

# Perception of conflicts in the organization by employees

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## Abstract

Conflicts within organizations are normal. Where people work together, conflict situations can always happen. People are distinguished by their behavior, approach to life, values, religion or culture in which they grew up. The way they perceive conflict situations can vary according to age or gender. Thus, the aim of this article is to determine how employees perceive the conflicts that arise within the organization and how their approach varies according to age and gender. In order to achieve the aim, a literature review and survey was conducted among 120 employees of different companies.

## Keywords

conflict, conflicts management, managing of employees

## Introduction

The subject of the research carried out within the framework of this article is the issue of the attitude of employees to conflicts within the organization. The main objective of the research is to examine how employees perceive conflicts within the organization. The issue seems particularly important because there is no a lot of research about how age and gender influence how a person perceives conflict. Organizations need to tailor their senior management approach to each individual employee. According to the division where young people see conflict as a potential and older people as a problem, managers should pay attention to and adapt solutions to

people and the conflict itself. Conflicts arise not only in everyday life but also at work. It is important that not only management itself understands that the approach to conflicts is different from the person itself, but also employees should understand that not everyone is the same. Conflicts between people of the same age can be completely different from those between young and old. Therefore, it is important that each side understands that it is not possible to measure all of them by its own measure and that, in order for conflict to have a positive effect, the way of conflict resolution should be adequate for both sides.

## 1. The concept of conflicts

The term conflict comes from Latin – *conflictus*, which mean simply clash [Kaczmarek, 2016]. Conflict is a phenomenon that does not only occur in private life, but also appears at work. However, depending on the place of occurrence, it is understood and interpreted in a completely different way. In the literature there are different definitions of conflict. Conflict is described as a variety of hassles, differences of views, sentences or positions. In most cases, the conflict that arises causes a desire for change, imposes some kind of activity [Penc, 2011]. From an organizational perspective, conflict is the result of disagreement among company departments, working groups or employees themselves. There is a definition that says that a conflict is a dispute between two or more members or groups that occurs in the case of division of labor or resources [Kaczmarek, 2016]. In sociology conflict is understood as a disagreement on interest of the groups or basic values [Bylok, Robak, 2009]. The Table 1 shows other different definitions of conflict.

**Tab. 1.** Definitions of conflict

Author	Content of the definition
S. P. Robbins	Conflict is a process, in which party A begin rational effort which is direct to foil the aspirations of party B, by blocking activities or the accomplishment of goals.
R. Dahrendorf	Conflict is all symptoms of disputes, competition, tension between two or more parties.
L. Coser	Conflict is a struggle between people with different values, or it is a struggle for access to power, status or resources, whose aspiration is not only to achieve value, but also to eliminate, neutralize or destroy the enemy.
L. Kriesberg	Conflict is a situation where two or more parties are certain that their objectives cannot coexist.
J. Galtung	Conflict is a result of attitudes, postures and variances. This is three-elemented construct. Conflict is recognized by people’s behaviour, but the postures and beliefs are the origin of it.

A. Pocztowski	Conflict is a social situation when the dichotomy between postures or values of individuals or groups in organization occurs and as the result, people act in specific way.
A. Potocki	Conflict is a fight in which counteracting or pursuit in accomplishment of power or access to resources is the aim. It is a state of disharmony of aims between groups, in which one of them are received what they want, but the other cannot have what they want. Conflict appears as a competition, disputes, tensions or open social confrontations.
U. Gros	Conflict is a misapprehension as to aims and appropriations for achievement or when emotional dis grace are the source of confrontation between groups and individuals.
J. Moczydłowska	Conflict is a dispute as the result of need to division of the resources or as the result of the fact that one party belief, that the other party is blocking important values, goals and activities for her.

Source: Kmiotek K., Piecuch T. (2012), *Zachowania organizacyjne. Teoria i przykłady*, Difin, Warszawa, p. 174.

## 2. Traditional and modern approach to conflicts management

There is a dispute as to the essence of the conflict. One part of scholars think, that conflict shows only problems in the group and everyone should avoid them. This approach is called traditional approach. Traditional view of the conflict treat conflict as something bad, negative, unnecessary and even something which can harm the organization [Bylok, Robak, 2009]. This approach shows the impact of the mechanistic paradigm, assuming that the organizational system is an instrument or tool used only to achieve a specific goal [Sikorski, 2013]. To strengthen the negative impression of the conflict, people use terms such as destruction and violence interchangeably with it [Robbins, 2014]. In traditional approach, conflict is a result of wrong communication between people, lack of trust and simplicity in relations with others [Bylok, Robak, 2009]. This negative situation, which occurs in organization, can also be a consequence of management shortcomings [Kaczmarek, 2016]. In traditional approach conflict is something that makes group unsettled, block achievement of goals and makes communication more complicated [Bańka, 2009]. The organization was comparable as a faultless machine, in which everything works well together. However, according to the classics of a scientific organization, a conflict is a sand that is thrown into the perfect machine that is an organization [Sikorski, 2013].

