

Conflict Management in Public Organizations: A Human Resource Management Perspective

Yulianah

Perbanas Institute, Jakarta, Indonesia

Correspondence Email: yulianah@perbanas.id

Abstract

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon within organizations, including public organizations that have complex bureaucratic structures and involve various interests. This study aims to analyze the forms of conflict that occur in public organizations, evaluate the role of Human Resource Management in handling conflicts, and identify effective conflict management strategies from a Human Resource Management perspective. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and document study. The results show that conflict management in public organizations is highly influenced by the effectiveness of the role of Human Resource Management. Through strategic approaches such as communication training, implementation of clear conflict resolution policies, and the strengthening of a collaborative organizational culture, Human Resource Management is able to minimize potential conflicts as well as resolve existing conflicts constructively. This study also finds that the most common forms of conflict are vertical conflict and role conflict, mainly due to mismatched perceptions, disproportionate workloads, and ineffective communication. Therefore, optimizing the role of Human Resource Management not only impacts conflict resolution but also enhances organizational performance and the quality of public services as a whole.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Public Organization, Human Resource Management, Conflict Resolution Strategy

Introduction

Different life perspectives among individuals are natural and unavoidable in social life, including within the context of organizations. An organization is a forum where individuals with diverse backgrounds come together, united by shared visions, missions, values, and specific goals to be collectively achieved (Ambarwati, 2021). In reality, this diversity in background, thinking styles, values, and interests often leads to differences in perspectives that may trigger conflicts. Conflicts in organizations can occur horizontally – among coworkers at the same level – or vertically – between superiors and subordinates. The presence of conflict is not entirely negative; rather, it is a natural part of the evolving dynamics within an organization (Dalimunthe, 2016).

However, in the dynamic life of an organization, conflict often arises when there is a clash of interests or resistance to change. Rejection of change is one of the most common causes of conflict, especially when the changes affect work processes, authority structures, or the rights and obligations of members of the organization (Fauzi & Purbasari, 2024). When change is not well managed, individuals or groups within the organization tend to exhibit defensive or even confrontational attitudes. Therefore, each

member of the organization—especially management—is required to adapt to environmental changes and foster healthy working relationships. This is important to maintain organizational effectiveness and to ensure that any conflict that arises can be resolved constructively through proper conflict management approaches (Heridiansyah, 2014).

According to Mitchell, Setiawan, and Rahmi (2006), conflict—or disagreement in the current state—can be used to identify the ineffectiveness of resource or environmental processes. Conflict can also serve to reinforce ideas and clarify understanding. Conflict is defined as a process of social interaction in which two or more people—or two or more groups—differ or are entangled in their goals and objectives (Ray & Esteban, 2017). Conflict is the difference between groups of people that ultimately leads to the achievement of shared goals. It emerges from interpersonal or intergroup relationships that may escalate tensions due to significant obstacles in achieving objectives. In this sense, "conflict" refers to individual attitudes or forces that cause tension. According to Dubrin, as cited in Wahyudi (2015), conflict occurs when two or more parties—individuals, groups, or organizations—perceive goals or events as incompatible with one another.

Organizational conflict is a condition where there is a mismatch or disagreement between two or more people within an organization. This is generally caused by various factors such as competition over limited resources, differences in tasks or job responsibilities, and differences in status, goals, values, and individual perceptions (Wall & Callister, 1995). Within organizational environments, the limitation of resources such as budget, time, facilities, or managerial support often triggers competition between individuals or teams, which—if not well managed—can develop into open conflict. In addition, differing values and viewpoints on issues or organizational goals may also create tension, especially when each party believes their perspective is more correct or more important (Stoner & Wankel, 1993).

Public organizations are entities that focus on providing services to society without being oriented toward achieving financial profit (Abbas et al., 2020). These organizations are generally established and regulated by the government or state institutions with the main goal of meeting public needs and ensuring the availability of essential public services, such as education, healthcare, population administration, and security (Syafri, 2014). Unlike private organizations that pursue profit, public organizations operate based on principles of social service, justice, and general welfare. Their main orientation is to provide the greatest benefit to the broader community, particularly in the provision of goods and services that the private sector cannot always fulfill (Wicaksono, 2015). Concrete examples of public organizations include ministries, governmental agencies and departments, public schools, government-owned hospitals, and nonprofit institutions engaged in social services.

