

## Experiencing Task and Personal Conflict: Case Study of a University Faculty Member

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The present study deals with the case of a male assistant professor who experienced task and personal conflicts in a Pakistani public sector university. Semi-structured interview protocol was developed to conduct an interview with the participant in order to explore his experiences of conflicts in university. Results obtained through thematic analysis indicated that he experienced task conflict with the administrative system of the department. His promotion was delayed due to the mismanagement of the university administration. He also faced personal conflicts with senior colleagues who tended to be unprofessional by showing an uncooperative and discouraging attitude. The main themes of thematic analysis include: western universities as a model, teaching of non-approved course outline, casual attitude of clerk, diffusion of responsibility, less educated administrative staff, less vigilance of the head of department, politicizing of promotion system, no merit for promotion to higher ranks, rift with senior colleague over laboratory and non-conducive learning environment. In order to deal with such conflicts effectively, it is strongly recommended that Universities should organize a series of orientations about the different administrative system for the faculty members. The head of department may also play the role of a facilitator, guide and counsellor to the newly appointed faculty members. Co-workers may extend their co-operation and encouragement to newly appointed colleagues to help them adjust in their work environment. The study has important implications for university faculty, departmental heads and university administrators.

*Key words:* task conflict, personal conflicts, administrative system, orientation, higher education

Conflict occurrence is a natural and inevitable phenomenon of every organization. "Conflict is the perception of differences of interests among people" (Thompson, 1998, p.4). According to Roloff (1987), "organizational conflict occurs when members engage in activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network and members of other collectivities" (p. 496). In addition to the presence of incompatibilities, its threshold level should range from moderate to high in order to have the perception of a conflict (Baron, 1990). Educational institutions including universities entangle in it as well. Faculty members in universities do experience conflicts on a variety of matters. Sometimes they have different ideas for carrying out the task. For instance timetable making, course allocation, course contents or scheme of studies etc.

An important task for head of the departments and institutions is to manage the conflicts effectively. A well-managed conflict is constructive because it promotes teaching and research activities thereby leading to institutional development. However if the conflicts are poorly managed, the institution would fail to achieve its goals and objectives and they would also negatively affect one's health, life satisfaction, relationship commitment, morale of their employees and community values like justice (Thomas, 1992).

Conflicts can be broadly categorized into two types which include task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict occurs when group members perceive disagreement about the contents of decision and is also termed as substantive conflict (Eisenhardt,

Kahwajy, & Bourgeois, 1997; Jehn, 1997). For instance, conflict may occur when the head of department makes a team of faculty members who are from different cultural backgrounds, this grouping can result in diverse ideas, perspectives, observations, experiences and creative solutions. If task conflicts are managed effectively they lead to better outcomes in the form of work efficiency, increased productivity, low turnover, low absenteeism, and greater psychological well-being (Peterson & Lewin, 2000; Caudron, 1998). With reference to decision making, task conflict is associated with betterment in group decision quality (Fiol, 1994; Janssen, Van de Vliert, & Veenstra, 1999) and emotional acceptance of group decisions (Amason, 1996; Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995). Consequently the group members feel satisfied about their decisions and show commitment and identification with the group (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Greenberg & Folger, 1983).

At times conflicts occur due to personal liking and disliking towards the head, other colleagues, and subordinates. They revolve around friendships and emotional relationships. They are referred to as relationship conflict. It is a perception of interpersonal clash or incompatibility which is expressed in the form of hostility, annoyance and tension among group members (Jehn, 1995). It is also known as emotional (Jehn, 1997) or affective conflict (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). Such types of conflicts are quite detrimental for smooth functioning of organizations. Numerous studies have indicated that relationship conflict leads to negative outcomes which include poor decision quality and low commitment with group (Janssen et al., 1999; Jehn, 1995). It limits the critical thinking ability (Jehn & Mannix, 2001) and cognitive potential of group members (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1980). Group members concentrate more on maintaining their relationships and neglect the immediate solution of their group problems (Evan, 1965).

