

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN AN ORGANISATION

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Abstract

There is bound to conflict in every human setting because everyone has unique identity. Our values, opinion and beliefs are different therefore; there should be room for expression of divergent opinions. While it is important that everyone should express themselves, the common goal of the organization should be considered in order to ensure a harmonious relationship. The study examined relevant literature on the subject. The various causes of conflicts and the strategies for resolving these conflicts when they occurred were reviewed. It was therefore concluded that conflicts should not be suppressed but rather it should be discussed and resolved in a way that will be beneficial to all concerned in order to ensure cordial relationship in the organisation.

Keywords: *Conflict, Conflict Management, Conflict Management Strategies*

INTRODUCTION

At all level of life or spheres of human existence conflict cannot be ruled out. As affirmed by Greg (2012) conflict is “inevitable and has the potential for beauty, but at the same time, there is also a “beast” lurking in it if we mishandle our conflicts”. This is so because no two people have the same expectations, thoughts, opinions or needs. According to Hoban (1992a), Conflict is a natural disagreement resulting from individuals or groups that differ in attitudes, beliefs, values or needs. In addition, Greg (2012) and Dobson (1992) saw conflict as avoidable and potentially beneficial because it is a part of getting to know and adjusting [to a group], values, habits and ways of functioning. Thus, as posited by McNamara Carter (2013), conflict is not the problem, however, poor management of the conflict is the problem. Conflict is a problem when it hampers productivity, lowers morale, causes more and continued conflicts, causes inappropriate behaviours.

It is obvious that definitions attributed to conflict have some words in common which revolve around words such as differences, disagreement and incompatibility in connection to needs, ideals, values, belief and goals. Foundation Coalition (2013), define conflict as a struggle or

contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. Other meaning such as stated by Deustch (1973) believes a conflict is manifested when two or more individuals interact and perceive incompatible differences between or threats to their resources, needs, or values. From a communication perspective, Hocker and Wilmot (1985) explain conflict as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference with the other party in achieving their goals. Conflict arises from differences, both large and small. As such, it occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires (Segal & Smith, 2013).

Dysfunctional behaviours in an Organisation leads to loss of time and resources and affects the achievement of organisational goals and objectives. There is therefore a serious need to understand what conflict is and how it can be successfully managed in order that organisational goals are achieved.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to understand the concept of conflict and how it can be managed. Specifically, the study is done to

- Understand the concept of conflict in an organization
- Examine the various strategies that can be used in conflict management, and
- Examine negotiator skills required to avoid conflicts.

CAUSES AND ISSUES OF CONFLICT IN ORGANISATIONS

Many Human complexities exists which triggers conflict at home, offices, party (groups) and in the society. As identified by Rahim (2002), conflict can arise when a party is required to engage in an activity that is incongruent with his or her needs or interests, secondly, when behavioral preferences, and the satisfaction of which is incompatible with another person's implementation of his or her preferences, thirdly, when a party wants some mutually desirable resource that is in short supply, such that the wants of all parties involved may not be satisfied fully. Fourthly, when a party possesses attitudes, values, skills, and goals that are salient in directing his or her behavior but are perceived to be exclusive of the attitudes, values, skills, and goals held by the other(s). Other causes of conflict include trying to negotiate before the timing is right or before needed information is available (Hoban, 1992a), Conflicting values or actions, The alignment or the amount of resources is insufficient, poor communications and leadership problems (McNamara, 2013).

There are also some causes which are best categorise as predisposing factors or ingredient that fuel conflict because directly they are not problems on their own but can trigger the real causes of conflict in an organisation. As pointed out by Hoban (1992), they are:

1. **Needs: individuals or groups in an organisation have things that are** essential to their well-being and when these needs are ignore it causes conflict.
2. **Values:** values are beliefs or principles we consider to be very important (Hoban, 1992). Values of individuals, party or between organisation management and staff needs to be make it clear and incompatible values resolved .when this is lacking it results to conflicts.
3. **Perceptions:** interpretations given to situations or issues around us differ and this can cause conflicts. Hoban (1992) pointed out that misperceptions or differing perceptions may originate

from self-perceptions, others' perceptions, differing perceptions of situations and perceptions of threat.

4. **Power:** The ability or right (capacity) to control people or things, perform or act effectively can be subjected various test. This is not far from the view of Hoban (1992), in which he pointed out that the way people define and use power is an important influence on the number and types of conflicts that occur. Especially when that power is used to make others change their actions or to gain an unfair advantage.
5. **Feelings and emotions:** Many people let their feelings and emotions become a major influence over how they deal with conflict. Conflicts can also occur because people ignore their own or others' feelings and emotions. Other conflicts occur when feelings and emotions differ over a particular issue (Hoban, 1992)
6. **Code of conduct, ethics and principles:** in any organisation, code of conduct, ethics and principles goes a long way to help people to refrain from conflicting behaviour but when it is lacking conflicts arises no matter the all other efforts embark on to make peace.

