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Research Paper 9: A Free Research Paper

Organisational Role and Role Relationships

**Prof Dr Crawford – Director
HRODC Postgraduate Training Institute**

Role, according to Berger (1973. p.79), role is a "typified response to a typified expectation". For Raven and Ruben (1976, p. 514), role is a "pattern of behaviour that characterises and is expected of a person who occupies certain position in a group or social organisation". These two definitions bear some similarities. However, we might analyse the, slightly more explicit, one by Raven and Ruben. There are two parts to this definition. The first is, the pattern of behaviour that characterises a person who occupies certain position in a group or social organisation. Suggestive, here, is that a person who occupies a certain position takes on role characteristics. This means that there are certain qualities or characteristics, which are typical of a person within that position. Also implicit, are the suggestions that: The behaviour, which is typical, is contingent on the particular position. Certain behaviour is standard for one position and might not be for another; the position, and its characteristic behaviour, is standard. Whoever the post holder is, the behaviour which typifies the position remains the same: The position makes no distinction between personalities, who occupy the role; Although the incumbents, from time to time, change, the role characteristics and standardised behaviour remain the same.

The other part of the definition suggests that there is a pattern of behaviour that is typical of a person who occupies a position in a group or social organisation. Implicit, here, is the notion that not only is the behaviour standard, but that there is a standard set of behavioural expectations. This is a potentially conflicting situation, in that whilst the behaviour is constant, or rather permanent, there is a set of expectations, which is also fairly standard, but not necessarily in total conformity with the standard behaviour. To make it even more confusing is the idea that the individual, who occupies a certain position, has a set of people who expects certain display of behaviour from him or her. This set of people, represents the individual's role set.

The fact that the role set itself constitutes several role segments or subsets of the role set, means that what appears to be a standard set of behavioural patterns and expectations becomes a varying pattern and expectations of

behaviour. This means that the incumbent is expected to respond to the role set, collectively and satisfactorily, and at the same time fulfilling the needs and aspirations of each segment. This seems highly hypocritical, the fact that conflicts are almost inevitable - conflicts of interests and expectations. Whenever the incumbent attempts to represent these need, aspirations and expectations, one group or other groups might not be satisfied. The incumbent, by virtue of his or her position as a role actor, may act out different scenes within certain contexts. Then it might mean failing to satisfy a number of role segments, while attempting to satisfy others. Some segments may be satisfied on one occasion, and another or others on subsequent occasions. Probably the most important thing, is that certain groups, or certain segments, should not feel totally ignored, in terms of being given preference to decisions.

As was indicated in the role relationship models, which are presented, a manager has both his superior/s and subordinates to satisfy, along with those people who are not necessarily under his direct control, but who are much lower in the hierarchy. It could be a matter of making decisions in, for example, resource allocation and utilisation. One example might be a production manager who makes demands regarding, and expects his assistant manager to reduce the level of consumption to be reduced from 5X amount to 4X. At the same time, assistant managers own subordinates expect to be allocated 5X amount of resources. These represent fairly constant demands and each of the segments will increase its level of demands. It means that the manager or head of a department might, at one time, satisfy the demands of her director or principal by reducing the resource allocation and utilisation, but cannot do this at all times. She is likely to find it necessary to satisfy the demands of her subordinates, at least some of the times, in terms of the amount of resources allocated to them. This is because he may want to establish or maintain a good relationship with them on the perception that this will create the possibility of a high level of influence, and reduce conflicts.

In society at large, and in the various sectors of society, there is a high level of individuality with respect to roles. What happens is, in fact, that the individual in

society may change his or her role without seeking a great deal of compromise from others. For example, a person who occupies the position of a bachelor, may change to a married person without causing many problems. The individual may also change occupation, quite easily. In an organisational context, roles are tied to the tasks to be performed and the individual finds it difficult to interchange between one role and another. There is an abounding duty for an individual to play the particular role assigned to him or her until, if and when, another assignment is given, in which case another individual will occupy his or her former position as a replacement. This does not preclude the occupation of more than one role, by one individual, on a permanent basis, and rotation (moving from one job to another) on a temporary basis.