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Many studies have reported the co-occurrence of task and relationship conflict among work groups and both types of conflicts had significant moderate positive relationship between them (Janssen, et al., 1999; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Jehn, 1995). Researchers have mentioned three possible explanations for the co-occurrence of these two types of conflict. The first argument is related to attribution error made by the conflicting parties which occurs when they misinterpret the attitudes and comments of each other and perceive them as personal attacks (Jehn, 1997) or propaganda (Amason & Sapienza, 1997). This perception leads to inaccurate and incomplete information processing; thereby converting task conflict to relationship conflict. A second pertinent factor in this regard is the presence of mistrust among group members which may result in misinterpretations of the behaviours of conflicting groups (Mishra, 1996). Thirdly, the use of harsh language in any task conflict increases the probability that task conflict would take the form of relationship conflict (Pelled, 1996).

Most of the studies about conflict types cited above have used a quantitative approach and survey method. The present study aimed at filling in the gap in existing literature by exploring these conflict types by using qualitative approach and case study design.

## Research Question

What was your experience of workplace conflicts in a Pakistani university?

## Method

### Participant

The inclusion criteria for the selection of the participant was that they had experienced personal and task conflict within their university. Mr X is a male, middle aged Assistant Professor who was working in the natural science department of a public sector university in Pakistan for the last eight years. After qualifying intermediate examination from Pakistan, he went to Russia to complete his graduation, masters and then PhD. He stayed there for 15 years initially for education and then for work.

### Instrument

An Interview Protocol was developed through the consultations of the first and second author and experts in psychology. It consisted of 10 questions which were developed keeping in view the existing literature. The main question was to describe the experience of workplace conflict in a Pakistani university. The contents of peripheral questions were pertaining to the nature of conflict, sources of conflict, conflict management style, social support of colleagues, role of head of department, stress and psychological and work well being. A few sample questions are as follows: what type of conflicts have you experienced at the workplace? Describe the situation where some of your team members disagreed with your ideas? How did you manage conflicts? What were the outcomes of your conflict management style?

### Procedure

Informed consent was taken from the participant and the purpose of the study was explained. Semi-structured in-depth interview was

conducted to uncover task and relationship conflicts at work place. The duration of the interview was 90 minutes. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The confidentiality of the data was ensured at all stages of the analysis.

### Case formulation

#### *1<sup>st</sup> Conflict Scenario: Conflict with system of departmental administrative staff*

Mr X said, "My conflict is with system". He experienced this conflict while teaching an MPhil course outline which was not approved by related official bodies of the department and university. When the MPhil course was assigned to him, he recommended modifications in the course outline to the head of department. The head of department asked him to teach according to the modified course outline while the department would get an approval from the relevant official bodies (board of studies and board of faculty) of the department and university. Mr X modified the course outline and handed it over to the departmental clerk. The departmental clerk kept the file somewhere and forgot to add it in the agenda of board of studies. Consequently the modified course outline was not approved by the end of semester and it was not in the notice of the faculty member.

For examination purposes, he made one question paper. On the day of examination, a student from previous session who was repeating the course told Mr X that he could not attempt the paper because he had prepared for the examination in accordance with the old course outline. This was the students last chance to appear in the final exam of the concerned subject. The student wrote an application to the Head of the Institution. The Head of Institution called the course instructor and said, "*I am favouring the student because of your mistake*". Mr X expressed with distress that although he was considered a defaulter he was unaware of "*how that was my fault*". Being a newcomer in the Pakistani university system, he was unfamiliar with the protocol and procedures needed for obtaining final approval to bring about modifications in a course outline. The Head of Department asked, "*Who gave you the modified course outline?*" He named the departmental clerk. The Head of Department then said, "*You should have given a copy to me and then monitored the progress of the case.*" He also narrated his own experience of having worked in a foreign university and said, "*I have studied in a Russian state university where there was only one female manager who was highly qualified (PhD). She had brilliantly managed the records of 1000 students. In the Pakistani university, there are six clerical staff members but the quality of work is poor*". Keeping in view his experience of a foreign university, he asked the Head of Department, "*Why don't you appoint qualified clerical staff?*" Head of department replied, "*It becomes a matter of financial burden for university. Secondly, this system is prevailing in all universities of Pakistan.*" He reflected upon the administrative system and said, "*Clerks are kings in Pakistani organizations and all documents are letters for them. Expecting a clerk to realize the importance of a document is ridiculous as he does not have the ability.*" He expressed with regret that authorities have not even tried to bring about improvements to the system to avoid such mistakes in the future.

