

# Relationship Dynamics of Filing Grievances: A Conceptual Model

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## Abstract

*Grievances are indispensable in the contemporary of competition in the face of limited resources available to the individuals, organizations and the nations. A grievance, in the organizational context, refers to the formally submitted complaint by an employee or group of employees. However, if a grievance is made good in time, the existing relationships between the employee and his co-workers is expected to get strengthened. Otherwise, it turns into a dispute thereby aggravating the organizational relationships from bad to worse. This article brings a diversity of arguments around the practices of 'filing grievance' in the form of thesis and anti-thesis thereby emerging into a 'synthesis' arguing that grievance-filing is not negative in itself unless baseless and fake grievances are filed for some hidden agenda. This paper also presents a conceptual model which demonstrates the relationship dynamics of filing grievances and guides the future researches. Some propositions have also been developed in this paper which could be validated by empirical researches in the future.*

**Keywords:** Organizational Relationships, Grievance, Grievance-Filing, Current Organizational Relationship, Future Organizational Relationship.

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## INTRODUCTION

Grievances are widespread phenomenon in workplaces and have been an important concern within the organizations. In general, the term grievance refers to the real or supposed hardship suffered by an individual in formal work settings which forms some legitimate grounds of launching complaints (Turner & O'Sullivan, 2013). In other words, grievances are the disputes regarding the effect, interpretation, application, claim or breach of any employment agreement between the organization and its employees (Ichniowsk, 1986).

A grievance is thus a reflection of general attitudinal climate of dissatisfaction and low employee morale (Farrell, 2012). Grievances range from ordinary disagreements between the supervisor and subordinates over workplace decisions to some major disputes over discriminations (Colvin, 2013). Therefore, all organizations, regardless of their size and nature of operations allow their employees to express and seek out the

resolution of these disagreements or dissatisfaction about their work environments (Walker & Hamilton, 2011). These disagreements may relate to their terms and conditions of employment, managerial decision making, working environment or their work agreements (Colvin, 2013) and can be latent or apparent; this typology of dissatisfaction is based on the nature of issue, its extent and the manner they are presented (Dwivedi & Williams, 2013). The dissatisfactions which are only expressed without following the proper procedures are known as complaints; whereas, if these dissatisfactions are presented formally become grievances (Salamon, 2000). So, grievance is more formal in character than a complaint.

Grievances generally arise under provisions of collective bargaining and are alleged violations of the employee rights (Mills, 1994). Therefore, organizations establish grievance systems and procedures which serve as sources by which employees can express

and record their feelings and protest (Calavita, & Jenness, 2013). The decisions to handle, grant or deny any grievance are made under the very system. This system outlines the procedures and processes of filing and handling grievances (Farmer & Miller, 2013). A grievance handling system, therefore, serves several purposes by its functions (Tanguy, 2011). It provides a formal mechanism of clarifying and adjusting disputes, brings the issue in a formal way to the attention of officials and management, defines and specifies the nature of complaint or issue and provides a structure of grievance settlement (Mills, 1994).

Grievances have also become the integral part of management-workers relationship (Rahim, 1989) and handling these grievances is a critical issue in maintaining productive management-workers relationship (Tjosvold, 1999). But, the review of relevant literature reveals that most of the researches conducted in this very field are focused on the nature, sources, and grievance procedures or on their impacts on organizational productivity, performance ratings, profit and decision making. An insight on how grievance filing affects the current and future organizational relationship is however missing.

This perspective on grievance is essential to understand because it would help understand the fact that how the filing of a grievance is triggered or restrained by the current and perceived future organizational relationships of individuals at workplaces. Therefore, there is a dire need to construct a framework of understanding the relationship dynamics associated with filing of grievances. This paper, thus aims at establishing a sound conceptual model which can illicit the relationship dynamics of filing grievances. This paper uses an in-depth literature survey to develop this conceptual model.