Despite the claim regarding the high degree of permanence, it should be made quite clear that organisational roles can, in fact be and often are disbanded or re-defined. This is particularly true in the event of organisational re-design or re-structuring. The notion of accountability comes into play, here, in which case an individual is accountable, not only to those who make policy decisions, but also to the people who implement them and those on whom they are likely to have an effect, negative or positive.

Another important aspect of role is the incumbent's perception of the requirements of his or her role. This perception, claims Wren and Voich (1984), is a product of past experience or, in the case of a new incumbent, a personal judgement of the role requirements. Implicit in roles are norms and values. Values are highly abstracted and present great difficulty of interpretation. In society at large, they are laden with requirements, the realisation of which is of a high moral demand (Katz and Kahn, 1978). In organisations, there are values too - however, they relate to goal accomplishment.

Norms are the behavioural expectations of a role set for a role actor. Requirements may be specified, but not at the level of role expectations. Norms, as proposed by Argyle (1972), represent a group's solutions to the external and internal problems that confront it. This, he asserts, is a rule, e.g.

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about promotion and discipline, which are used to administer the activities of the organisation. One major difficulty with norms is that an individual is expected to interpret and respond to the demands of particular situations as they arise.

LOW ROLE SPECIFICITY: ROLE AMBIGUITY ROLE AVOIDANCE

There should be no question concerning what is required of an incumbent within an organisational setting (Weeks, 1974). He or she should know: what his or her tasks are in relation to the primary task; his or her span of management (if any); the different role segment which are associated with that role set; the immediate role sender, that is the person to whom he or she is directly accountable. A situation that falls short of this specification, may lead to the role being ambiguous. Following from this, the situation will arise where confusion persists.

The incumbent, in such situation, has very few choices, apart from requesting that the role be specified. On one hand, he might enact the part of a role misfit in which case he or she will narrow the boundary of operation tremendously, to reduce the level of contact with the significant others (those important role determiners). This might be if it results in low performance of more explicit aspects of the role. On the other hand, the incumbent might draw on his experience and make a number of assumptions regarding his role. The implications are that conflict will result as boundary intrusion becomes inevitable. This means that individuals perform their roles without specific guidelines pertaining to their duties and areas of responsibility, thus leading to inconsistent perception of roles. The fact is that there has not been a mutual agreement regarding who should do what, means that it is likely that one individual may perform activities that are presumed by another or others to be within their area of operation.

Low role specificity could also have the reverse effect, thus resulting in role avoidance. In this case, the role is deliberately shirked by one or both parties

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who perform related roles. The notion of role avoidance is distinct from the concept of role dodging, which is discussed below. While the role avoider deliberately and openly rejects the implicit aspects of his job, the role dodger is more discreet and exhibits a great deal of pretence, thus disguising that he fails to perform his explicit duties. While the role dodger accepts the responsibility for the performance of certain tasks, the role avoider points the finger at someone else.

HIGH ROLE SPECIFICITY: ROLE DODGING - PLAYING IT SAFE.

While it is desirable for roles to be specified, too high a specification might have tremendous ill effects. When role requirements are detailed, there is no room for initiative. High specification requires close supervision. This fact is noted by Katz and Kahn (1978) who suggested that there is a high preference, among workers, for general, rather than close supervision. Gray and Starke (1988, p.257) note that supportive behaviours from the manager, not direction, will rebuild commitment of workers to organisational objectives. Close supervision subsequently leads to role dodging and the act of playing it safe. In this case, the organisation members try to do only the things that are specified. Things that are well within their capacity to do, but which are not specified, will be neglected. Role dodgers avoid work but exhibit a great deal of pretence because they do not want the fact to be known to those in authority. The underlying assumption is that no credit will be given to them for undertaking activities that are considered to be outside their specified areas of responsibility.

