INTERDEPENDENT CONFLICT: AN HRM PERSPECTIVE ON STAFF-LINE DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

Line and Staff functions are two inevitable and complimenting aspects of an organization. The conflict between Staff and Line functions has always been a concern for Human Resource (HR) managers. HR practitioners and researchers have always struggled to formulate a common policy for Staff and Line function, which have different orientation from each other. The purpose of this research note is to throw light into this management problem and develop a conceptual understanding of the same. Definitions of the constructs explained in the study and detailed explanation of the management problem are provided. The manifestation of the problem is elucidated in practical as well as conceptual terms. The latter part of this research note discusses the impact this conflict can have on the performance of organization. The role of middle managers in organizations is also discussed. The final section of this note emphasizes on the role of leadership in mitigating the effect of this conflict. Appropriate recommendations are also made on need to assimilate suitable HR polices into the organization.

Keywords: Staff-Line Conflict; Leadership; Middle Managers; Human Resource Policies

INTRODUCTION

Transaction cost perspective states that organizations are formed or organization exists to reduce transaction cost by taking advantage of the complementary nature of various tasks in the market. This explains why groups are formed or why humans tend to socialize. In the context of today’s organization and in particular with business firms, the complementary nature has expanded beyond task. To perform tasks, skills and abilities are required and hence skills, abilities and competencies need to be complementary. To utilize the skills and abilities the right kind of behavior is required. Like the diversity in skills and tasks, behaviors and emotions are also diverse and unique. But can an organization survive with diverse behavior? The utopian situation would be complementary skills and uniform behavior. People in every organization take up different roles and handle different responsibilities like line manager, staff specialist, consultant etc. Here, the possibility of uniform behavior becomes bleak. Behavior is influenced by the job type and environment. Job type cannot be uniform but work environment can be uniform and impartial. This is achieved through common vision, policies and practices. For decades, practitioners and researchers were equally baffled and concerned on how such common policies can guide polar orientations like line managers and staff members.

Theoretical Background

Human Resource management (HRM) is a philosophy guided by long term policies and practices. Every organization has a vision and mission. Vision is where an organization want to reach in the future and mission is what the organization wishes to do to reach that future. Many times these are even known as goals or objectives, where a goal is the larger ambition and objective is the immediate result that can be achieved. These targets are too far-fetched and difficult to operationalize. Deduced from these goals are the departmental or business unit goals that can be operationalized. Achieving
such micro goals require a stable and sustainable method and orientation. What brings-in such orientation is the policy that is envisaged by each organization and its individual departments or business units. A policy is a principle of action or a protocol that guides the decisions in the larger interest of the organization. Human Resource (HR) policies are aimed at leveraging the potential of the human capital for achieving the goals of the organization without any discomfort or discontent. The purpose of a policy is to bring in standards that can be consistently enforced to bring in parity, accountability and uniform code of conduct.

Line managers, as explained by Melville Dalton (1950) are the managers who are directly responsible for the productivity and profit. Productivity and profit is an outcome of a satisfactory or an exceedingly well performance. It is quite natural that the orientation of the people who oversee the productivity and profit, are highly performance oriented. There was a time when most organization did not have a dedicated HR department and most of the employee centric decisions were taken by the managers responsible for performance measures. But later personnel department was born and that evolved into full-fledged HR departments. HR departments typically, take all the decisions related to employees and formulate the HR policies. To what extent would it be favorable and advisable to involve or hand over the right and responsibilities concerning employee decisions to the line managers? Answering this should require a better understanding of line management practices.

Line managers are highly performance oriented and performance in typical terms is tangible and quantified results. Hence the focus of the line managers are more on achieving the results rather than achieving the same results through people (McGovern, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles, & Truss, 1997). This infers that a line manager would be more focused on the result rather than the development of people in the process of achieving those results. A clear deviation from the basic orientation of HRM which focus more and at times only on the aspect of developing the people resources. Another inference that can be drawn from the strong result focus of line managers is the time frame that is considered adequate for measuring the result. With fierce competition and dynamic customer preferences, the performance goals are mostly measured and evaluated in shorter time intervals and line managers are professionally trained and tuned to view and work in such short time frames. Human resource management aims at delivering result through people by motivating and inducing organizationally desirable behavior in employees, both of which invariably requires a longer gestation period. Line managers may find it very difficult to bring into focus such longer time frames into their work culture.

