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NEGOTIATING WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN HIGH-PRESSURE ENVIRONMENTS: A CASE ON WORKPLACE CONFLICT IN LOGISTICS CONSULTING

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ABSTRACT:

This article addresses the challenges of negotiating and resolving conflicts at work in a high-pressure logistics consulting environment in Brazil. An intern working on a challenging project for a major shoe company disagrees with his project manager about how to balance work and life and what the job should entail. As the stakes rise, the intern must find a solution by weighing various options and interests. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the negotiation dynamics, highlighting the challenges of reconciling conflicting priorities and expectations in a rapidly evolving industry. This study enhances our understanding of how to handle conflict and negotiate within organizations effectively.

Keywords:

Workplace conflict; Supply Chain Management; Work-life Balance; Brazil.

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1. Introduction

Negotiation, as a field of research has attracted scholars' attention over the past decades (Dias, 2019; Fisher, Ury & Patton, 1981; Kissinger, 1969; Lax & Sebenius, 1986; Navarro & Dias, 2024; Pruitt, 1981; Raiffa, Richardson & Metcalfe, 2002; Rubin & Brown, 1975). Past research has examined negotiation as a communication process (Acuff, 1993; Dias, 2016; Salacuse, 2003, 2006; Schatzki & Coffey, 1981; Shell, 2006), mediation (Zartman, 1988), and its relevance in managerial decisions (Bazerman & Moore, 1994) and business negotiations (Dias, 2023; Dias, Almeida, Silva, Russo et al., 2022; Dias, Lafraia, Schmitz et al., 2024; Dias, Leitão, Batista & Medeiros, 2022).

This study focuses on Type II negotiation, as seen in Figure 1 and defined by Dias (2020). In this setting, negotiation involves a complex interplay of interests, possibilities, and alternatives, requiring effective communication and strategic decision-making. According to Yin (2018), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context. In this study, the negotiation process between the intern and the project manager serves as the case, allowing for an in-depth examination of the complexities of workplace conflict and negotiation. To maintain confidentiality and comply with organizational requirements, real names and IDs have been omitted from the case study.

This research examines workplace conflict and negotiation within a logistics consultancy in São Paulo, southeastern Brazil, bridging a gap in the challenges of reconciling divergent objectives and expectations in dynamic business environments. We employed a case study method, with the unit of analysis (Yin, 2018) being the negotiation process between the intern and the project manager as a solitary, holistic case study (Yin, 2018). The study data were obtained through direct observation and active participation by one author in the negotiating process, resulting in a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the complexity involved in workplace conflicts and negotiations. Figure 1 illustrates the Four-Type Negotiation Matrix typology (Dias, 2020), to categorize this negotiation, as follows:



Figure 1: Four-Type Negotiation Matrix
Source: Dias (2020). Reprinted under permission

2. Materials and Methods

This study utilized a qualitative method, inductive reasoning, interpretive position, and one descriptive case study design (Yin, 2018), which is especially capable of investigating intricate phenomena, such as conflict at the workplace and negotiation, in a real context (Dias, 2023; Dias et al., 2022; Yin, 2018). Data collection involved an intensive analysis of the negotiation between the intern and project manager. The case study employed pseudonyms and identities to be withdrawn for reasons of privacy protection as well as conformity to company policy.

3. Background

In this case, the stakes can be very high, and failing to handle conflict effectively can have serious consequences. This case study examines the complexities of a workplace conflict that emerged between an intern and a project manager at a logistics consulting firm in São Paulo, Brazil. The disagreement primarily centered on the length of the workday and what people expected from their work-life balance. The intern's negotiation strategy would be crucial in determining the outcome of a challenging project for a major shoe company. This research aims to enhance our understanding of effective conflict management and negotiation within organizational contexts by examining the complexities of workplace conflict.

The case begins with an intern at a logistics consulting company, whose office was located in São Paulo/SP. At the time, he was still in his final year of undergraduate studies in São Carlos/SP, a city 230 km from the capital. Due to the credits still to be fulfilled, he traveled weekly between the two cities, attending college on Sunday nights and returning for the internship on Tuesday nights. Due to this peculiar schedule, the presence in the office was limited to only three days a week, but during extended hours. The beginning of the workday used to be around 10 am, but without a predictable end.

4. Challenges

The environment was quite stressful. Usually, the consultancy made aggressive proposals to convert budgets into sales, at the cost of the additional hours required of its employees. In general, a project that required five people and six months to complete was executed by a team of three people with a three-month deadline.

Additionally, competition was encouraged among interns. Of the class of 10 people, a maximum of two would be used in the following year. Despite this, the group of newbies often helped each other, which relieved some of the psychological pressure of the situation. Even so, this competitive component favored people who stayed much later in the office; after all, they would be more engaged, which could count towards a potential hiring in the team of consultants the following year. It is worth noting that the year was 2014, and companies were holding investments due to the natural uncertainty of the election period. As a result, there was a reduction in vacancies for recent graduates at that time.

In this context, the intern was part of a project for a large client in the footwear sector, which aims to optimize its logistics network to reduce product delivery times in the states of the Brazilian Southeast. It was a job that required analyzing various aspects of the operation, including the manipulation of large databases, evaluating state taxes, and preparing periodic executive reports for the contractor's board of directors. The consulting team consisted of a junior project manager (it was her first project in this role), two consultants who had never dealt with logistics networks, and one intern.

5. NEGOTIATION SCENARIO

The scenario was highly conducive to the manifestation of conflicts, characterized by a stressful and competitive environment, tight deadlines, team inexperience, and divergent interests among team members. The project manager had a good analytical capacity, but she was very anxious and lacked skill in managing the team's emotions. Still, she needed to demonstrate the ability to deliver; after all, it was her first job in this role. In this way, she focused more on delivery than on people. The consultants, on the other hand, came from an intense period of projects, with no time off between one and the other, arriving at this work very tired and needing to put in much effort to learn and perform unprecedented analyses for both. Ultimately, the intern sought to learn and establish themselves in the job market.

