Conflicts Management in Constructions Projects

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Abstract
Conflicts are inevitable within organisations and construction projects are not excepted. The large number of persons involved and the interdependent relations sometimes inevitably result in conflicts.

There are very different and sometimes hidden reasons of the conflicts.

Nevertheless, conflicts may represent a chance in running the project, as they contribute both to new developments and to clarifying problems and positions of the team personnel. Besides, it’s the project leading team that is in charge with surveying conflicts to try to find the best solutions in the early phase of the conflict.

The project manager must induce the team to create an appropriate working climate characterized by no tensions within.

In order to practice a performing conflicts management, the project manager must have social competency and communication skills. The quality of the project outcomes, the degree of personnel involvement and motivation highly depend both on means of communication and level of information inside the team.

This work paper highlights the main types of conflicts which develop in construction projects and the most important strategies for settlement.

Key words: conflicts, project team, manager, strategy, organization

JEL Classification: O15, J53

1. Causes of conflicts
The specific elements these projects have – complexity, interdisciplinary, newness – as well the activity in itself presuppose a correlation of all the activities
and decisions within the project. The number of individuals working on such a project as well as the relations between them generates conflicts.

The conflicts are, within certain limits normal and necessary in a project and, they measure the quality of work in a project and help finding new solutions, new organizational ways clarify the problematic aspects and finally create a good working environment.

The lack of conflicts, which means to avoid direct confrontation, may be a clue for the work team to postpone solving such conflicts. Thus, the duty of the management of the team involved in the project is to control conflicts and to try to solve them as they appear.

The causes that generate conflicts are various and sometimes hidden. The objective causes mingle with individual judgement and feelings.

Among the main causes that generate conflicts in this field are:
- the ambiguities in the contractual documents;
- the attitude of the contractors and beneficiaries;
- different attitudes towards what is right in a private enterprise contract.

The ambiguities in the private enterprise contracts and the way they are interpreted represent one of the most frequent cause that generates conflicts.

The competition to win action is sometimes very hard and the parties are very aggressive.

The attitude of the contracting parties and beneficiaries is a source of conflicts. The activity in constructions is characterized by a high degree of risk and implies fast decisions concerning the expenses, coordination of the subcontracting parties with different levels of competence and the setting up of a viable relation between the supplier and the beneficiary. That is why this environment attracts participants with an aggressive attitude and highly competitive.

The attitudes are different when it comes to what is right in a private enterprise contract.

2. Types of conflicts

Apparently, setting up a project team does not seem to be very problematic.

Due to the general opinion, everything depends on the qualification of the individuals working in a team. But the diversity that exists among project teams makes things more complicated. They have their own character, limited in time, and their target is unique and specific due to the project.

A careful attention should be paid to solving the conflicts within the team. The individuals do not reach immediately an agreement because they have different attitudes and expectations. Usually this type of conflict is generated by the fact that each member of the team wants the best for the team.

The conflicts may appear:
- within the project team;
- between the project team and the managers of different departments within the company;
- between the teams of different projects;
- between the team and high level management;
- between the team and the beneficiary, suppliers or consultants, etc.

Taking into consideration the order the conflicts appear, we can talk about the following types of conflicts:
- conflicts related to non-compliance with the dead lines;
- priority conflicts;
- conflicts related to ensuring the necessary personnel;
- conflicts related to technical factors;
- conflicts related to personnel management;
- conflicts generated by different types of personality;
- conflicts related to expenses.

The sources of conflicts can weight differently, depending on the stage the project is in. Where the project is at organizational stage, the conflicts that may appear are related to project management and setting the priorities.

In the last stage of the project there are conflicts related to deadlines and priorities, while during the project, the conflicts generated by technical aspects are more frequent.

The conflicts are not easy to manage, but it is a necessity to solve them. The most important tool to deal with conflicts is communication. The way people communicate and the way the involved personnel is informed, influences the quality of the results and the motivation.

3. Strategies regarding conflicts management.

In practice, there are mentioned several strategies that help solving the conflicts in this field.

In order to solve a conflict we must acknowledge its existence. The specialists are talking about the following stages:
- to define the problem, talking into consideration the requests the parties involved have and not the possible solutions;
- to select the best solution that meets the needs of the parties involved in a conflict and to verify the order of the possible measures;
- to name the person, the time and the deadline to implement the necessary measures;
- to implement the measures;
- to evaluate the effectiveness of the solution.

There is no general strategy to solve a conflict. Each type of conflict has its solution. Kenneth Thomas identified five possible strategies that can be used to solve a conflict:

a) Competitive approach;

b) Collaborative approach;

c) To compromise;
Kenneth Thomas also established the circumstances each strategy can be used.

a) Competitive approach. This strategy gives priority to the objectives, facts or procedures, because the conflict parties act in order to reach their own aims, using rather often authoritative structures. Thus, some specialists think this strategy is “power oriented”, because they use any type of authority to obtain a fit position.

This approach can be used in the following situation:
- when it is recommended a rapid and decisive intervention;
- when it concerns the individuals that have a passive attitude;
- when we need to adopt some unpopular measures in order to solve important problems;
- when we need to solve some vital problems for the welfare of the company and the next measure to be implemented is definitely the right one.

b) Collaborative approach. This strategy is meant to maintain the interpersonal relations between parties and to make sure the objectives are met. This approach takes into consideration the fact that the individuals do not act only in their own interest but also considering the other party. In other words, the parties agree to communicate in order to solve the conflict.

This strategy can be used:
- when the main objective is to learn and get experience;
- when we are looking for solutions to the problems that cannot be solved by compromising;
- when we need to develop a general strategy when the parties have different opinions;
- when the feelings interfered with the pre-established human relations;
- when we want to raise the commitment of the parties by consensus.

c) To compromise. Compromise means to analyse the conflicts and to reach an agreement that fits both parties. This strategy aims to find a solution that satisfies both parties.

We can use this strategy:
- when the objectives are important but do not justify the gaps created by adopting severe measures;
- when the parties in the conflicts have equal power to negotiate;
- when we want to make a temporary agreement concerning a very complex problem;
- when we cannot use the competitive strategy or the collaborative one.

d) To adapt. The parties involved in a conflict do not act in order to impose their own point of view but to meet the other individual’s needs. It implies to maintain the inter-personal relations without taking into consideration the personal objectives of the parties.

This strategy can be used:
- when we want stability;
- when one of the parties committed a mistake in order to obtain position to continue negotiating;
- when the other party considers the problem to be more important than it is – to maintain collaboration;
- when we want be credible towards third parties;
- when we want our employees to learn from mistakes.

e) To avoid. Although the parties acknowledge the existence of a conflict, they do not want to confront themselves. Thus, the problems are postponed, but in time they become more and more serious.

This strategy can be used:
- when the problem is less important;
- when the requirements of a party cannot be met;
- when the parties have to re – analyse more objectively the problem;
- when gathering and analysing information is more important than taking a immediate decision;
- when there are other persons that can solve more effectively the conflict.

When solving a conflict, we have to consider everybody’s best interests and we have to be sure that this is the best solution for them. There is no need to impose a solution not even when we are convinced that this solution fits everybody.

That is why conflicts management is very important in a project.

4. The manager’s role in solving the conflicts. The manager of a project should communicate with all the persons involved and try together with the team of the persons involved and try together with the team to find a solution. He has to make sure the conflict ends as soon as possible in order to avoid a worse situation. The discussions will be strictly between those involved, without third parties. The manager is not allowed to have a party that wins and one that is defeated. All the parties should have a positive feeling when the conflict ends and the results must be acceptable and constructive.

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