Human Resource Management plays a highly strategic role in creating a harmonious and productive work environment, particularly in managing conflicts within organizational settings (Yulianah, 2021). The role of Human Resource Management is not only limited to administrative functions but also includes the development of effective communication policies, leadership training that fosters empathy and mediation skills,

and the implementation of fair and transparent performance management systems. Additionally, Human Resource Management is essential in building clear, participatory dispute resolution mechanisms focused on long-term solutions. With the right strategies, Human Resource Management can prevent conflict from arising, manage differences constructively, and strengthen an organizational culture that values collaboration and open dialogue (Yulianah & Supardi, 2022).

However, in practice, many public organizations still fail to optimize the function of Human Resource Management in handling internal conflicts. This is often due to limited resources, a lack of training for managers or supervisors, and the absence of a structured and integrated conflict resolution system within organizational policies (Diniarsa & Batu, 2023). As a result, emerging conflicts tend to be ignored or handled reactively, which can worsen the work atmosphere and reduce employee productivity. This condition may negatively affect the effectiveness of public organizations in delivering services to the community (Muspawi et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial for public organizations to strengthen the strategic role of Human Resource Management, positioning it at the forefront of managing employee relations dynamics and ensuring the creation of a healthy, inclusive, and responsive work environment (Basuki, 2023).

This study aims to analyze the strategic role of Human Resource Management in managing conflicts within public organizations and to identify effective strategies for conflict resolution so as not to disrupt performance and the effectiveness of public service delivery. Through this research, it is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the importance of optimizing the Human Resource Management function in creating a conducive and harmonious work environment. The benefits of this study are not only academic—contributing to the development of management science—but also practical for public organizations in formulating adaptive, systematic, and responsive Human Resource Management policies toward the dynamics of internal conflict, thereby improving employee relationships and the effectiveness of public service delivery.

Method

This research will be conducted using qualitative methods and descriptive approaches, which aim to describe in depth and systematically the role of Human Resource Management in managing conflict in public organizations. This method was chosen because it is able to capture the complexity of social phenomena related to the dynamics of employee relations, organizational policies, and conflict resolution strategies. Data collection was carried out through literature studies, by reviewing various scientific articles, academic journals, policy documents, and previous studies that are relevant and related to the research topic (Sugiyono, 2013). These literature sources will be analyzed critically to find patterns, themes, and important findings that can support the researcher's framework of thought. All data that has been successfully collected will then be processed and presented descriptively so that a comprehensive understanding can be obtained, and conclusions formulated that are in accordance with the research objectives, namely to provide theoretical and practical contributions to improving conflict management in public organizations (Yulianah, 2022).

Result and Discussion

Identifying Types of Conflicts That Commonly Occur in Public Organizations

1. Vertical Conflict

One of the most common types of conflict in public organizations is vertical conflict, which arises between individuals or groups at different hierarchical levels within the organizational structure. Typically, this conflict occurs between supervisors and subordinates, and it may be caused by differences in interests, perceptions, expectations, or leadership styles that do not align with the needs of lower-level employees. In the context of public organizations, where bureaucracy and hierarchical systems are deeply embedded, vertical conflict often arises when subordinates feel excluded from the decision-making process or when policies established by superiors are perceived as disconnected from on-the-ground realities.

Vertical conflict is also frequently triggered by power imbalances and one-way communication from leaders to staff. In many cases, superiors have the authority to assign tasks, evaluate performance, or make critical decisions, while subordinates have little space to express their aspirations or provide feedback openly. When communication is not conducted effectively and lacks a two-way approach, employees may feel unappreciated or ignored, which can lead to resistance, decreased work motivation, and increased potential for conflict.