### Results

When academicians come back to Pakistan after completing their higher degrees from foreign universities, they find discrepancies in the educational and administrative system of local and foreign

universities. They constantly express the desire to bring about a change within the Pakistani university system. However, when the local university system does not change they get frustrated.

Thematic Analysis clarifies it as a task conflict. Both Head of Institution and Head of Department considered the faculty member as the defaulter. The Head of Institution said, *"I am favouring the student because of your mistake"*. The head of department said, *"You should have given a copy of modified course outline to me as well and then monitor follow up of that case"*. Both the faculty member and head of department were partly responsible for this mistake which became a conflict. Despite being unintentional, this event was an irresponsible act and indicated the gap in acquainting faculty members with the rules, regulations, policy matters and official procedures of Pakistani university system in which he was employed. Also, Mr X had not followed the complete protocol for submission of official documents. He did not exhibit the sensitivity towards cultural differences which exist in the local and foreign institutions.

Head of department was also responsible for this conflict. He very rightly suggested that the participant should have given him a copy of the modified course outline at a wrong time. It would have been better and appropriate to have given this suggestion in an earlier meeting. Secondly, it was negligence on his part not to have traced the status of the concerned document. The decision of the Head of Institution to favour the student was good and authoritative for student but authoritarian and non-empathic for the faculty member. Head of Institution should have marked the case to the departmental head to uncover the real source of this conflict so that proper guidance and training could be organized for faculty member.

The faculty member said, *"Although I was considered a defaulter, I did not know how that was my fault"*. He also commented, *"My conflict is with system. Neither Head of Institution nor head of department tried to improve the system so that the same mistakes are not repeated in the future"*. This comment depicts that the conflict management style of faculty member was interrogatory as he questioned the decision of Head of Institution that how was that my mistake. He also objected on appointment of less educated administrative staff which ultimate affects the quality of their official working.

It seems that no one tries to own the responsibility of their mistake in the Pakistani system. There is no trend of acknowledging one's weaknesses and act of negligence in Pakistani culture.

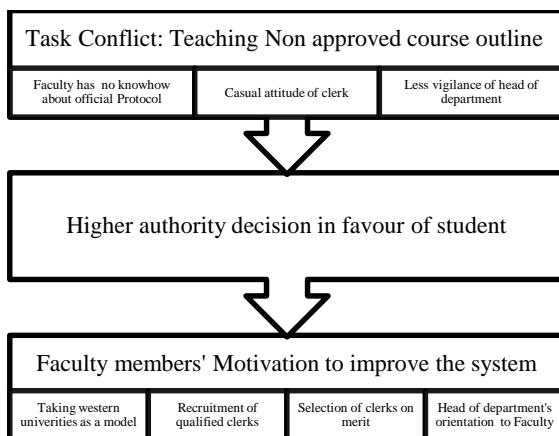


Figure 1 (A) Experiencing Task Conflict

Everyone tries to keep one's own position clean and clear by putting the blame other person.