## Background

### Grievance:

Workers spend a considerable amount of time at their respective workplaces; disagreements with their supervisors, colleagues and subordinates and feelings of dissatisfaction are obvious to rise

(Akyeampong, 2003). This dissatisfaction is marked by its "heavy cost and disruptive nature" for the organizations. This feeling of injustice or dissatisfaction may be genuine or imaginary (Ash, 1970). Ichniowski (1986) defines grievance as a dispute regarding the effect, interpretation, application, claim or breach of any agreement with in the firms and reflects a general attitudinal climate of dissatisfaction and low morale. Most of the times the term "grievance" is misinterpreted and intermingled with "complaint", "dispute" and "conflict". Therefore, it is important to understand that grievance is entirely different from these terms. The complaint is the informal expression of an employee's dissatisfaction; if the same is expressed formally by following the organizational procedures it becomes a grievance. Grievance must be expressed by the employee and brought to the notice of the management and the organization. The grievance can easily turn into dispute if it is not handled properly within the firms. Both, the grievance and dispute involve negotiable interests but the conflict on other hand is severe and involves non-negotiable interests. (Salamon, 2000).

Grievance is generally the alleged violation of an employee's rights and arises under the provisions of collective bargaining arrangement with in a firm (Mills, 1994). The grievance activity is attributed to the traits and characteristics of the individual employees (Dalton & Todor, 1979). Bemmels (1994) identified the fact that grievance initiation usually involves two parties; the supervisor or boss and the employees both play an important role in grievance procedure. The employees are generally the aggrieved parties while the supervisors attempt to resolve the documented grievance and various aspects of their behaviors provide the momentum for the grievance. The employees can file a grievance because of several reasons. Kisler (1977) rightfully argues that the causes of grievance are countless. It was found that grievance crop up from employment issues; it arises when an employee's expectations are not fulfilled by the organization. It may result from inappropriate working conditions such as strict production standards, unsafe

workplace, bad relations with managers, irrational management policies such as overtime, demotions, transfers, inadequate salary and reward system, violation of organizational rules and practices etc.

### **Grievance System and Procedure:**

All organizations endeavor to handle and resolve grievances so that they can maintain conducive environment to ensure amicable organizational climate and productivity. For this purpose, organizations establish the grievance procedure and system. This grievance system serves as a source by which employees can express and record their feelings, protest against wrongdoings and to seek justice.

The decisions to handle, grant or deny any grievance are all made under the very system, his system consists of the procedures and processes that spell out mechanism of filing and handling grievances (Walker & Hamilton, 2011). A grievance handling system, therefore, serves several purposes by its functions; it provides a formal mechanism of clarifying and adjusting disputes, brings the issue in a formal way to the attention of officials and management, defines and specifies the nature of complaint or issue, provides a structure of grievance settlement and to make sure that the grievances are resolved properly and timely (Mills, 1994). On the other hand, if the dissatisfaction of employees' goes unattended or the conditions causing it are not rectified, the employee irritation is likely to increase and would lead to hostile attitude towards the management and unhealthy relations in the organization. The delay in handling the grievance is likely to make issues worse because this hold-up may create resentment, escalate negative impact on employee performance, can make employee anxious, de-motivate other organizational members and disrupt or deteriorate organizational relationships. (Management Study Guide, 2012).

Human resource is the major resource in any organization. For an efficient and effective utilization of human resource, human resource management provides different procedures, tools and techniques. Human resource management includes all the

activities from human resource planning to grievance handling procedures (Saaty & Qureshi, 2012). The grievance procedure is an integral and critical part of the employee and management relationship (Bemmels, Reshef & Startton-Devine, 1991; Ash, 1970; Uppal, 2010). Therefore, the procedures by which grievances are administered are important for the organizations (Greenberg, 1990).

### **Grievance Filing**

Grievance filing refers to the act by which an individual or group of workers formally express their feelings of dissatisfaction by following the prescribed procedures of the organization (Walker & Hamilton, 2011). Normally, the grievance filing process consists of four steps; i) discussion with the supervisor, ii) filing the written request to resolve the grievance with the supervisor, iii) decisions by the immediate supervisor and iv) decision by the higher authorities in the case if grievance is not handled by the immediate supervisor (Klass, 1989; Walker & Hamilton, 2011).

