of conflict better, Borisoff and Victor (1998) suggested the easiest way to know the term of conflict is by dividing all the theories of conflict into functional, situational and interactive view. Functional conflict involves allowing employees to express different viewpoints and resolve differences in a healthy way that can encourage innovation and new ideas. It contrasts with the dysfunctional type of conflict that has no benefit to the company and only harms communication, efficiency and workplace morale. Functional conflict may encourage greater work effort and help task performance. It also supports the work that employees are engaged in because it is in line with the goals of the organization. Far beyond the petty infighting of interpersonal conflict lies the realm of functional conflict, where problems get resolved because concerns are heard and acted upon. Functional conflict can lead to a host of benefits, including enhanced productivity which pointing out weaknesses in the contact center system can help them get resolved. Functional conflict also helps to sparks new insights through listening to the concerns the employees may help the organization work out problems in the current business approach. It also helps to improved employee interaction, because when conflict is addressed rather than ignored, problems get resolved and employees are better able to function as a team.

Besides, a situational conflict is a conflict that arises from external circumstances, including plot, settings, and places. For example, a business building which is caught in a fire which causes damages in terms of physical and also emotional which has affected the whole organization and its employees and now they have to deal with their emotional issues and communicate with each other. Just like other kinds of conflicts, a situational conflict can build suspense and move the storyline forward. By concerning the interactive view, the conflict also can be defined as the interaction of interdependent people that perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other to achieve these goals (Folger, 1993). There are two important concepts which are interdependence and also perception. For interdependence, it can be connected to the situations by which future of one party depends on another party's action. Conflict does not only come to the needs or values but also objectively incompatible and when it comes to one of the parties will perceive to exists and coming from interdependent people (Tidwell, 1998). Many other researchers have also defined what conflict is. The various definitions available in the literature could be used to help understanding conflict better. Table 1 below summarizes the definition of conflict that was found during the review of the literature.

Table 1: Summary of Definition of Conflict

Author	Definition of Conflict
Robins (2003)	Conflict is known as natural due to life uncertainty and it is good and necessary that can improve the innovative thinking in the right way. It is also allowed for the necessity of actions and thoughts.
Lewis Coser (1967)	Conflict can be referred to the clash of interest and values, the tension between what is and what some of the group feel ought to be.
Bercovitch (2009),	Conflict as a situation that generated incorruptible goals or values among different parties. It depends on the situation because different conditions will influence the person and also external factors.
Lam et al (2007),	Conflict is a disagreement among different parties for the opinions, ideas and views
Barki et Hartwick (2001)	Conflict is a phenomenon of feeling negative emotional reactions in conflicting parties when achieving their goals and perceiving disagreements.

Conflict in Organization

Organizations are a living system that contains interacting units that perform a task in a mutually dependent manner with the scarce of resources. It is important to know that conflict will be between the parties in an organization that have a conflict about the distributions of all the resources and have a more important conflict regarding the structure of the organization and also the basic nature of their interaction.

It is also important for an organization to understand conflict as to resolve the divergent dualism which is the way to achieve some kind of unity and served as a social purpose and reconciliation can occur even when the destruction of one party. Al-Sedairy (1994) who surveyed a hundred thirty-eight constructions professionals in Saudi Arabic for public sector constructions project, and to find a different kind of ways to solve any conflict that might happen between employees and also an employer. His study reported that usually conflict caused by different perceptions, goals and project priorities among employees. He also finds out that the most frequent conflict is reflected by the disagreement, interference and also negative emotions. Conflict involves the individual struggles over claims such as opinions, resources, beliefs, status, priorities, desires and also power. It depends on the individual perspective itself because when one of the parties tries to impact the interest, goal or objectives for another party the conflict will exist.

Apart from that, the moderate conflict will lead to a positive outcome which leads to better performance and high levels of conflict that becomes loyalty to something or attachment to something (Banner 1995). This is because current managers do not avoid any conflict happen but take it as challenge and opportunity as a growth for the individuals and organizations (Darling & Foliasso, 1999). Relationship conflicts will lead to dissatisfaction, mistrust, non-cordial relationship, provoked hostility or even reduce project performance. For a conflict that can be managed properly, it will lead to the better-quality product, more innovation, better decision making and also can enhance performance. Besides, constructive conflict management comes along with good mutual respect, intention to learn and cooperation from each other. This will lead to better productivity and could help improve organizations' performance.