During the work meetings, a sense of tension was palpable. The consultants did not get along with the project manager. It was common for there to be an exchange of barbs and words of disdain between the parties. The stress level was so high that the manager behaved harshly even with the client's board of directors.

One night, around 11 pm, the intern found himself involved in a situation that required negotiation. The analyses depended on the validation of one of the consultants, who was on the phone solving a problem on another front of the project. While waiting, the manager approached and asked what the intern was doing. The intern explained, and in response, heard that it was very easy and could be completed quickly, which was not necessarily true. Because the intern was exhausted, he suggested to take a break and finish the work later, as he needed a little rest. The manager accepted, and the intern left.

When the intern arrived at the office the next morning, he noticed that the manager was still wearing the same clothes as the day before. The work that was easy required her to spend the night to complete it, with no possibility of going home. For this reason, the intern was summoned to a room to discuss.

6. NEGOTIATION MAPPING

Although the meeting was a surprise, the parties were already thinking a lot about interests, possible agreement zone, options and alternatives to that job, something that helped the ongoing discussion at that moment. Therefore, the rationale for the negotiation was:

Interests: Learning from the development of the work in the internship. Conquer space in the job market. Better work-life balance. Do not overload the other members of the team. Maintain monthly income.

Options: When there was work until dawn, allow entry time after lunch. Request a laptop for remote work in case of need (interns could only work on the office desktop). Clock in and receive a financial bonus for overtime at the end of the internship program (interns did not register time to enter and leave the office).

Possible Agreement Zone: Set a limit of 12 hours of work that ends preferably before 10 pm.

Alternatives: Quit the job immediately and do some freelance work to survive until a new job opportunity arises. Propose a reasonable period (3 months) to close the internship while looking for new opportunities in the market. Negotiate the extension of the working day directly with the director of the office, ignoring the manager at that moment.

On the manager's side, there was the anxiety for deliveries and the challenge of leading people, something new for her. In summary, the manager's negotiation structure would be:

Interests: Quality deliveries and within the agreed deadlines. Demonstrate leadership skills. Keep the team focused and engaged with the delivery of the project.

Options: Flexible hours of entry and exit from the office. Propose longer breaks throughout the working day. Propose the maintenance of the intern until the end of the project and only then replace him with a new market professional. In this situation, she could also make positive referrals of the intern for open positions in the companies in which she had influence.

Possible Agreement Zone: Maintain an intern and establish a fixed departure time as long as the beginning of the workday always takes place before lunch.

Alternatives: Fire the intern immediately and request replacement for HR (impacting deadlines). Request reinforcement of personnel for the company's board of directors, reducing the team's workload.

7. CLOSING THE DEAL

At the end of the discussion, the intern believed it was successful, as both parties achieved two important agreements: (a) Starting at 10:00 am and ending at 10:00 pm at the latest, and (b) commitment to stay until the end of that year in the company, helping to complete the project in progress. Thus, both parties had the opportunity to learn from the development of the job while the intern was looking for another one, maintaining the monthly income throughout the period.

Another important point is that the situation caught the attention of the company's leadership, which assigned an experienced manager to coordinate the technical work on that specific project. Due to his prior knowledge, the new manager was able to simplify and expedite decisions at crossroads of analysis, improving the climate among the consultants, maintaining the quality of deliveries, and adhering to the deadlines already agreed upon.

8. IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study's results have significant implications for organizational behavior and management. For instance, they suggest that managers must prioritize employee well-being and work-life balance, particularly in sectors under significant pressure (Dias, Lopes, & Duzert, 2020). Managers can create a more productive and sustainable work environment by recognizing the importance of work-life balance. Conflict management can also lead to improved team relationships and productivity (Dias, Waltz & Oliveira, 2021).

This research is echoed by buyer-seller exchange research, which emphasizes the importance of fostering good relations and maintaining clear communication (Dias & Lopes, 2020; Dias & Navarro, 2020). Lastly, this study contributes to the broader body of knowledge about negotiation and conflict management. Through negotiation, conflict management, and the intersection of organizational dynamics, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the complex influences that may shape negotiation outcomes (Dias, Lopes, Cavalcanti, & Golfetto, 2020; Dias, Netto, Oliveira, et al., 2021).

Evidence suggests that effective communication, strategic decision-making, and adaptability are crucial in addressing conflicting priorities and expectations, supported by previous studies (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1981; Lax & Sebenius, 1986). The intern's negotiating style, which involved analyzing interests, options, and alternatives, played a crucial role in facilitating a satisfactory agreement between the parties (Dias, 2020a).

9. LESSONS LEARNED

As a lesson learned, the intern would not have abandoned the job if the manager had not minimized the importance of the activity. As a consequence, the parties ended up creating a zone of unnecessary tension: the conflict not only felt but also manifested. An alignment conversation at that very moment could have been more productive. On the other hand, mapping out the options for negotiation and the alternatives to the current situation were crucial to the way the parties conducted the conversation and reached an agreement. Today, looking back, the parties believe that conversation conducted was correctly and coherently, ultimately benefiting the parties and the rest of the team.

10. CONCLUSION

Even without knowing it, the parties had been mapping their interests, options, a possible agreement zone, and alternatives to the internship for some time. That way, when the conflict became manifest and an alignment meeting was needed, their mind map was ready. If it were only on impulse, the intern could have been irritated, said unnecessary things, and left without a job, without a salary, and without learning from the work they had developed. The counterpart would be more understaffed in terms of labor, further worsening the work environment at that time.

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