Each stage of grievance filing process is characterized by its importance and some distinct aspects (Saaty & Qureshi, 2012); for instance, the discussion stage of filing grievance is less formal and almost 40% grievances get resolved at this stage. The second stage is more formalized, the grievant at this stage follows a systematic procedure and files a claim of his rights granted to him under the employment contract or some prevailing regulations, the likelihood of granting favors largely depends upon on how well a claim is filed. The scrutiny of the claim starts at third stage when the immediate supervisor looks into the claim and determines the probable outcomes by remaining within the jurisdictions of legitimacy granted through organizational hierarchy. Generally, 90% of the grievances are granted at third stage but if a grievance is severe, improperly handled or the determination of outcomes is beyond the legitimate authority of a supervisor, the top management then decides whether to grant or refuse a grievance (Mills, 1994; Salamon, 2000; Uppal, 2010). Impartiality and proper deliberations are essential to be ensured at each stage of grievance

filing; these can help an organization to avoid the dysfunctional consequences of grievance activity.

### **The determinants of grievance filing:**

The research has identified five major reasons of grievance which were comprised up of twenty one factors. The five major reasons or causes of grievance include the i) Job itself, ii) Personnel Management Decisions, iii) Working Conditions, iv) Interpersonal Relations and v) Personal Life Problems. The study has drawn a conclusion from the evidences that the “Job Itself” creates highest degree of grievance (Akuratiyagamage & Opatha, 2004). Muchinsky & Maassarani (1980) also reported in their study that more grievances are filed regarding discipline, discrimination, and safety & health issues. Rees and Porter (2008) have identified some other reasons of filing grievance; they are of the opinion that grievance can emerge from sexual harassment, disagreement on pay, discrimination and performance issues. Inappropriate gain-sharing plans are some other reasons of grievances to arise (Arthur & Jelf, 1999). Another important aspect that can cause grievance is the quality of information exchange between the employees and their immediate bosses. And the number of grievances filed is inversely proportional company commitment and job satisfaction (Dalton & Todor, 1982).

Cleyman, Jex & Love (1995) surveyed one hundred and twenty five employees and found that the intention or rate of file a grievance significantly decreases when there exists an exchange of quality information among them and their supervisors. Peach & Livernash (1974) spotted three major factor associated with the rate of filling grievances: i) environmental, ii) union, and iii) management. In addition to this, they argue that higher rate of filling grievances hampers productivity and negatively affect organizational relationships.

### **Organizational Relationships and grievance filling**

Relationship is all about the “dealings and feelings” between the individuals or groups (Department of Labor, 2013). Whereas, the term organizational relationship commonly refers to the interpersonal relationships of

individual at work (Rana, Dwivedi & Williams, 2013). It is an association of individuals who work together at a same work place such as the management, staff and union (Management Study Guide, 2013). These workplace relationships serve several functions such as decision making, influence sharing, and emotional support (Sias, 2005). Thus we pose the following proposition referring to the conceptual framework presented later.

### **Proposition 1: Organizational Relationships affect grievance filing.**

The workplace or organizational relationships are generally divided into two broader categories; i) supervisor-subordinate relationship and ii) peer-coworker relationship, the former refers to the different forms of relationships a superordinate forms with his subordinates, whereas, the latter signifies the relationships among colleagues, peers or coworkers. Formality is associated with each of these workplace relationships; the supervisor-subordinate relationship is more formal due to hierarchical levels whereas the peer-coworker relationship is informal because no one has a formal authority over one another (Sias, 2005; Sias, Krone, & Jablin, 2002). Sias & Chahil (1998) have examined the way by which the latter category relationships are formed; they argue that peer-coworker relationship can range from acquaintance to fast friendship. Kram and Isabella (1985) have developed a most cited system of categorizing the peer-coworker relationship, they categorized this relationship into three primary categories: i) Information-Peer Relationship, ii) Communication Relationship a, iii) Collegial Peer Relationship and iv) Special Peer relationship. According to them, the first category is characterized by a low level of trust and self-disclosure, a little and only work related information is shared in the category of communication relationship and this relationship is limited to the work roles. There exist a moderate level of trust, support and self-disclosure in collegial relationship; whereas, the level of trust, emotional support and self-disclosure are very high in special peer relationships.