CONCEPT OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

No single definition of conflict management exists. However, the definition of Rahim (1992) which stated that conflict is "*the interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities*" pulls a lot of facts to limelight. This definition identified some key issues such as interactive process, and incompatibility and entities. Conflict might escalate and lead to nonproductive results, or conflict can be beneficially resolved and lead to quality final products. Therefore, learning to manage conflict is integral to a high-performance in an organisation. Although very few people go looking for conflict, more often than not, conflict results because of miscommunication between people with regard to their needs, ideas, beliefs, goals, or values.

Furthermore, learning how to manage conflicts can decrease the odds of nonproductive escalation in organisations. Conflict management involves acquiring skills related to conflict resolution, self-awareness about conflict modes, conflict communication skills, and also establishing a structure for management of conflict in your environment (The Foundation Coalition, 2003). Conflict management, has been used as a generic term to cover the whole scope of positive conflict handling. It is referred to as a more limited way to the settlement and containment of violent conflict while conflict resolution is a more comprehensive term, which implies that the deep- rooted sources of conflict are addressed and transformed.

STEPS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND CONFLICT MANAGMENT STRATEGIES

A. Steps in conflict management

It is very important to avoid mixing up steps in conflict management with conflict management strategies. The latter (management strategies) is the second step of conflict management known as determination of management strategy (Hoban, 1992). Strategies employed in conflict management can be viewed from different perspective and according to level of existence of groups or parties such work teams, communities, corporate entities, or organisations, states or nations involved in the conflicts. Thus, no one way is the best and for different situation. There are **five steps to managing conflict**. These steps are:

1. Analyze the conflict

This required analysing the nature and type of conflict. It raises important questions such as who are the groups involved, who they represent, how they are organised, what their power base is, and historical relationships among the groups. It is also important to find out how the conflict arise and also identify and describe main and secondary issues. In the course of analysing the conflict negative issues can be reframed positively. Then see if issues are negotiable and what is the position of parties involved in these issues and what are their common interests.

To progress, further questions should be ask, such as what information is available and what other information is needed? What values or interests are challenged? Then, possible strategies are looked into. Would consensus serve all interests? Are there external constraints or other influences that must be accommodated? What are the past experiences (if any) of the groups working together? What is the timeline for a decision? How will the public and the media be involved and informed? Will an outside negotiator be needed?

Sources of these answers can come from interviews of some of the groups concerned, partners, organisation archives, or from personal experience.

2. Determine management strategy

Proper understanding of the nature and type of conflict will surely influence the selection of the most appropriate strategy bearing in mind that sometimes it may be necessary to have a neutral negotiator to help move the groups toward consensus. Hoban (1992a), Dontigney (2013) and McNamara (2013), highlighted five conflict management strategies, which are Collaboration, Compromise, Competition, Accommodation and Avoidance.

3. Pre-negotiation

The third step in managing conflict requires laying down the ground work which should occur prior to negotiation. This ground work as purported by Hoban (1992a), are *Initiation, Assessment, Ground rules and agenda, Organization and Joint fact*.

4. Negotiation

Negotiation which is the process whereby parties seek to settle or resolve their conflict, is another step that put issues in perspective to lasting solution. Negotiation entails the interest of parties, options for satisfying interests, evaluation entails discussion of options and determining the best, written agreement and finally, commitment to agreement.

5. Post-negotiation

Once negotiation is complete, the parties will need to implement the decisions made. Some key steps include ratification and implementation of agreement. The partnership will need to have a plan to monitor progress, document success, resolve problems, renegotiate terms and celebrate success (Hoban, 1992b).

B. Conflict management strategies

Hoban (1992a), Dontigney (2013) and McNamara (2013) identified five conflict management strategies which are explained below.

i. Collaboration:

Collaboration works by integrating ideas set out by multiple people. The object is to find a creative solution acceptable to everyone. Collaboration, though useful, calls for a significant time commitment not appropriate to all conflicts. For example, a business owner should work collaboratively with the manager to establish policies, but collaborative decision-making regarding office supplies wastes time better spent on other activities. As purported by McNamara (2013), you can focus on working together. Use this approach when the goal is to meet as many current needs as possible by using mutual resources. This approach sometimes raises new mutual needs. Collaboration can also be used when the goal is to cultivate ownership and commitment

ii. Compromise

McNamara (2013) calls it mutual give and take, you can engage in mutual give-and-take. This approach is used when the goal is to get past the issue and move on together. This strategy typically calls for both sides of a conflict to give up elements of their position in order to establish an acceptable, if not agreeable, solution. This strategy prevails most often in conflicts where the parties hold approximately equivalent power. Business owners frequently employ compromise during contract negotiations with other businesses when each party stands to lose something valuable, such as a customer or necessary service.