Not only are un-specified tasks avoided, but so are specified ones. Previous research (Crawford, 1985) has indicated that role dodgers are often commended for the behaviours that they make explicit, and which, therefore, are noticed by those concerned and who are able to show recognition. In this case study, one subordinate who, under normal circumstance, exhibited poor professional conduct and a low level of competence was recommended for promotion above others who, on the whole, were quite competent and exhibited

a high level of professionalism. 'Mr T', one of the role dodgers, made significant efforts to draw the attention of the manager to any activity that he had undertaken and which was considered worthwhile. As a result, he received open commendation. In the presence of the manager, he made a marvellous exhibition of his performance. Unfortunately, in his absence, 'Mr. T'. reverted to his usual poor performance.

A further explanation of the notion of role dodging is that whenever the role dodgers are being watched, they make great effort to please their superiors. On the withdrawal of close supervision, they revert to their normal behaviour, that of neglecting some elements of their role. The idea of 'playing it safe' relates to the fact that some individuals might behave in an expected manner, merely to satisfy the onlooker. The resistance or non-commitment of these individuals to the required role enactment is therefore a latent factor.

ROLE ACTUALISATION

It might be worth considering the social anthropological view of role. is seen to consist of "the activity the incumbent would engage in were he to act solely in terms of the normative demands upon someone in his position" (Katz and Kahn, 1978. p.85). Implicit in this definition, is the suggestion that certain normative demands are made of individuals in given positions, in which event total conformity is optional. Realistically speaking, some truth is conveyed. This is if whatever built-in role requirements there might be, there will be varying levels of compliance. The levels of compliance will depend on the particular personality as a role incumbent. The idea of self-image is nonetheless evident, thus particular personality traits might be associated with a given role. The role incumbent is therefore expected to change to fit closely into the role. Although the personality requirement is implicit, there is no rule regarding the universality of roles accompanying each position. As noted by Goffman (1973) what is handled from one position in one organisation, may be apportioned to two or three kinds of positions in another organisation. The point made, is that what is seen as a single role in one organisation, may be several roles in another. An added complication is that although the role sectors or role segments might be

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similar in two organisations, the actual role enactment might be different. The role of a director for example, differs from one organisation to another. The incumbent at first, behaves according to his perception of the behaviour that is expected of him. Later, adjustments are made in conformity with real expectations.

An important point made by Berger (1973) is that identity comes with conduct and that conduct occurs in response to a specific social situation. This means that the person playing a particular role expects social support from his role set. His behaviour might generate social characteristic like, democratic, autocratic, generous, dedicated. This social self (the self seen by others) helps in maintaining his self ideal (whom he actually is, behaviourally), thus strengthening his role position. Implicit, here, is the suggestion that the incumbent is constrained by, not only the expectations of his role set, but also the support that it is willing to give. This has implications for the management of organisations in that the manager might, in some cases, be able to generate acceptable behaviour, and at other times is unable to do so. Whatever strategies are used, it is expected that when policy decisions are made, they will be, largely, acceptable to those who are to implement them. The degree of acceptability pertains, not only to the strategies used, but, to the extent to which these strategies conform to the expectations of the role set. Pertinent to these expectations is the pattern that the incumbent has established, about his choice of strategies.

The structure of an organisation dictates the extent to which roles might be specified. The degree of specificity of organisation structure rests on a continuum, from high to low. If the hierarchical and matrix structures are placed on the extremes of the continuum from left to right, respectively, the hierarchical structure will be seen to have a high role specification and the matrix structure, low role specification (see Fig.). It therefore means that organisations that fall on different points of the continuum will have varying degrees of role specification. Since organisation structure embodies a system of relationship, it follows that these relationships relate to the roles. The implications are that

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while some organisations (those toward the left of the continuum) will require clearly defined role relationship, others (those on the right) require low level of specification.