Conflict Management and Resolution

The term conflict management and resolution have been widely used interchangeably. Although the term projects a different meaning, both seem to complement each other in all situations. Conflict management is the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of the conflict. Conflict management also refers to the techniques and ideas designed

to reduce the negative effects of conflict and enhance the positive outcomes for all parties involved. Conflict management aims to enhance learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness or performance in an organizational setting. The techniques and ideas used depends on the type of conflict that needs managing - researchers differentiate between affective (relational) and substantive (performance, process or task-specific) conflict, as well as inter-organizational conflict (between two or more businesses) and Intra organizational (conflict within organizations). A properly managed conflict can improve group outcomes. On the other hand, conflict resolution can be an aim of conflict management but not all conflict management techniques or styles have conflict resolution as the ultimate target as it may not be feasible.

There are many ways in handling the organizational conflict depending on the different causes, origins and also contexts of the conflict. The main purpose of conflict management is to manage the parties involved in the conflict. The involvement in intervention by the outside party sometimes can affect the entire conflict situation and also help to find solutions for it. Besides that, effective conflict management is important for reducing the disruptions from the existing conflict and also provide a solution. The strategies in conflict management can be fruitful with efforts through the party's attitudes, situation and also behavior and the strategies for the conflict resolutions. Apart from that, the organizations whether it is simple or complex, involve many types of procedure for handling conflict. The effectiveness of the procedures and satisfactory solutions in conflict management and resolution can achieve the limit of conflict behavior.

Conflict Management Process

Conflict management involves analyzing the conflict and then solving it (Matta & Corby, 2000). According to Barki and Hartwick (2001) and Robbins (2003), the best practices to solve the conflict is to look back at the process itself. In addition, Warner (2000) stated that the conflict management process came with the building blocks such as conflict analysis, conflict management plan and also capacity building and implementation. Apart from that, according to Pierce, Gardner & Dunham (2007), the conflict process is from the individual's experience itself regarding the frustration, the individual conceptualization of conflict, a conflicting style which is one of them is conflict resolution. Meanwhile according to the Sutterfield, Friday-Stroud & Shivers-Blackwell (2007) has described a conflict process with stages such incompatibility or even potential opposition, intentions, behavior and outcomes and classifications of conflicts. Meanwhile for the Ng, Pena-Mora & Tamaki (2007) provide the resolutions steps including prevention, negotiation and also trust that will give effect on the conflict and negotiations process. Apart from that, according to Mosaic (2012) the conflict management process with steps such as acknowledgement, action, analyses and attitude. According to Stoner, Freeman & Gilbert (1998), the conflict management process involve persuasion, communication and also power. This is because the main reason for the conflict management process is by knowing the facts to always remain calm and listen to others.

From various literature, it can be identified that in general the first step for the conflict management process is to identify the conflict. This step will make the employees assess the first of the causes of conflict. For example, at this first stage of the conflict management process, the employees will get information regarding the issue of the conflict and try to judge the situation carefully to deal with the situation with consideration. The different conflict also can be learned at this stage as the law for it different. The second step is to analyze the conflict. This is to make it more understand regarding the situations and also prioritize and clarify the issues that need to be addressed. Besides that, it is to identify the root causes that contribute to the factors that cause the conflict. By doing that it is to identify all the information provided regarding the conflict and also further information needed so that can enhance all the problem-solving skills. The next step which is step number three is to identify alternative solutions. After knowing the point of the conflict, the next step is to identify how the situation can be changed. This can be made by discussions to resolve any conflict that happens. Listening skill also involved. List out possible solutions that can be taken to

resolve the conflict management process. After identifying the alternative solutions then the next step is by applying conflict resolutions techniques. By doing this try to encourage participants to discuss the situation in a good manner and don't use pressure to reach an agreement. Besides that, all the resolutions technique should be based on the right law to apply because it involves playing with the issue. Next step is choosing the best alternative. Regarding all the conflict resolution technique it should be able to express clearly and firmly. Recognize all the advantages and disadvantages of each conflict resolution so that all the way or method can be done according to the situation. By listening carefully to the different issue can solve the problem. For example, by using an active listening skill for both parties can help to solve the problem because it needs both cooperations. Focusing on listening will help to prevent the conversation from becoming heated and out of hand too.