From a human resource management perspective, vertical conflict should be viewed as part of the organizational dynamics that can be managed constructively. Strategies for managing vertical conflict may include improving the quality of communication between leaders and subordinates, empowering employees by involving them in decision-making processes, and strengthening leadership capacity that prioritizes inclusivity and empathy. Leadership training that emphasizes interpersonal communication, emotional management, and conflict resolution skills is also essential in preventing and resolving vertical conflicts in public organizations.

2. Horizontal Conflict

Horizontal conflict occurs between individuals or groups who hold equal positions or ranks within the organizational structure. In public organizations, such conflict often arises between coworkers in the same unit, between equivalent work units, or even between departments that share the same administrative level. Horizontal conflict typically results from differing interests, work goals, task implementation methods, or unhealthy competition related to performance achievements and recognition at the workplace. Although it does not involve hierarchical differences, horizontal conflict can significantly affect team effectiveness and workplace harmony.

One common cause of horizontal conflict is the lack of coordination and effective communication between individuals or work units. When inter-departmental tasks are not well-coordinated or when there is an overlap in authority, the potential for interpersonal friction increases. Furthermore, horizontal conflict may arise from unclear role distribution, unequal workloads, or perceived injustice in the allocation of organizational resources such as budgets, facilities, and career development opportunities. In public organizations, which often operate under strict regulations and

bureaucratic procedures, limited work flexibility may further exacerbate the likelihood of conflict among equal-level units.

From a human resource management standpoint, horizontal conflict should be addressed using a collaborative approach that emphasizes teamwork and open communication. Management can facilitate mediation between conflicting parties, strengthen inter-unit cooperation mechanisms, and provide training on conflict resolution and effective communication for employees. Implementing team-based work systems, collective rewards, and reinforcing an organizational culture that values unity and mutual respect are also strategic measures for preventing and managing horizontal conflict.

3. Line-Staff Conflict

Line-staff conflict refers to the conflict that occurs between line units, which are responsible for the operational functions of the organization, and staff units, which provide support, analysis, and policy advice. In public organizations, line units typically consist of departments that deliver direct services to the public, such as administrative services, education, or healthcare. Meanwhile, staff units include divisions such as planning, personnel, finance, and oversight. Conflict often arises due to differing approaches between technical implementers in the field and analysts or planners working behind the scenes.

The main source of line-staff conflict lies in their differing work orientations. Line units tend to focus on service effectiveness and speed, while staff units emphasize legality, procedure, and budget efficiency. For instance, when a public service unit is required to implement a new policy developed by the planning division but perceives the policy as unsuitable for field conditions, conflict may ensue. This conflict is exacerbated by imbalances in authority and a lack of understanding regarding each unit's responsibilities.

To address line-staff conflict, public organizations need to establish robust coordination systems and open communication between units. It is essential to align the visions and goals of both line and staff units and empower employees in the planning process to ensure that policies are applicable and contextually relevant. Strengthening managerial capacity is also crucial, so that leaders can effectively manage inter-functional dynamics and foster synergy that prioritizes optimal public service delivery.

4. Role Conflict

Role conflict occurs when individuals or groups within an organization experience discrepancies or ambiguities related to the roles, responsibilities, and expectations assigned to them. In public organizations, which often have bureaucratic structures and work procedures, role conflict is very common—especially when tasks are not clearly defined or do not align with the position held. This leads to confusion, work-related stress, and feelings of being unappreciated among employees.

Role conflict often arises from the lack of specific job descriptions, inappropriate task delegation, or disproportionate workloads. For example, an administrative staff member who should be focused on documentation tasks may be asked to handle technical work or tasks outside of their expertise due to a shortage of personnel. This

situation not only creates job dissatisfaction but also lowers productivity and the quality of public services.

To address role conflict, human resource management needs to develop clear descriptions of duties and responsibilities and conduct periodic evaluations of workload distribution. Training and skill development aligned with each role are also essential so that employees feel capable of carrying out their tasks. Transparency in workflows and strengthened communication across departments can also help minimize conflicts arising from role mismatches.