### Recommendations

This case highlights the need to organize detailed orientations for all newly appointed faculty members regardless of their designation, previous work experience and qualification, to acquaint them about the various official matters and their processes of getting things done. The head of department can also depute a senior faculty member to guide newly appointed faculty members. For the participant, it would have been more appropriate to have taken the signature of the administrative staff member who had received the modified course outline on a copy of the document, along with the receiving of the document, as evidences that protocols were clear on his side. In this way Mr X would have been in a better position to defend himself and pinpoint the person responsible. Role responsibilities should be clearly defined from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy in order to deal with phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility and avoid role conflict. Clerical staff needs to be strictly monitored to discourage their casual attitude and habit of keeping the important documents pending. Their training about document processing and record keeping procedures can also make significant difference in the better functioning of the department. Head of department may improve upon his supervision by practicing guidance and counselling on regular basis.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Conflict Scenario: Delay in career growth

The participant mentioned that his career development remained stagnant for last 8 years. He joined the university as Assistant Professor and was still working as an Assistant Professor. He became Assistant Professor (TTS) two years ago. He applied for Associate Professor thrice. There was no interview for two times and for third time he was not called to appear in an interview. He further elaborated that hardworking people are not promoted in Pakistan. For promotion, one important criterion is relationship with higher authority. It is not qualification, work experience and expertise. The participant was ignorant of the fact that once a person chooses TTS as an Assistant Professor, he/she has to stay on this position for six years and then he/she can apply for a promotion. It seems that the participant was also unaware of the criterion for an Assistant professor and the terms and conditions of the Tenure Track Appointments (TTS).

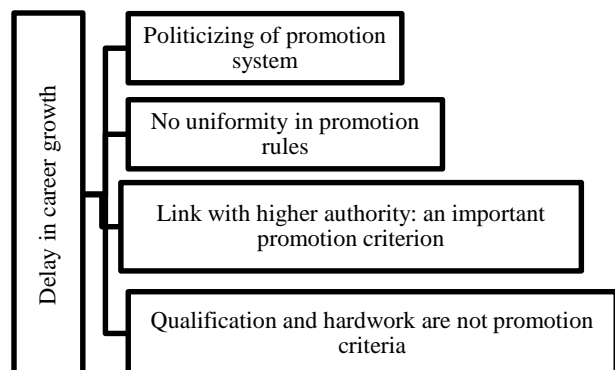


Figure 1 (B) Experiencing Task Conflict

### Results

Mr X has attributed his delay in career growth to mismanagement on behalf of the university administration. Seats for Associate Professor were advertised but interviews were not held. He has also highlighted a flaw that selection system for higher positions in universities is not based on merit and fair rules. When he failed to attain higher academic ranks and perceived that he may as well retire as an Assistant Professor he started experiencing feelings of despair rather than a professional identity.

### Recommendations

In order to attain academic excellence, universities need to carry out proper succession planning to hire and train competent faculty members for higher positions. Secondly universities need to advertise the number of seats for higher ranks like Associate Professor and Professor. They should increase the number the seats for higher ranks so that competent faculty should get an opportunity of maximize their career growth in the same institution. When faculty member's aspirations for higher goals are not met we can witness the phenomenon of job hopping occurring. In which individuals shift their jobs to post graduate colleges because the criteria to seek higher ranks is relatively simpler over there. The selection system for higher designations in universities would be based on merit.

### 3rd Conflict Scenario: Conflict with a senior colleague

In summer, head of department of the department and senior faculty members used to take their MPhil classes in air conditioned rooms or in Laboratories (lab) which were also air conditioned. However Mr X used to teach in a non-air conditioned room. One of his MPhil students pointed out that only his class is held in non-air conditioned room. So he thought of taking his class in the lab which was large and roomy making it possible to have lab work on one side and class on other side.