The fact that there are problems with both high and low role specifications, heralds the necessity for deliberate attempt to create levels of relationships that will generate a balance, thus avoiding the two extremes, high and low role specification. This situation is difficult to achieve because roles and role relationships are an essential function of organisational structure. Nevertheless, the fact is that the degree, to which an organisational structure is permanent, is contingent on the extent to which the members of the organisation are unwilling to change their behaviour. This is suggestive of the fact that, despite the difficulties that are implicit, the possibility does exist for such major change.

Avoidance of extremes, high and low role specifications, can allay fears of excessive role dodging and role avoidance, particularly because low role specificity connotes arbitrary role enactment, and a high level of specification suggests a great deal of rigidity.

Fig. 1: Relationship Between Organisational Structure and Role Specificity.



ROLE SET

Each individual in organisations belongs to two or more groups - in the most formal sense, she belongs to one or two command groups (a group consisting of a superior and her subordinates) and an informal group. The individual also belongs to the larger group, the organisation. There are also several groups of which the individual is not a member. For example, if he works in the accounts department, he might not be a member of the marketing group. All the different groups and individuals within them have perception as to how a particular role should be enacted. As a result, they have expectations of the behaviour of the incumbent.

We might therefore define a role set as all those who have general behavioural expectations of an incumbent and in some way affect his behaviour. It is therefore possible for the role set to extend beyond the boundaries of the organisation. It is important to note that individuals within a role set might have quite different expectations of an incumbent. This makes the role set's expectation of an incumbent general, rather than specific.

ROLE SEGMENT

Since each individual might perceive the role of an incumbent differently, it is possible that they are grouped in accordance with their similarity of expectations of the behaviour of incumbents. Those who have similar and specific expectations of incumbents for segments or sub-groups, which might relate to the way in which they are grouped for the performance of formal organisational tasks.

A role segment might then be regarded as one or more people who are members of a role set and who have similar expectations of an incumbent. Colleagues of an incumbent might also form a segment of his role. Despite the fact that the model below highlights the role of the managing director, connoting that the person who enacts that role is the incumbent, it must be remembered that anyone and everyone is an incumbent and therefore has a role set.