The behavioral approach is characterized by the perception of conflict as something natural. Something that is present in every organization and in every social group [Potocki, 2005]. According to the representatives of this approach, conflict is

inevitable, so it should simply be accepted and solved [Bylok, Robak, 2009]. In this case, the attitude to conflicts is unclear. On the one hand, the conflict is destructive, but on the other hand, it can create new interpersonal relationships, which will become necessary for the whole organization [Sikorski, 2013].

The current approach to conflict, the interactive view, encourages to conflicts [Robbins, 2014]. The motivation for this approach is that a group that is characterized by harmony and tranquility is not considered to have the necessary changes and innovations [Bylok, Robak, 2009]. A manager's ability to stimulate conflict is just as necessary as resolving it. Maintaining a conflict of a certain intensity is a desirable factor for the development and survival of the organization [Sikorski, 2013]. The mission of managers is to supervise conflict in such a way that it does not become destructive [Bylok, Robak, 2009]. It is very important to be readiness to compromise [Moczydłowska, Leszczewska, 2018]. Table 2 shows main differences between traditional and modern approach to conflicts.

**Tab. 2.** Traditional and modern approach to conflicts

<b>Traditional approach</b>	<b>Modern approach</b>
Conflict is unnecessary and harmful	Conflict is inevitable
Conflict can be avoided	Conflict can be manager in such way, that minimise its harmful aspects and maximise positive one
Conflicts arise as the result of mistakes of managers in design and management of organizations or under the influence of people who like conflicts	Conflict arise as the results of many reasons, including wrong structure of organization and different management's perception of organization aims and tasks
Conflict preclude achievement by the organization of optima efficiency	Conflict increases efficiency to varying degrees or is harmful for it
Main task of leaders is to eliminate conflict	Leaders task is to manage conflict and solve it in way that can optimize efficiency of organization
If organization want to have optimal efficiency, need to eradicate and eliminate conflicts	If organization want to have optima efficiency, need a conflict at moderate level

Source: Bylok F., Robak E. (2009), *Zachowania ludzi w organizacji. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Częstochowskiej, Częstochowa, p. 117.

Conflict understanding has changed as a result of changes in the business environment and the related evolution of the management concept [Sikorski, 2013]. Now conflict is seen as something that can help the organization rather than harm it.

### **3. Research methods**

The main objective of the research is to examine how employees perceive conflicts within the organization. The following research questions, which are a development of the main objective are established:

- What is the employees' approach to the conflict?
- Are conflicts perceived as good phenomena or bad by employees?
- What positive functions the conflict in the company meets?

In order to achieve the aim, a questionnaire was conducted that allows to collect information on the basis of questions contained in a form filled in by respondents. The questionnaire consisted of seventeen opened and closed questions. The survey was carried out among 120 employees of different companies of Podlaskie voivodship. Among one hundred and twenty respondents, women constituted just over half of all respondents (53%). There were slightly less men (47%). The age structure of respondents between the genders is similar. Among the respondents, both women and men up to aged 30 were respectively 41% and 39%. In the group of respondents aged 31-50, women were 39%, and men were 39%. The women respondents over 50 years were 20% and men were 22% in the same age group.

### **4. Research results**

Respondents had to define with their own words what conflict is for them. Each respondent, regardless of gender and age, understands conflict in a similar way. Definitions of respondents that appeared in the replies were:

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“conflict is when people have different ideas for life or to solve some problems and they try to persuade other people that's they have always right” (female, 25-years)

“conflict is when two different sides wants to win and no one wants to agree with the other” (female, 45-years)

“conflict is connected with anger, problems, different opinions and of course-money” (male, 24-years)

“conflict is different perceptions of reality, quarrels, bad emotions among people” (male, 35-years)

“conflict is mindlessness of working people, immaturity and a profit at the expense of people and colleagues at work” (male, 54-years)

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These definitions indicates that employees can perceive the conflict rather as a situation with negative emotions – “is connected with anger”, “bad emotions”, “mindlessness” and “immaturity” and as a win-lose situation – “try to persuade”, “wants to win”. In that case it is difficult to see positive effects of conflicts such as getting to know another opinions, ideas and find solution which provides a win-win situation.