When Mr X sought for permission from a senior faculty member who was also a lab-In charge to take his MPhil class in Lab, he not only refused but also started reprimanding him. Mr X apologized but he did not listen. Then he went to head of department and told him the whole matter. In the meanwhile lab in-charge also came there. The head of department offered him to take class in his office. He did not accept it because university officials and many visitors keep visiting the head of department's office. Both the participant and the senior colleague did not talk to each other for several days. One day the senior colleague came to him and asked, "Why did you talk to the head of department directly?" Mr X answered that initially he tried to talk to him but he did not listen. Gradually they developed smooth working relations but he never offered Mr X to take his MPhil class in air conditioned room. Consequently students started avoiding this optional subject because they had to sit in hot environment.

This conflict was not stressful for Mr X but he perceived it as an unjust situation. At first glance, he could not understand the reason of this conflict. He had no personal clash with the senior faculty member. May be there are some faculty members who come from "Chaudary" background do not come out of it. They have lived privileged and flamboyant lifestyles and want to show their supremacy. The participant found it very difficult to handle such conflict. He tried to avoid the conflicting situations, as getting involved in a conflict was against his nature.

### Results

It was a personal conflict which took place between Mr X and a senior faculty member of his department. The senior faculty member did not allow Mr X to avail a resource which was the university property and not his own. He had shown an authoritarian attitude which was highly unprofessional by considering the institutional property as personal property. Whereas the apologetic gesture of Mr X reflects that he tried to manage the situation and reduce the hostility of his senior colleague. His conflict management style was accommodating. It might be because that some faculty members especially the senior ones have strong drive to dominate and rule others which might result in the form of this conflict. It satisfies their need of power and status. Mr X involved the head of department of the department to mediate in this situation who was generous enough to offer his office for the class to the participant but it was a non-practical and unrealistic offer. It is interesting to note that the chair did not confront the senior colleague rather he avoided him. Probably it might be a strategy to deal with inflexible and problematic co-workers. It might be the case that the chair had done so to avoid the same hostile response of the senior faculty member. By doing so, Mr X might have perceived the impression of favouring the senior.

### Recommendations

The head of department of the department may opt for a legal and fair approach in such type of conflicts. He should also encourage the senior colleagues to show caring attitude towards the junior ones and share the university property assigned to them. It would definitely enhance the element of respect and regard among juniors for their seniors. Moreover, improvements in university resources (air conditioner) and infra-structure can increase the morale of faculty members and learners.

### 4th Conflict Scenario: Taking part in university's election

Four years ago, university held elections for an official body. Mr X thought to be a contestant for that election. He informed the head of department who encouraged him to submit the documents. Then after a few days, another colleague who was very popular also submitted the documents for the same post in elections. The colleagues of Mr X took it seriously and started convincing him to withdraw his documents but he did not do so. Although Mr X did not win elections but his act of not withdrawing documents was considered as bad.

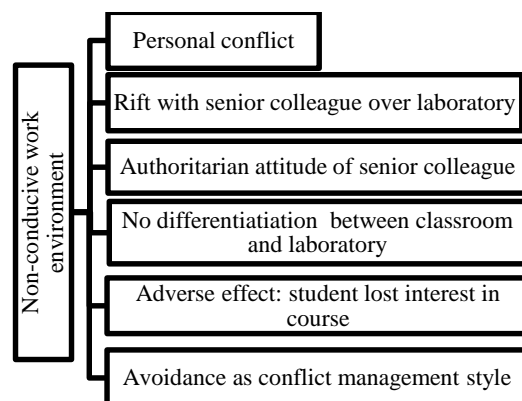
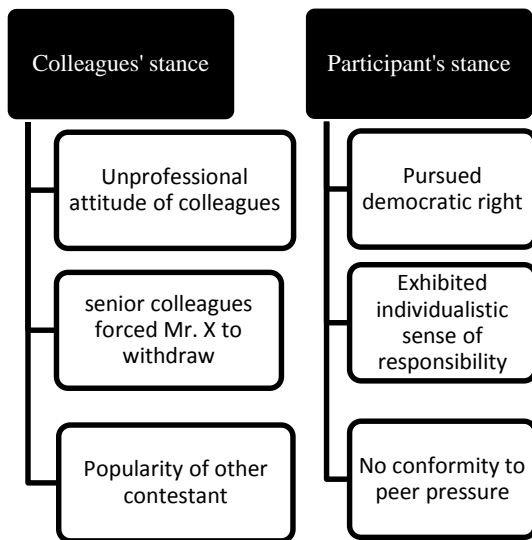