5. Conflict of Interest

Conflict of interest is a situation in which public officials or employees have personal interests—either financial or non-financial—that can affect their objectivity, integrity, and impartiality in carrying out their duties and responsibilities. In public organizations, conflict of interest is a serious issue because it can erode public trust, reduce institutional accountability, and open opportunities for corrupt practices.

A clear example of conflict of interest is when a public official owns shares or holds a position in a private company that is in partnership with the institution where they work. Even if they are not directly involved in the decision-making process, there is still the potential for abuse of power to benefit themselves or certain parties. Conflict of interest can also occur in subtler forms, such as nepotism in staff recruitment or the use of public facilities for personal gain.

Managing conflict of interest requires strict oversight systems and clear regulations. Public organizations must have codes of ethics that prohibit involvement in decisions that could lead to a conflict of interest. Additionally, mechanisms for reporting and transparency—such as the declaration of assets and affiliations by public officials—are crucial to prevent undetected conflicts. Integrity education and fostering an organizational culture that upholds accountability are long-term strategies to prevent and manage conflicts of interest in the public sector.

The Role and Strategies of Human Resource Management in Conflict Management in Public Organizations

A. The Role of Human Resource Management in Conflict Management

1. Conflict Prevention

Human Resource Management plays a vital role in preventing conflicts by creating a positive work environment. A fair, inclusive, and open environment allows each individual to feel valued and have space to contribute. By fostering an organizational culture that upholds the values of fairness and transparent communication, the potential for conflict among employees can be reduced. Public organizations that apply these principles will find it easier to maintain harmonious working relationships and improve collaboration spirit.

Additionally, Human Resource Management can prevent conflicts by providing communication and conflict resolution skills training to employees. This training aims to improve their ability to express ideas effectively, listen empathetically, and resolve problems constructively. Equipping employees with these skills helps organizations avoid misunderstandings and strengthen cooperation among parties with differing

interests. This is highly relevant in the complex environment of public organizations that involve various stakeholders.

Another important step is to develop clear policies and procedures for conflict handling. Human Resource Management is responsible for designing formal rules that explain systematic conflict resolution mechanisms, including who is involved, the stages of the process, and the time frame for resolution. This clarity provides a sense of security for employees and prevents conflicts from escalating due to uncertainty or perceived unfairness in how issues are managed. Thus, Human Resource Management is not only responsible for managing personnel but also for maintaining the overall stability and effectiveness of the organization.

2. Conflict Management

In managing conflict, Human Resource Management plays a crucial role as a neutral mediator amid differing interests within public organizations. When conflicts arise, especially those involving individuals or groups in the workplace, Human Resource Management is tasked with facilitating open dialogue between the disputing parties. This mediation process aims to create a safe and supportive space for expressing views, clarifying misunderstandings, and conveying aspirations. Through effective communication techniques, Human Resource Management can help reduce emotional tension and encourage both parties to understand each other's perspectives, thereby enabling sustainable mutual agreements.

Furthermore, Human Resource Management assists in seeking fair and constructive solutions. In this role, Human Resource Management acts not only as a facilitator but also as an advisor offering resolution options based on organizational values, internal policies, and fair management practices. Collaborative approaches such as problem-solving and win-win solutions are often applied so that the results are acceptable and implementable by all parties. This support may include counseling, psychological assistance, or reassigning roles within the organization if necessary.

In more complex cases or when there are indications of ethical or regulatory violations, Human Resource Management may conduct internal investigations. These investigations are essential for objectively and thoroughly uncovering the root causes of conflict. This process typically involves data collection, interviews, and documentation from the involved parties to identify the conflict's source, intensity, and impact on performance and workplace atmosphere. The results of the investigation serve as the basis for managerial decisions that not only resolve the current conflict but also help prevent similar future incidents. With this systematic approach, Human Resource Management serves not only as a conflict extinguisher but also as a key actor in creating healthy organizational relationships and work culture.