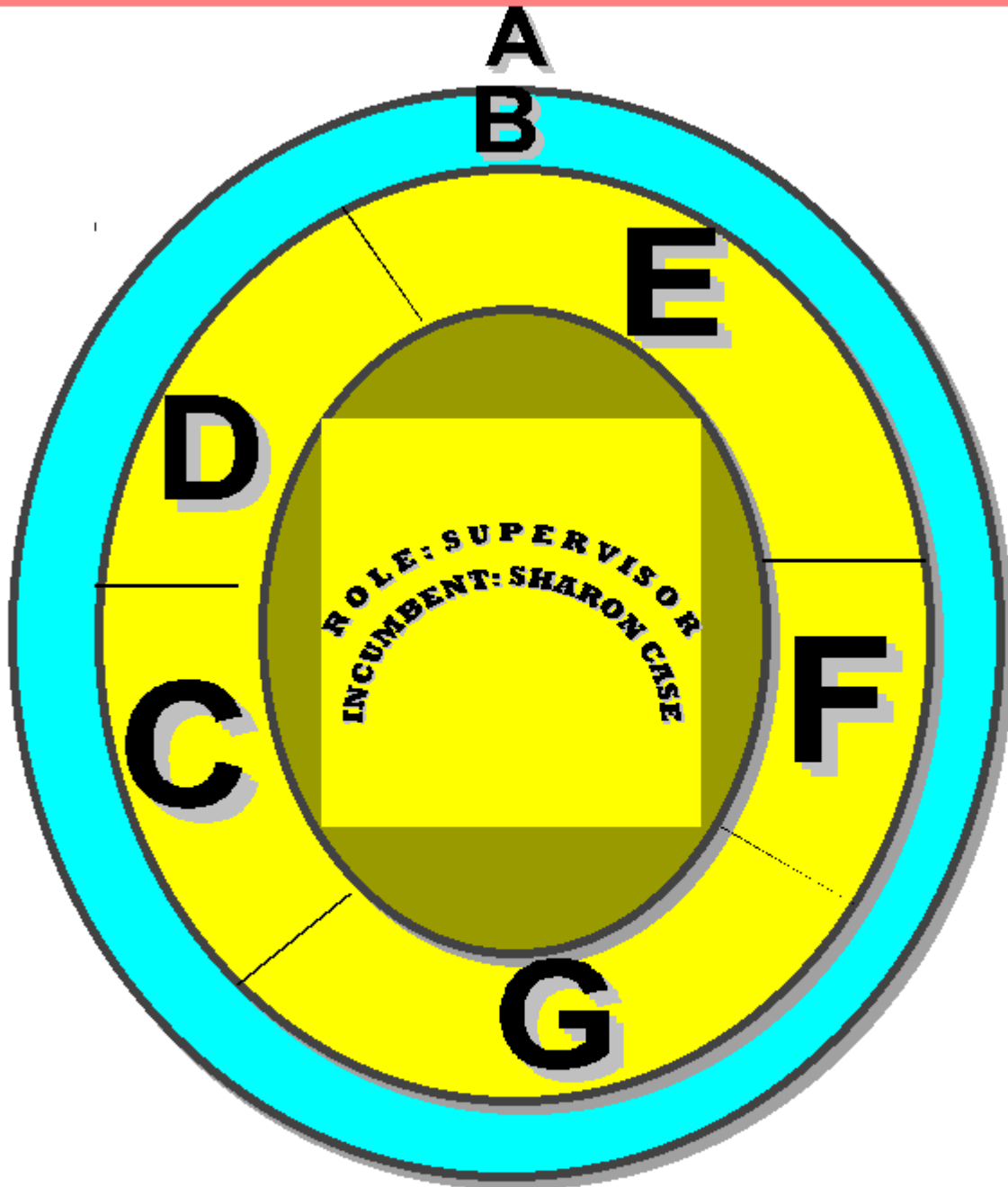
CONFLICT AND ROLE CONFLICT

Conflict might be regarded as:

- A disagreement;
- A discord or disparity between role perception and role expectation; or
- Competing role expectations

The traditional view of conflict is that it is something to avoid at all cost, a phenomenon that has disastrous consequences for the organisation. This is not the full story. Conflict is desirable but must be managed effectively