Both of the workplace relationship categories are associated with a variety of outcomes; for instance, the employees in good supervisor-subordinate relationship feel more satisfied with their jobs and committed to their organizations and possess less turnover intentions than those whose relation with the boss is bad (Witten, 2009). A congenial supervisor-subordinate relationship promotes an environment of trust; and as a consequence, the managers and subordinates communicate more openly and freely (Sias, 2005). Sias & Chahil (1998) and Sias (2005) argue that a high quality peer-worker relationship yields several benefits; it fosters free and speedy flow of communication, improved coordination, enhanced group performance and an environment of trust.

**Proposition 2: *The present organizational relationships of individuals significantly influence grievance filing.***

Several research studies are conducted on grievance procedures and on its outcomes. For instance, Sulkin & Pranis (1967) conducted a study on the characteristics of grievant and reported that grievant were; i) more educated, ii) more active in the unions, iii) had a higher rate of absenteeism and, iv) earned less than their non-grievant counterparts. Bamberger, Khon and Nahum-Shani (2008) analyzed the gender, ethnicity and aversive working condition on grievance filing. They found that gender and ethnic background of the workers are not linked with the perceptions of adverse workplace and working conditions. Klass & Thomas (1994) examined the grievance activity at an individual level. This research took an account of the idea that past behavior of a consistent grievant is a good predictor for future behavior of filing grievance by the same grievant. Furthermore this study examined the stability and consistency in a grievance behavior following three different perspectives. Among different analysts it is believed that there is a high stability in the level of grievance behavior across the tenure of the employee, thus they are being called as the bad apples since they file multiple grievances at different stages of their work life. They are prone to grievance as a result of certain

personality traits such dominance, need for power, hostility to rules and authority such employees always seek for the ways to file the grievance due to language ambiguity and misinterpretation in the contractual terms. This perspective suggests that the relation between the grievance filing in one period and the subsequent periods will be high and same for the non-disciplinary grievance filing.

Boswell & Olson-Buchanan (2004) analyzed that perception of mistreatment, justice and unfairness cannot be avoided in any organizational settings. Their research on 461 out of 920 staff employees of a public university measured the relationship between perceived mistreatment, grievance filing, nature of mistreatment, exit-related withdrawal and work related withdrawal and showed that perceived mistreatment and procedural mistreatment can be caused exit-related withdrawal and work related withdrawal respectively.

Kalas & DeNisi (1989) examined the managerial reactions to grievance activity. Their research was aimed at finding the relative effects of finding different types of grievance activities such as grievance filed against the supervisors and against the organizational policies and the positive outcomes associated with them. The results of their research revealed that supervisors react negatively to the employees who were involved in filing grievances thus it affected their performance ratings. The supervisors react even more negatively when the grievances are granted to employees. On the other hand, the grievances filed against the organizational policies had no effect on performance ratings. The implications of this research suggests that the value of the voice provided by the grievance filling system turned out to be limited that results into dissatisfaction among the employees, causes absenteeism and extremely low productivity.

Lewin & Peterson (1999) analyzed the effects of filing grievances, grievance settlement activity and the post-hoc outcomes of these activities. They studied four unionized organizations over a period of three years and found that performance rating, attendance rates and prospects of promotion decreases and the turnover of the grievance

fillers increases as compared to non-fillers. The findings of the study suggest that the employers exercise revenge against the grievance fillers and their supervisors. Ng & Dastmalchian (1989) analyzed that the grievance filed by highly paid employees are more likely to be granted than those filed by lower paid employees. Lower paid employees file more grievances than the highly paid employees. Job related grievance have a higher likely hood of being granted than policy oriented grievances.

Grievances outcomes vary across the organization depending on the functions of the organization and the grievances related to work condition were granted more than the grievances over assignment duties. Grievance filing and handling not only disturbs the social interactions within organizations; but also affects the future relationships of grievance officials (Duane, 1991).