The next question concerned the perception of the conflict by the respondents (Fig. 1). The women under 30 years of age believe that conflict is a way to increase the effectiveness of the organization (47%) or is a natural phenomenon (37%). A smaller number of women believe that conflict is something completely negative (16%). As far as men are concerned, the results are very similar in this age group of respondents. Women aged between 31 and 50 mostly believe that conflict is something completely natural (68%). Definitely fewer respondents (22%) believe that a moderate level of conflict has a positive impact on the effectiveness of the organization. A small percentage understands conflict as something negative, having a bad impact on the functioning of the organization (11%). Men between the ages of 31 and 50 claim that conflict situations always occur and are the natural course of things (46%). One third of men believe that each organization should have a moderate level of conflict in order to improve the quality of work (31%). More men than women perceive conflict as something completely negative (23%). Most women aged over 50 understand that conflict is completely natural and happens in every organization (92%) and the rest of them (8%) believe that conflicts at moderate level are needed for optimal efficiency. No one women respondent indicates that conflict is a negative phenomenon. The surprisingly results can be noticed for men. Men over the age of 50 mostly think that conflict is something negative and spoils the work of the organization (48%). Slightly less men stated that conflict is something completely natural and occurs in every organization (43%). Only a few men stated that conflict is needed for organization in order to optimize efficiency (10%). This result shows that perception of conflicts are different between women and men and clearly different by age even for the same gender.

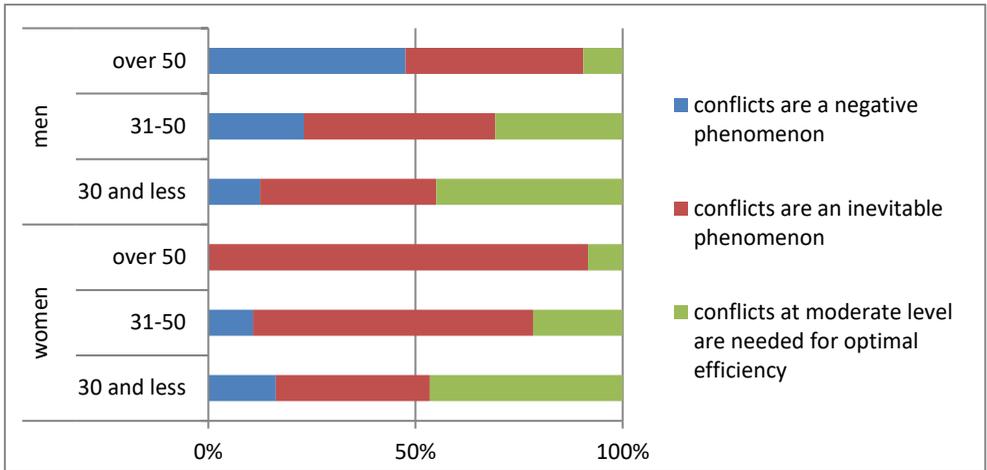


Fig. 1. Perception of conflict in organizations by gender and age

Source: based on own research.

The next question concerned the positive consequences of conflicts in the organization. Taking into account the total number of women participating in the study, the best positive effect of conflicts according to those under 30 years is to increase the cooperation of the group (28%). The rest of positive effect has moderate importance between 6% and 15%. A small number of women felt that none of the answers took into account the positive effects of the conflict (13%). As far as men are concerned, according to respondents under 30, the positive effects of conflicts are not only better cooperation in the group (20%), but also a increasing the employees activity (27%). The results about other positive effects are quite similar in both men and women. According to women and men aged between 31 and 50, the most significant effect is the reduction of tension in the group (respectively 21% and 32%). However the other effects are also pointed out: emergence of new ideas, discovery of new field of actions (respectively 15% and 16%); better cooperation within the group (10% and 13%); increasing motivation (15% and 7%). Slightly less indicated that the positive effect of conflict is to improve the level of justice (6% each). Surprisingly, the answer “none of the answers” was indicated by more men than woman (respectively 13% and 8%). It means that part of men cannot see positive effects of conflicts. Moreover, the indicator of this answer increased in the case of men and decreased in the case of women. It is noted significance differences in perception of positive effects by women and men aged over 50. None of women respondents indicates that increasing the employees activity can be positive effect of

conflicts, while 23% of men believe in that. The opposite situation is related to emergence of new ideas or discovery of new field of actions. None of men claim that, while 26% women point that the positive effect of conflicts is the explosion of new ideas at work. Moreover, almost one-third men (29%) and a few women (6%) stated that none of the answers fit their opinion. This can be due to the fact that more men respondents considered conflict as a negative phenomenon.