These arguments may tend to conclude that line managers and HR policies are better off, if kept at a safe distance from each other. But it will be premature and foolish to ignore the leadership capabilities and the impact such capabilities can have on the employees. Like HR policies and practices, leadership behavior of management also influences the employees. A good leadership behavior not only directs the employees in the right direction but also induces employee behaviors like commitment and compliance. According to Purcell & Hutchinson (2007), the effect of good HR policies can be negated by improper or inadequate leadership behavior and vice versa. The relationship between line manager leadership and HR policies are interdependent, interactive and dynamic. The effectiveness of HR policies and line manager activity has a symbiotic nature, leaving us with no choice but not to keep them at safe distance. This evidence does not answer the question of to what extent the line managers should be associated with formulation of HR policies and what should be the nature of interaction and interdependence of HR policies and line managers.

**OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the paper are:

1. To elucidate the management problem of staff-line conflict.
2. To develop a conceptual understanding of staff-line conflict.
3. To discuss the impact of staff-line conflict on performance.
4. To discuss the role and importance of leadership and middle managers in mitigating this conflict.

**Staff Members and Conflict with Line Managers**

Melville Dalton (1950) defined the staff organization or staff members as the vertical grouping in an organization that doesn’t have authority over production or profit and instead plays an advisory and research role. Staff members were even called as specialists as they brought in specialized knowledge for specific problem areas that can help the line managers achieve higher efficiency and productivity. To be precise line managers have authority and staff members have specific knowledge required for achieving the goals. This very nature of classification and its definition points towards an impending conflict born out of the wrong assumption that a) staff members are motivated to work without full authority over their actions and contributions and b) line managers are happy to subscribe to the advice that staff members give. In most scenarios, the reality is just the opposite. Much effort and funds have flown to understand and control this staff-line conflict. Despite such efforts, the root cause of this conflict and its remedial measure still remain elusive to corporates.

Staff-Line conflict is born out of inconsistencies between staff specialist and line managers. These inconsistencies arise from many factors like differing perceptions of reality, differing perceptions of interdependence, disparity between authority and contribution to goals and absence of shared goals and values (Thompson, 1961). The reality in any organization is that line managers have to lead and staff specialist need to facilitate and support. This reality is easily understood by both line and staff but not so easily acknowledged. Such an acceptance issues arises due to the obfuscation resulting from the intense desire of both staff and line members to take credit for the success. Both staff and line consider their contribution to be necessary and sufficient for the success of the organization. What they forget is the interdependent nature of their expertise and experience possessed by staff and line respectively. Adding to the wrong perception of reality is the differing perception of interdependence, augmenting the conflict. Line members think that staff members require their support and direction to perform and contribute to the long term goals. But when it comes to taking support and expertise from staff, line managers are skeptical and egoistic. Similarly the staff members assume that they are being hired due to the lack of expertise and knowledge that line managers require. This sense of irreplaceability and inevitability blinds them from taking direction from line managers. The only way forward is that experience should shed ego and expertise should shed complacency. Such understanding and interdependence can lead to shared values and goals being created and pursued, leading to reduction in conflict.

Is conflict always bad or good? Conflict needs to be evaluated with respect to the effectiveness and appropriateness needs to be ascertained under the light of the organization philosophy (Pondy, 1967). Taken as it is, conflict seems to be detrimental and is viewed as counter-productive to organization performance. But many organizations, which follows high focus on results and innovation, accepts a limited conflict as a method of intellectual stimulation and professional motivation. Conflict, in an impersonal manner is thought provoking and inspiring, to achieve better results and improve upon the current methods of working. Even then, how to control conflict and what level of conflict is permissible is unknown. Walton & Dutton (1969) proposed that since top management engages with both line managers and staff specialists to spy on each other, top management itself should come up with strategies that can mitigate the self-perpetuating tendencies of conflict like, self-reinforcing, regenerative and reciprocal approaches. A third party involvement helps in creating a common shared culture that can reduce the incidences of conflict. Another bright side of a conflict between two units is the development of intra unit cohesion, provided we assume staff specialist work as one unit and line manager work as another unit.