**Proposition 3: Individual's perceptions of future organizational relationships influence grievance filing.**

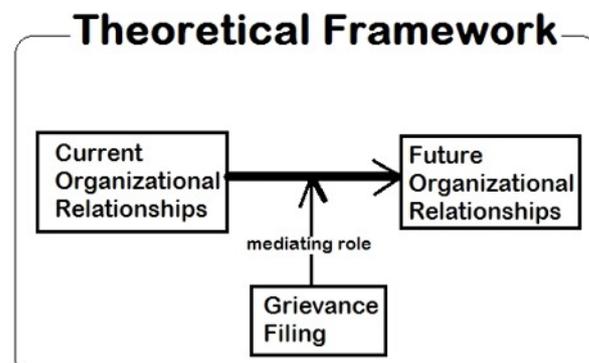
**CONCEPTUAL MODEL:**

The following conceptual definitions have been used in this study;

1. **Grievance** implies that it is the feeling of discontent, injustice or dissatisfaction felt by the employees arising from their work environment.
2. **Grievance filling** refers to the act of recording the grievances by an employee through the formal organizational grievance handling procedure.
3. **Existing organizational relationship** means the prevailing interpersonal relationships of the employees with their peers, high-ups and subordinates within their organizational settings.
4. **Future organizational relationship** connotes the relationship of the employees with their peers, high-ups and subordinates that result from filling a grievance.

Based on the literature review comprising of past 50 years(1967-2013); the following

conceptual framework is developed to explain the links among the major constructs of the study.



**Figure 1:** Relationship Dynamics of Filing Grievances

Grievance filing plays a mediating role between the organizational relationships of individuals with their colleagues and high-ups at workplaces. Existing and future relationships are the dual facets of organizational relationships. We propose that the organizational relationships determine the extent to which a grievance is likely to be filled or vice versa.

The first facet, that is, good current/existing organizational relationships of an individual with his/her coworkers and super-ordinates, restrain him/her from filing of grievances against them; whereas, the bad organizational relationships trigger individuals to file grievances against their counterparts. Thus, it is hypothesized that an individual who is in good relationships with those of his peers and high-ups would rarely file any grievance against them. But, if one does not enjoy good relationship at workplace, then he/she would file more grievances.

The perceived nature of future organizational relations is the other aspect of organizational relationships. It is also proposed that the grievance filing can also be determined on the basis of the perceived nature of an individual's future organizational relationships in their work settings. It has been observed that the individuals, who refrain from filing grievances against their counterparts and high-ups not only enjoy good relationships with their colleagues, but also yield more benefits in terms of salary raise, promotions and many others of similar kind than those

who do not. Hence, it is postulated that the perceived nature of future organizational relationship affects filing of grievances. That is, an individual, who expects that grievance filing would affect him in many, regards; will not initiate grievance filing process and vice versa.

## CONCLUSION

It is a universal fact that wherever human beings are involved, of certain there will be discontents and dissatisfaction, even though it may superbly be best managed organizations. But, it does not mean that by thinking so, the management can ignore the grievance of the employees. Accumulation of dissatisfaction may result in severe conflicts and litigations, hampering the peace and work, for which the majority of the human being aspires. Further, it is observed that some of the situation which could easily be otherwise avoided result in the form of grievances, damaging the very harmony of the organization. Quite often, it is also forgotten that the grievances are those pests that weaken the organization tree with the trace of indelible marks. This paper conceptualized the possible effects of grievance filing on existing and future relationships of individuals in their work places. It is noteworthy that the major constructs of the study (grievance filing and organizational relationships) are completely dynamic; therefore, their interrelationships are continuously evolving. Hence, this relationship must be given a proper consideration and thought if the working environment is to be maintained conducive. Also, these factors do not stand alone; for instance, the organizational relationships are not solely determined by grievance filing. There are several other factors that might affect it. Therefore, it is imperative that the researchers and practitioners continue to examine other factors. Furthermore, empirical investigations are required to validate the notions posited in this study and also to identify all the possible factors that can provide a comprehensive framework for understanding.

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