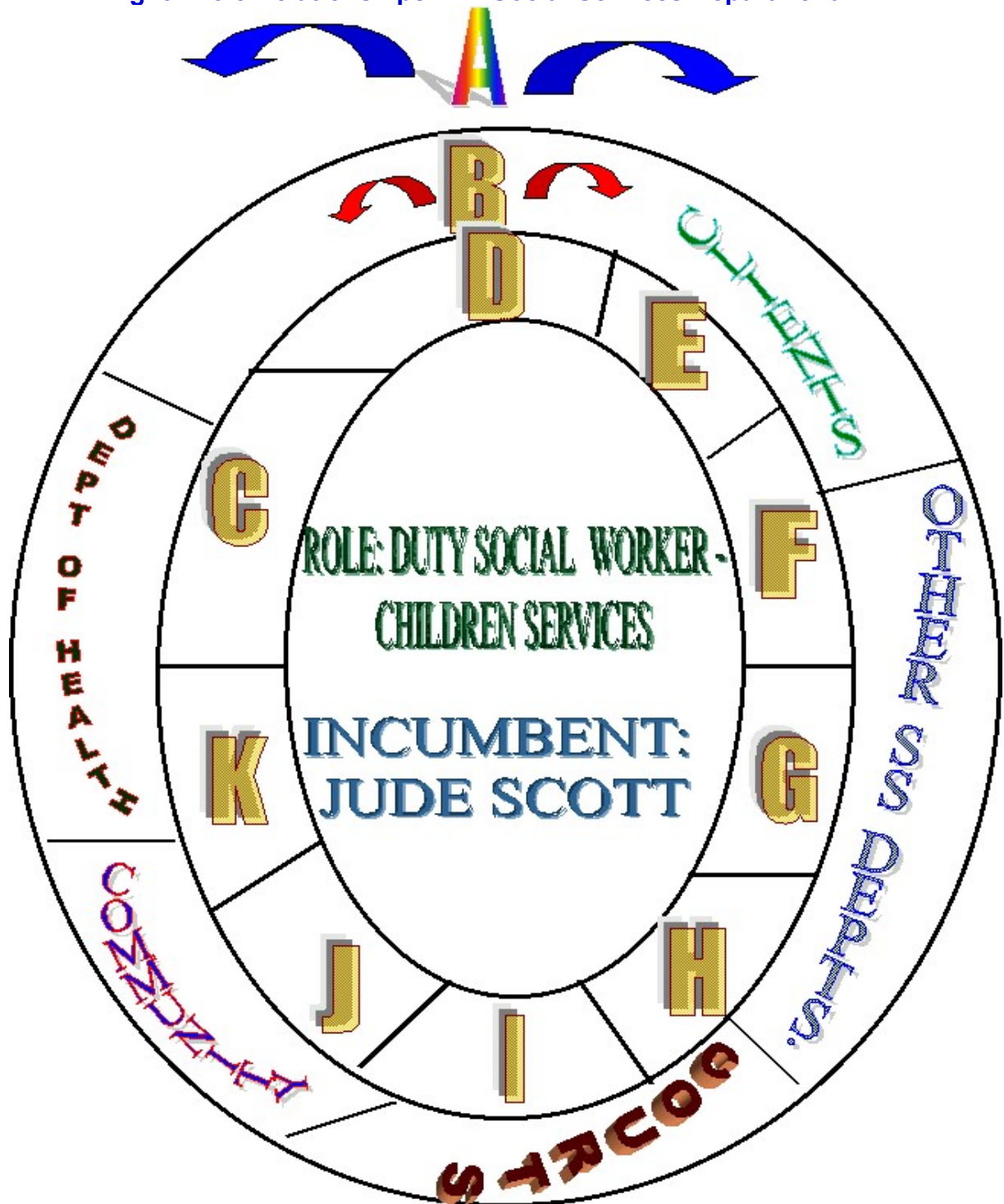
Fig. ____ Role Relationships In A Manufacturing Company



KEY

- A; Role Set**
- B: External Environment**
- C - G: Role Segments**
- C: Other Supervisors**
- D: Shift Workers**

Fig. 3: Role Relationships In A Social Services Department



KEY		
A. Role Set	B. External Environment	C. Other Duty Social Workers
D. Duty Manager	E. Other Social Work Managers	F. Field SWs - Children
G. Field SWs - Adult Services	H. Field Social Workers - Illness & Disability	I. Field Social Workers - Mental Health
J. Director Of Social Services	K. Corporate Services Personnel	

Conflict enables individuals to re-evaluate their stance, usually arriving at a 'satisfying' solution in the interest of the organisation. Conflict of this sort is explicit and might manifest in a display of extreme emotion (verbal outburst) that some US practitioners refers to as 'Going Into Excess'. 'Going into excess' might not be bad, after all – but seeks to establish the degree to which individuals wish to defend their stance on particular issues. In fact, a number of organisations deliberately introduce conflict. This might be achieved through the employment of individuals of strong personality, who have other characteristics that are at variance with those of the pre-existing group. One positive effect of this strategy is that it reduces the likelihood of groupthink – where the group is likely to make ineffective decisions – improving the organisation's overall decision-making process. Conflict might also be introduced through various team development activities.