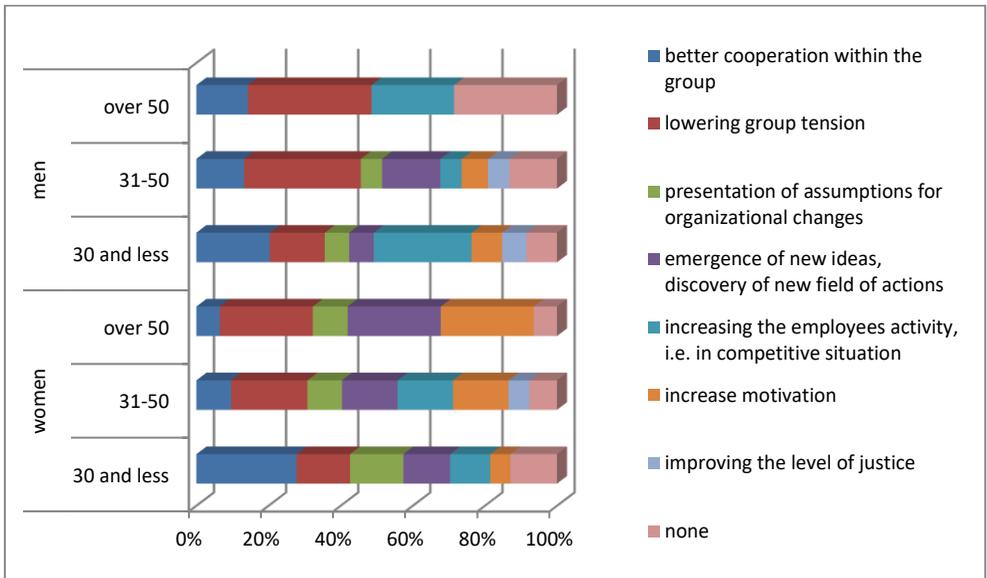


Fig. 2. Perception of positive effects of conflict by gender and age

Source: based on own research results.

## Conclusions

The results of research brings to several conclusions concerning the perception of conflicts in the organization by employees. The approach to conflicts by employees is different taking into account their gender and age. Although each respondent has a similar understanding of conflict, their approach is different. The women respondents are more likely to believe that conflict is a natural phenomenon than men. Moreover, the older women are, the more they believe in it. It is quite different in the case of men. The older men are, the more they believe that conflict is a negative phenomenon. Although the results show that employees still perceive the conflict

rather as a bad phenomenon which is unnecessary and should be avoided according to traditional approach, the most of them try to see a conflict situation as a positive phenomenon. The positive effects of conflicts are indicated by more women than men.

The research results show that there are differences in employees' perceiving the conflicts by gender and age. This result is significance for managers. It allows them to understand that employees' approaches to conflicts are different and to manage conflicts in organization in many ways according to these approaches.

## Literature

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# **Podejście pracowników do konfliktów w organizacji**

## **Streszczenie**

Przedmiotem badań prowadzonych w ramach niniejszego artykułu jest kwestia stosunku pracowników do konfliktów wewnątrz organizacji. Głównym celem badań jest poznanie, jak pracownicy postrzegają konflikty wewnątrz organizacji. Kwestia ta wydaje się szczególnie istotna, ponieważ wiele badań pokazuje, że wiek i płeć wpływają na to, jak dana osoba postrzega konflikt. Organizacje muszą dostosować swoje podejście do każdego poszczególnego pracownika w zakresie zarządzania kadrą kierowniczą wyższego szczebla. Zgodnie z podziałem, w którym młodzi ludzie postrzegają konflikt jako potencjał, a osoby starsze jako problem, menedżerowie powinni zwracać uwagę i dostosowywać rozwiązania do ludzi i samego konfliktu. Konflikty pojawiają się nie tylko w życiu codziennym, ale także w pracy. Ważne jest, aby nie tylko samo kierownictwo rozumiało, że podejście do konfliktów różni się od podejścia samego człowieka, ale również pracownicy powinni rozumieć, że nie wszyscy są tacy sami. Konflikty między ludźmi w tym samym wieku mogą być zupełnie inne niż między młodymi i starszymi. Dlatego ważne jest, aby każda ze stron rozumiała, że nie można mierzyć wszystkich swoją miarą. Konflikt będzie przynosił pozytywne efekty tylko wtedy gdy sposób rozwiązywania konfliktów będzie odpowiedni i dopasowany do obu stron.

## **Słowa kluczowe**

konflikt, zarządzanie konfliktem, zarządzanie pracownikami