3. Conflict Resolution

After a conflict in a public organization has been resolved, Human Resource Management plays an important role in ensuring the sustainability of that resolution. One of its primary roles is monitoring the implementation of the agreed-upon solutions by the disputing parties. This monitoring is crucial to ensure that the resolution is not merely formal or administrative but is genuinely applied in the work environment. Human Resource Management ensures that no party violates the agreement or triggers

further conflict. If signs of new conflict emerge, preventive actions and strategy adjustments can be immediately taken.

Additionally, evaluating the conflict resolution process is an inseparable part of the Human Resource Management function. This evaluation includes assessing the resolution methods used, their effectiveness, and their impact on the work environment and productivity. Through such evaluations, Human Resource Management can identify the strengths and weaknesses of the mechanisms implemented and develop better approaches in the future. This is also useful for improving organizational policies and managerial training related to conflict management.

Equally important, Human Resource Management is also responsible for helping to restore working relationships between individuals or groups previously involved in conflict. Conflicts that are not thoroughly addressed can leave emotional wounds and disrupt team dynamics. Therefore, Human Resource Management needs to encourage reconciliation and rebuild cooperation through team-building activities, counseling, or open dialogue. The goal of restoring these relationships is to recreate a work environment that is conducive, collaborative, and productive so that the public organization's objectives can be achieved more effectively.

B. Human Resource Management Strategy in Conflict Management within Public Organizations

1. Collaborative Approach

The collaborative approach is one of the most recommended strategies in conflict management within public organizations. This strategy emphasizes cooperation between conflicting parties to jointly find solutions that not only resolve the problem but also consider the interests and needs of all involved. In the context of public organizations, which are characterized by bureaucratic complexity, diverse stakeholder interests, and high public service expectations, the collaborative approach becomes an effective method for creating sustainable and fair resolutions.

Collaboration in conflict resolution involves open communication, empathy, and active involvement from every individual concerned. Human Resource Management plays an important role in facilitating this process by creating a safe and productive dialogue space and assisting in negotiations between parties. Human Resource Management can also provide training on collaborative skills such as active listening, critical thinking, and joint decision-making to strengthen a cooperative organizational culture.

In practice, the collaborative approach not only focuses on short-term solutions but also pays attention to long-term interpersonal relationships. This is crucial in public organizations, as unresolved conflicts can hinder team effectiveness, decrease employee motivation, and ultimately affect the quality of public services. Therefore, Human Resource Management needs to systematically integrate the collaborative approach into organizational policies, including in performance appraisal systems, promotions, and leadership development.

2. Development of Communication Skills

The development of communication skills is a key strategy in conflict management carried out by Human Resource Management, especially within public organizations.

Effective communication is a fundamental aspect in preventing and handling conflicts, as most organizational conflicts stem from miscommunication or misunderstandings between individuals or groups. Therefore, providing systematic and continuous communication training to all employees is a strategic step to build a healthy and cooperative organizational culture.

Communication training provided by Human Resource Management should cover several important aspects, such as active listening skills, speaking clearly and straightforwardly, as well as the ability to give and receive constructive feedback. Active listening allows someone to understand the intentions, feelings, and perspectives of the interlocutor without immediate judgment or defensive reactions, thereby minimizing the escalation of conflict. On the other hand, the ability to speak clearly and provide feedback positively also helps convey messages or criticism without causing misunderstandings or emotional tension.

In the context of public organizations, good communication skills are essential, as employees often interact not only internally but also with the wider community, stakeholders, and other external parties. Therefore, Human Resource Management must prioritize the development of these skills as part of employee training and development programs. By strengthening effective interpersonal communication, public organizations will be more capable of creating a harmonious work environment, reducing potential conflicts, and improving the overall quality of public services.

3. Implementation of Clear Policies

The implementation of clear policies and procedures is a crucial element in the Human Resource Management strategy for addressing conflicts in public organizations. Well-documented policies provide consistent guidelines for all members of the organization in dealing with and resolving conflicts. Without structured policies, conflict handling is often done on an ad hoc and inconsistent basis, which can worsen the situation and reduce employee trust in the organizational system.