Apart from that is implement the solution to the conflict. Implementation is the ways to solve a problem that requires careful attention to deal with the detail. Three basic stages involved which are planning and preparing to implement the solution, implementing and monitoring the action and the last one is reviewing and analyzing the success of the action. Firstly, planning and preparation is the key to success for the implementation. This is because the more important the problem or hard the action to solve than the more throughout your planning and preparations need to be ensured so that it will succeed. Few questions can be asked which involved constructing a plan of action, the action required, the resources required, management of the action, reviewing the plan, selecting, briefing and training those involved and many more. Then the last one is reviewing the impact. For a formal resolution process, it will include things like grievances or lawsuits. They usually require to submit the report or complaint in writing and also need to provide testimony or evidence. Besides that, the outcome of the written decision can appeal. There will be a deadline for all of this. But different for the informal resolution because it focuses on the outcomes rather than process. Rather than taking opposing sides, both parties work in a collaborative to achieve any mutual understanding. This will make everything easier because the manager does not have to find any solution for the conflict. So, with a proper conflict management process, the manager can know which way that they need to take for different cases. If it is not working as planned then they need to change the ways to get the proper a solution.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative method using a case study approach to understanding the conflict management process carried out in the Department of Labor. This research used purposive sampling to select the respondents for the study. Five respondents have been chosen to participate in this study. The respondents comprise of the officers working in the Department of Labor who are responsible for managing the conflict cases. The respondents were chosen based on their willingness and also their availability to participate in the interview. The respondents aged between 30 – 55 years old and have experience working in handling conflicts in the department. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview. Each interview session took about 30 minutes and was recorded using a voice recorder. Data collected were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the process involved in conflict management. Results from the data analysis were presented in the following section. The results were then used to develop a work process for conflict management to be used by the Department of Labor in Malaysia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presented the findings on the work process currently practised by officers that work at the Department of Labor in handling cases related to conflict management gained from the interview session in the qualitative research phase. To ensure the confidentiality of the respondents' information, all the respondents will be labelled as R1, R2, R3, R4 and R5.

During the interview sessions, the respondents were asked how they handled the cases involving conflict between employee and employer when the cases were assigned to them. They were also asked to explain in details all the processes that they undertook during the case management. In overall, this study found that different officer follows a different work process in handling the cases. Reason being there is no standard work process available in the department that they can follow. Some of the respondents mentioned that when they were not sure what they are supposed to do, they will ask their colleague or other senior officers to help them. They find it difficult to carry out their work due to the absence of a standard work process in the department.

Apart from that, this study also found that some officers follow a shorter work process than the other. Some steps in the conflict management process were skipped because they are not aware of it. This could lead to a negative outcome from the conflict management process and would not help the parties involve in resolving their conflict.

Based on the results, we classified the process into nine processes which are:

1) **Identify a conflict** - Conflict exists when there is the dissatisfaction between two parties, i.e. the employee or employer. Most of the cases started when an employee files a report towards his employer. The case will then be assigned to an officer who will be in-charged to resolve the conflict. Cases of the conflict include dismissal without just and failure to comply with statutory requirements by the employer.

2) **Analyze the conflict** - In this process, the officer will analyze the conflict based on the report that he received from the employee. The officer will analyze if the employee has a valid case against the employer by analyzing the employee's statement and evidence provided. This is also to ensure that the next step can be taken according to the law and avoid to waste of time.

3) **Brainstorming** - During this process, the officer in-charged is allowed to discuss the strategy of how the conflict could be resolved with his superiors and colleagues. The officer free to ask another officer what step they should take to resolve the conflict. The idea and opinion flow freely during this time. The brainstorming session allows some alternatives to be outlined and the best suitable strategy to resolve the conflict will be selected later on.

4) **Create alternative solutions** - During the brainstorming session, the officer usually will come out with a few alternative solutions that can be applied to resolve the conflict.

5) **Select a solution** - During this process, the officer in-charged called both parties involved in the conflict for a meeting and offer the alternative solutions that he has prepared earlier. This process is carried out to achieve a good decision together. This to avoid the conflict from continuing any longer or pending decisions to resolve the conflict. However, sometime during this time, both parties cannot agree on a decision to resolve the conflict. If both parties cannot agree to a decision, the case will proceed to a court trial. Trial or hearing is considered to be the last step for both parties.