Figure 2 (A) Experiencing Personal Conflict

### Results

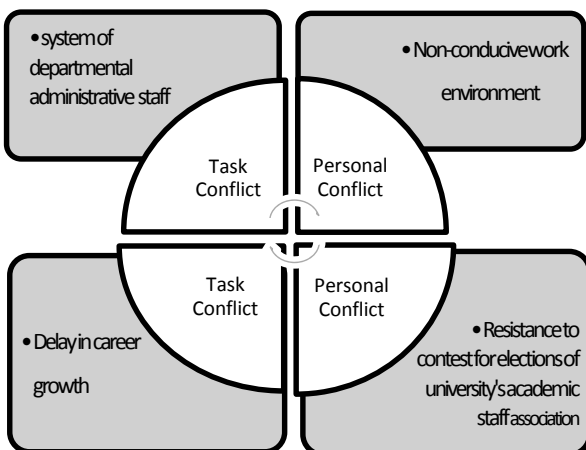
Mr X made healthy competition by taking part in university elections. He exhibited persistent attitude and pursued his democratic right when his co-workers forced him to withdraw papers from university elections of academic staff association. He did not conform to peer-pressure and retained his individualistic sense of identity. The attitude of co-workers was unprofessional because no-one has the right to stop anyone from competing for any event if he meets the eligibility criteria.



**Figure 2 (B) Experiencing Personal Conflict**

### Recommendations

It is recommended to encourage the faculty members to take initiative in different activities of the university by keeping in view their interests and abilities. It empowers them when they get together to talk about their concerns, share their ideas and express their frustrations. It also opens the lines of communication thereby fostering the personal and professional growth.



### Discussion

The nature of conflicts in universities is very dynamic and it changes from one type to another type (Jehn, & Mannix, 2001). Poorly managed task and relationship conflicts lead to dysfunctional outcomes both at personal as well as organizational level (Kurtzberg, 2000; Barsade, Ward, Turner, & Sonnenfeld, 2000; De Dreu & West, 2001). The findings of the present study are consistent with previous studies about task and relationship conflict (Amason, & Sapienza, 1997). Qualification, training and number of clerks in the department of a university was a task conflict but it was not perceived as an important issue to be presented and discussed with concerned authorities in administrative forums of university. Consequently the academic communication was delayed even in the presence of six clerks and this task conflict remained still due to its poor handling. Relationship conflicts are inherently bad and become worse when they occur due to poor handling of task conflicts (Simons, & Peterson, 2000). Colleague's misuse of authority over university's resources (laboratory space) was a relationship conflict. Similarly forcing someone to withdraw one's documents from elections of university's academic staff association is building a ground for relationship conflict. It not only destroyed the interpersonal relationships among colleagues but also made the work environment hostile. It is strongly recommended to handle both task and relationship conflicts in the light of university and administrative policies.

### Conclusion

The newly hired faculty member perceived his conflict with the university administration system. He also felt himself in a conflicting situation when a co-worker tried to misuse his senior position and demonstrated non-sharing, possessive and rude attitude towards him. He also experienced professional jealousy among few colleagues who discouraged him from taking initiative in a university activity. These conflicts had negative influence on his psychological and work well-being.

### Implications

This study will be of utmost importance for university administration system and it is expected that the findings of this study would assist them to realize the importance of well qualified and efficient administrative staff. Findings of the present study have great significance for head of departments of the department who can facilitate the newly hired faculty members by organizing professional orientations for their better adjustment in their work environment. It also highlights the importance of co-operation and encouragement of senior faculty members for their junior colleagues for good team work and achievement of departmental goals.

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