

Islamic perspectives on conflict management within project managed environments

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine Islamic perspectives on conflict management within project managed environments. Existing research does not reveal any study that examines empirically the Islamic viewpoint on conflict management in contemporary organisational contexts but does indicate that conflict in Islam is considered to be inevitable and a part of human nature, and, if managed properly, is positive and constructive. This paper aims to address this gap, by presenting an empirical analysis of Islamic models of conflict management. It is argued that the three Islamic models discussed, are partially and covertly in existence in environments not traditional to their own. Consequently, the paper finds that there is scope for investigating explicit applied aspects to these Islamic models. The paper concludes that existence of Islamic models for conflict management is visible and has potential for application by project managers without limitation.

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Keywords: Islam; Conflict; Project; Conflict management; Conflict resolution

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to expand research of Islamic perspectives on conflict management relevant to project managed environments, and to address questions pertaining to the potential of applying Islamic models for conflict management in functionally and demographically diverse work settings. The study appraises literature concerning conflict management in Islam and outlines three models. Existing research indicates that conflict in Islam is considered to be inevitable and a part of human nature, and, if managed properly, is a positive force, as it can enrich discussion, facilitate problem solving and encourage constructive debate (Abdalla, 2001; Ahmed, 2007; Al-Buraey, 2001; Khadra, 1990; Yousef, 2000). Western models, which tend to focus on formal (strategic) and informal (behavioral) mechanisms for conflict management, are also discussed.

The study further draws on collated survey data to evaluate the research question of whether there is possibility for project managers of non-Islamic orientation to apply Islamic models for conflict management.

2. Conflict and its management

Wall and Callister (1995) define conflict as “... a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party.” Ahmed (2007) states that conflict is “perceived difference between two or more parties resulting in mutual opposition.” Simplistically, conflict arises when one's own benefit or interest cannot be achieved simultaneously with another party's benefit or interest (Jones and Melcher, 1982). It is clear that conflict is inevitable as each party has its own history, character, gender, culture, values, beliefs, and behaviors which influence its actions and motivation. This diversity of perspectives, in contrast to leading to conflict between parties, could potentially enrich any discussion if managed prop-

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erly (Farmer and Roth, 1998). Gardiner and Simmons (1992) in discussing conflict in construction project management, define it as “any divergence of interests, objectives or priorities between individuals, groups, or organisations; or non-conformance to requirements of a task, activity or process.”

Aritzeta et al. (2005) underline three basic facets that can formulate conflict definition. The first facet is that conflict arises when parties involved in any argument perceive it as a conflict. Secondly, there is a degree of interdependence between the parties involved, which allows for mutual influence over one another. Finally, scarcity of resources, such as monetary, human, or prestige, are major reasons of conflict.

A rule of thumb is that the earlier one discovers conflict developing, the easier it is to resolve. In a project management context, to establish a constructive conflict culture, project managers need to concede that conflict is inevitable. Thus, conflict management has a great impact on project success if precautionary steps are taken to ensure constructive outcomes to the conflict. Manifesting the bright side of conflict will encourage employees to face conflicts and resolve them in a managed way. This, in turn will raise communication, efficiency, increase commitment and nurture loyalty during the project (Farmer and Roth, 1998; Jameson, 1999; Thamhain and Wilemon, 1975). A further example in the context of project managed environments, from a study by Tjosvold and Su (2006) is that of team members who share a common goal, but have conflicting views about the process of achieving them. Such conflict, if seen positively and properly managed can be useful and constructive.

The expression *Conflict Management Strategy* is used to demonstrate any action used by a disputant or third party to attempt to handle or resolve a conflict, which may include formal mechanisms for managing conflict such as negotiation, arbitration, or mediation (Jameson, 1999). According to Rahim (2002) such strategies can be considered as conflict resolution strategies. On the other hand, informal mechanisms are described by most scholars in the field of conflict management strategies and techniques as the five basic behavior or styles to deal with conflict, namely: Avoiding, Accommodating, Forcing, Collaborating, and Compromising. Commonly conflict style refers to particular behavioral practices that individuals prefer to utilize when faced with a situation of conflict. Studies indicate that, inherently the adopted style reflects how the individual's concern is directed towards his needs or the needs of others on a scale of two: high and low (Brown, 1992; Farmer and Roth, 1998; Gross and Guerrero, 2000; Jameson, 1999; Jones and Melcher, 1982; Moberg, 2001; Rahim et al., 1999; Wall and Callister, 1995).

Rahim (2002) provides a sophisticated interpretation to distinguish between ‘conflict resolution’ and ‘conflict management’. He argues that conflict resolution involves reduction, elimination, or termination of conflict. In other words, conflict resolution perceives conflict as a destructive

phenomenon. On the other hand, conflict management implies designing effective strategies to reduce the destructive facet of conflict and enhance constructive roles of conflict to improve learning and effectiveness in organisations.

Among the factors that determine the complexity of managing a conflict are the source, size, number of individuals or groups involved, and the type of conflict (Farmer and Roth, 1998; Jameson, 1999; Jones and Melcher, 1982). Furthermore, literature is available which covers issues of conflict between project team members (Porter and Lilly, 1996), project clients and contractors (Thamhain and Wilemon, 1975) and conflicts in managing stakeholders (Pinto, 2000).

A general consensus from researchers indicates that what triggers conflict may be an internal or external change, cause or result of communication, emotions, values, organisation structure, workgroups diversity or personal experience (Desivilya and Yagil, 2005; Farmer and Roth, 1998; Fine et al., 1990; Jameson, 1999; Jones and Deckro, 1993; Jones and Melcher, 1982; Tjosvold and Su, 2006; Wall and Callister, 1995). These scholars and others, present classifications for conflict within projects as: *Interpersonal*, *Intergroup*, *Inter-organisational*, and *International*. *Interpersonal* conflict is typified as the conflict within the person and it takes the forms of role conflict between colleagues when their values, beliefs, or benefits contradict. Or it could arise when the person has multiple roles and the requirements of the roles cannot be met concurrently.

Intergroup conflict arises when the interests or tasks of multiple groups oppose. Such conflict is widespread in construction project management as a result of scarcity of resources, cost overrun, scope change, administrative procedures, schedules, technical resources, and personnel (Thamhain and Wilemon, 1975). *Inter-organisational* conflict arises between organisations due to high market competition. In project management, inter-organisational conflict is currently common between contractors and clients as a result of various economic factors including, but not limited to, inflation and material price fluctuation, particularly in long term mega-projects. *International* conflict arises between nations and it is commonly visible within programme management and is caused by a multitude of factors.

3. The Islamic perspective on conflict management

The Islamic approach to conflict management is derived from the major principles and values of Islam as a religion, such as justice (Randeree, 2008), equality, freedom, and affirmative critical and goal oriented thinking (Abdalla, 2001; Al-Buraey, 2001; Khadra, 1990; Yousef, 2000). Leadership has a vital impact on effective conflict management from an Islamic viewpoint. In the case of the project manager, the leadership role includes resolving conflict (Khadra, 1990; Randeree and Chaudhry, 2007). The nature of Islam as an adaptive method of thinking allows individuals

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