**DISCUSSION**

The dynamics of staff and line has immense impact on the future success of the organization. Since HR policies are made to create a fair and conducive environment in the organization, the very nature
and content of HR policies vary according to the level and severity of staff-line conflict. Various dimensions can be assigned to this dynamism and its influence on HR policies. The most common of these is the age factor that plays, owing to the fact that most line managers are far more experienced and aged than most of the staff specialists. This creates friction and it influences the HR policies such that line managers would want a more fixed and bureaucratic policies to be formed and while the younger staff specialists would wish for more flexible policies. Secondly, it is a common sight that staff members tend to please the line managers for promotion, transfer or other benefits. Such acts and measures give a wrong sense of cohesiveness and the HR policies that are made on the premise of such work culture may well tend to undermine the importance of a latent conflict. This may lead to a situation where those HR policies are ineffective. Thirdly, line managers carry a misplaced threat from the staff specialists and it can induce more hostility to the work atmosphere. HR policies that are made to even out such hostilities may not address the root cause and hence the effectiveness of such policies remain below expectation. Finally, the unity of command or single authority that flows down may not exist as power struggle between line and staff keeps happening. Such distributed decision making powers can delay and at times deny a good HR policy for the organization as it may try to accommodate every view and may fail to take a final stand.

In a typical HRM organization, all the functions except production, sales and marketing can be considered staff functions. Human resources, finance, management information services etc belong to the category of staff specialist. These staff members do have a limited authority over their work. But when it comes to responsibility of failures or short comings, it is the line manager who is held primary accountable. Such mismatch of authority and accountability creates disgruntlement among the rising line managers in middle management. Evidence from recent research has proved that Line managers have been entrusted with HR responsibilities for various reasons (Renwick, 2000). The benefits aimed are local management accountability, faster decision making, locally sensitive policies and cost reduction. Line managers have executed the HR responsibilities to their best efforts, but consistency lacked as they weren’t trained properly or their first priority was in some other task. Another issue while line managers handle the HR activities are that, in addition to the conflict of authority a conflict on the method might also prop up, owing to the diverging orientation of the line and staff. The dominating view is that the devolution of HR activities to Line managers is good but in a limited manner, so that HR activities get consistency, priority, expertise and local sensitivity. In such a limited interaction arrangement between HR and line, the HR policy content, method and decision is affected. The main victim of such confusion will be the middle managers who lie between both line and staff. Middle level managers are more interested in executing faster, achieving greater goals and climbing the professional ladder higher. This faster, greater and higher orientation requires a flexible work environment and conducive policies, both of which gets affected by the tussle between HR and line. An ideal way will be to make line managers accountable for HR policies but the responsibility of creating and ideal policy should lie with the staff specialist and middle managers who are more affected by such policies. Middle managers need to take up ownership of their contribution to forming HR policies and also needs to drive the policies on the ground. Line managers can give direction and HR or staff specialist can facilitate. Partnership working should be the theme of such progressive changes in the organization.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

HR policies are essential for organization and each organization has its own peculiar nature of line-staff conflict. Participative and collaborative nature of formulating and executing the policies can help organization mitigate many shortcomings and in turn prevent the conflict from reaching higher levels or severity. Despite all such efforts it should be noted that such conflicts cannot be avoided completely. Systematic and effective HR practices should be assimilated in organizational life and the top management should champion the cause for it(Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). In spite of being criticized as a luxury, HR and its functions holds the key to binding and organization together and leveraging on its strengths. Line managers, staff specialists and middle managers cannot escape from each other or work in isolation and what is required is robust and all-encompassing HR policies and
practices. When the need is inevitable, interdependence is evident and consequence is invigorating, the only way forward is collaborative commitment to the cause of Human resource policies and practices by all stakeholders.

REFERENCES