While conflict has a generally positive effect on organisational functioning, if it is left unmanaged it might have disastrous consequences. This means that conflict is allowed to persist, resulting in the impairment of role performance. As effective conflict management suggests, conflict should be dealt with in such a way that **role conflict** is avoided. The following scenario is an example of conflict manifesting in role conflict. How should the manager and supervisor have addressed the situation, so as to avert role conflict? How would you address the current situation?

THE SUPERMARKET CHECKOUT

A supermarket checkout, Deidre, has been faced with the challenge of meeting the expectations of her manager and supervisor, in two related segments, her colleagues and accountants in others, respectively. Since she started four weeks ago, she was faced with the prospect of pleasing her colleagues and others and dissatisfying her superiors, or satisfying the expectations of her superiors and disappoints the other internal members of her role set. She chose the latter - who were quite aware of the situation - because of the implications that her behaviour has on her continued employment.

When Deidre' arrives at work one morning, she was accosted by her colleagues (other checkouts) and accused of 'showing them up' by doing the following things:

- Arriving at work much ahead of schedule
- Remaining behind to receive the accountants' report regarding the taking of the day
- Sending Money to the cash office more frequently than they do
- Keeping her uniform neat and tidy.

Deidre' was extremely upset but tried to forget the incident and took up her position as usual. She maintained her usual speed and, as was characteristic of her, was courteous to customers. However, about four hours later, a few minutes before her lunch-break, she remembered the encounter - while checking a customer's purchase. She went completely motionless, for an observable period, to the expressed annoyance of queuing customers. She returned from her lunch break, feeling somewhat relieved. However, she checked 20% less customers and handled 30% less transaction than her daily average. This undesirable situation persisted for approximately 3 weeks.

The supermarket manager, having noticed the difference in Deidre's performance, summoned her to a meeting, during which she gave her a verbal warning. The manager having exhibited no understanding of her explanation and her feeling that she had no support, Deidre's performance got gradually worse, to the extent that she was brought before a disciplinary panel.

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"Halim has reached Doha and resumed duty. He enjoyed very much the "One to One" course that you offered him. That was so generous of you. The amount of information he grasped and the way it was presented, he says, was professionally of the top. That was an experience he would joyfully talk about for quite sometime.

“Many many thanks & best regards.”

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Prof. Crawford's Qualifications and Affiliations

Professor Dr. Crawford is a Director of HRODC Ltd. and Director of HRODC Postgraduate Training Institute.

He is a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), from University of London; holding:

- MEd. Management from University of Bath;
- Advanced Diploma in Science Teacher Education from University of Bristol; with a
- Diploma in Doctoral Research Supervision, from University of Wolverhampton;
- Postgraduate Diploma in Information Systems from Thames Valley University; and
- Initial Teaching Certificate.

He is a:

- Fellow of the Institute of Management Specialists;
- Human Resources Specialist, of the Institute of Management Specialists;
- Member of Academy of Management (MAoM), within the following Management Disciplines:
 - ◆ Human Resources;
 - ◆ Organization and Management Theory;
 - ◆ Organization Development and Change;
 - ◆ Research Methods;
 - ◆ Conflict Management;
 - ◆ Organizational Behavior;
 - ◆ Management Consulting;
 - ◆ Gender & Diversity in Organizations; and
 - ◆ Critical Management Studies.
- Member of the Asian Academy of Management (MAAM);
- Member of the International Society of Gesture Studies (MISGS);

- Member of the Standing Council for Organisational Symbolism (MSCOS);
- Life Member of Malaysian Institute of Human Resource Management (LMIHRM);
- Member of ResearchGate Community;
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With Kindest Regards,



Prof. Dr. Ronald B. Crawford
Director
HRODC Postgraduate Training Institute