6) **Implement the solution** - Most cases will cause some sort of dissatisfaction to the employee as well as the employer. An officer in-charged in the Department of Labor must act with fairness and cannot take any side. Thus, during this process, the officer will implement the solution as agreed by both parties in the previous stage.

7) **Review the impact** - According to the department's standard operating procedure, all reported cases should be resolved within 90 days from the date of the report was made. However, this is only applicable to all cases that could be resolved by the Department of Labor without going into trial. After the implementation of the selected solution, the officer-in-charge will review the case

until all necessary said action has been taken according to what has been agreed by both parties in the earlier discussion.

8) **Close case** - After all the necessary actions have been taken, the case will be closed. However, the documentation related to the case will be retained in the department for a record for at least three years.

All these components that were found in the conflict management process play an important role and related to each other for resolving the conflict. Based on the analysis that has been done during the interview sessions, this research summarizes the findings and present it as a conflict management process model as depicted in Figure 1 below.
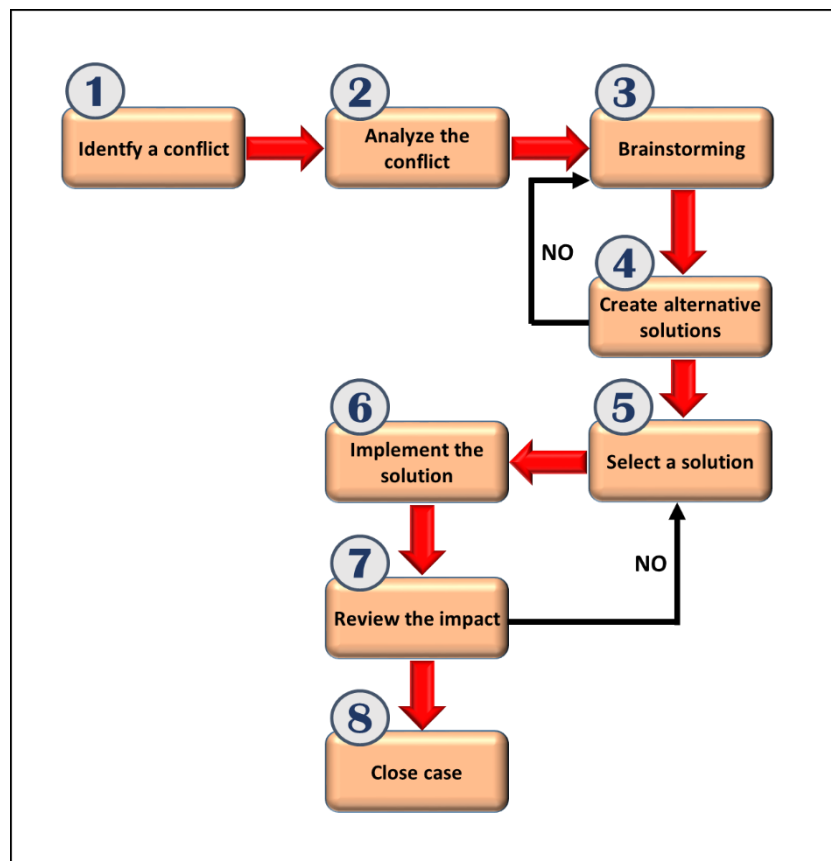

Figure 1: Conflict management process model

CONCLUSION

Managing conflict is one of the most important roles played by the Department of Labor. Its responsibility is to help conflicting parties which are the employee and the employer to help resolve their conflict and come out with a resolution that is agreeable by both parties. However, currently, there is no standard procedure that is used in the department. This could lead to the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the department in carrying out their duty. This research was carried out to explore the work process used for conflict management. It helps to contribute more on the knowledge regarding the conflict management process that could be implemented in a Department of Labor. The results of this research and the model developed could serve as a guideline to the officer-in-charge of managing any conflict in a Department of Labor. Apart from that, this guideline could also be used by

other organization in managing conflict in their organization. With the implementation of the guidelines, it was hope that organization can manage conflict more efficiently and effectively and subsequently help the parties involved in the conflict to gain the rights and have a solution which fairs to everybody.

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