The policies referred to include steps to be taken when a conflict occurs, the parties involved in the resolution process, time limits for handling, and relevant sanctions or corrective actions. Human Resource Management is responsible for drafting, socializing, and ensuring the implementation of these policies among all employees. Moreover, these policies should be adaptive and inclusive, taking into account cultural diversity, job positions, and work context in public organizations so that they can be accepted and effectively implemented by all parties.

It is also important for Human Resource Management to provide a reporting channel that is safe and free from intimidation so that employees feel comfortable reporting conflicts without fear of negative consequences. Regular socialization and training on understanding these policies can help ensure that all employees understand their roles and responsibilities when conflicts arise. Thus, the implementation of clear policies not only facilitates fair conflict resolution but also strengthens a professional and accountable organizational culture.

4. Improvement of Negotiation Skills

The improvement of negotiation skills is an important strategy in conflict management conducted by Human Resource Management in public organizations.

Negotiation is an interactive process in which conflicting parties attempt to reach a mutually beneficial agreement through communication and compromise. Employees with strong negotiation skills are more effective in de-escalating conflicts, understanding the perspectives of others, and finding solutions that do not disadvantage any party.

Human Resource Management plays an active role in designing and conducting negotiation skill training, which includes techniques for identifying common interests, building trust between parties, and seeking alternative solutions creatively. This training also helps individuals manage emotions, listen actively, and use constructive language during the negotiation process. In the context of public organizations, where the interests of various stakeholders must be considered, negotiation skills are crucial to maintain organizational stability and improve the quality of public services.

By developing negotiation skills at all organizational levels, Human Resource Management not only creates a more cooperative work environment but also builds an organizational culture that resolves differences through dialogue and mutual understanding rather than confrontation. This ultimately contributes to improved organizational effectiveness, employee job satisfaction, and a positive public image of public institutions.

5. Strengthening Organizational Culture

Strengthening organizational culture is a crucial strategy in conflict management conducted by Human Resource Management, especially in the context of public organizations. A healthy and strong organizational culture serves as the foundation for the establishment of harmonious work relationships, open communication, and appreciation for diverse perspectives. Human Resource Management plays a role in instilling organizational values such as integrity, collaboration, openness, and mutual respect through various policies, internal activities, and training on work culture values.

In public organizations, where diversity in social, educational, and cultural backgrounds is significant, strengthening an inclusive work culture is essential to prevent potential conflicts arising from differences from escalating into serious issues. Human Resource Management needs to build systems that encourage active employee participation in decision-making processes and provide safe spaces to express opinions without fear or discrimination. In addition, by celebrating shared values and rewarding behaviors that support positive culture, organizations can strengthen collective identity and reduce internal friction. Thus, an organizational culture that is strategically managed by Human Resource Management not only serves as a conflict prevention tool but also as a unifying mechanism that enhances employee loyalty, commitment, and performance in achieving optimal public service goal.

Conclusion

Conflict management in public organizations is a crucial aspect that cannot be overlooked, given the high complexity of work and the diverse backgrounds of individuals in the public sector. Conflicts can arise in various forms, including vertical conflicts, horizontal conflicts, line-staff conflicts, role conflicts, and conflicts of interest. Each type of conflict has its own characteristics and causes that must be well understood to ensure appropriate handling. Poorly managed conflicts can reduce organizational

effectiveness, damage interpersonal relationships, and hinder the achievement of public service goals. In this context, Human Resource Management plays a strategic role as a facilitator, mediator, and system manager who supports effective conflict resolution. Human Resource Management is not only responsible for handling conflicts when they occur but also has the responsibility to prevent them through the creation of a positive work culture, training in communication and conflict resolution, and the development of clear and transparent policies. These strategies enable public organizations to maintain internal stability and improve the quality of employee relationships. In addition, Human Resource Management must implement a collaborative approach, strengthen organizational culture, and enhance employees' communication and negotiation skills so that differences of opinion can be managed constructively. Through its active role in analyzing root causes, facilitating open dialogue, and evaluating the conflict resolution process, Human Resource Management enables public organizations to build adaptive and harmonious working systems.

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