iii. Competition

Competition operates as a zero-sum game, in which one side wins and other loses. Highly assertive personalities often fall back on competition as a conflict management strategy. The competitive strategy works best in a limited number of conflicts, such as emergency situations. In general, business owners benefit from holding the competitive strategy in reserve for crisis situations and decisions that generate ill-will, such as pay cuts or layoffs (Dontigney, 2013). You can compete with the others. You can work to get your way, rather than clarifying and addressing the issue. Competitors love accommodators. Use this approach when you have a very strong conviction about your position (McNamara, 2013).

iv. Accommodation

This is a strategy that entails giving the opposing side what it wants. For example, a business that requires formal dress may institute a "casual Friday" policy as a low-stakes means of keeping the peace with the rank and file (Dontigney, 2013). You can accommodate it. You can give in to others, sometimes to the extent that you compromise yourself. Use this approach very sparingly and infrequently, for example, in situations when you know that you will have another more useful approach in the very near future. Usually this approach tends to worsen the conflict over time, and causes conflicts within you (McNamara Carter, 2013).

v. Avoidance

A strategy that seeks to put off conflict indefinitely. By delaying or ignoring the conflict, the avoider hopes the problem resolves itself without a confrontation. In some circumstances, avoiding can serve as a profitable conflict management strategy, such as after the dismissal of a popular but unproductive employee. Those who actively avoid conflict frequently have low esteem or hold a position of low power. The hiring of a more productive replacement for the

position soothes much of the conflict (Dontigney, 2013). This strategy is generally used when the issue is trivial or other issues are more pressing. It is also used when confrontation has a high potential for damage or more information is needed. The drawbacks are that important decisions may be made by default (Hoban, 1992b).

NEGOTIATION SKILLS

Negotiation is an important skill for coming to an agreement when conflicts develop at work and in an organisation. Negotiation is the process whereby parties seek to settle or resolve their conflicts and the following negotiating methods listed below should be consider:

1. Separate People From the Problem.

When negotiating, remember you are dealing with people who have their own unique needs, emotions and perceptions. Some conflicts are based on differences in thinking and perceptions. These conflicts may exist mainly in peoples' minds. It helps for each party to put themselves into the other's shoes so they can understand each other's point of view Identify and openly discuss differences in perceptions, being careful not to place blame. In addition, recognize and understand the other side's emotions as well as your own.

2. Focus on Interests, Not Positions.

Focusing on interests, rather than positions, makes it possible to come up with better agreements. Even when people stand on opposite positions, they usually have a few shared interests. It takes time and effort to identify interests. Groups may not even be clear about their own interests. It helps to write down each group's interests as they are discovered. It helps to ask why others take the positions or make the decisions they do.

Partners will have multiple interests. Interests involving important human needs (such as security, economic well-being, a sense of belonging, recognition and control over one's life) are difficult to negotiate.

3. Develop Optional Solutions.

When developing optional solutions that meet the interests of all sides, it is advisable to meet as many of each side's interests as possible. Start by inviting all sides to brainstorm ideas (before reaching a decision). Brainstorming is discussed in the *Leading and Communicating* guide. Some obstacles to developing innovative options are:

- Judging and rejecting prematurely
- Searching for a single best answer
- Putting limits on scope or vision
- Considering only your own interests

To overcome these obstacles, view the situation through the eyes of different partners. Focus on shared interests to make the process smoother for all involved. Look for meaningful opportunities, not simple solutions.

4. Developing Objective Criteria.

When developing criteria for selecting or combining possible alternatives, it is advisable to revisit the conflicting interests. These can't be ignored or "wished" away. Instead discuss them as you begin developing criteria for judging alternatives. Also keep in mind principles such as fairness, efficiency and scientific merit.

Strive for criteria that are legitimate, practical and unbiased. You may also find it helps to explore the criteria used in making past decisions and discuss criteria with your partners or outside experts.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict is dynamic and it triggers different situation to any degree that can be beyond human imagination. Poor conflict management has contributed significantly to the set back experience in most developing countries such as Nigeria (NEPAD, 2011). For instance, crisis in the Niger Delta region was very real threats to Nigeria's national security and economic survival. As stated by Ubhenin (2013), the claim by the government of what conflict has caused was no figment of imagination. In January 2006 before MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta) attacks on oil facilities, the nation's daily production of crude oil was 2.6 million barrels per day. This had reduced to 700,000 barrels per day before the amnesty proclamation in 2009. Hence the country was fast losing its position as a top oil exporter (ibid). Similar consequence is seen in an organisation when institutions or organisations do not function properly due to conflict. This condition or consequence extends to the society and at large to the nation.

However, very limited research has examined how conflict in teams may evolve over time or how multiple, different forms of conflict may predict the appearance of other forms of conflict (Greer, Jehn & Mannix, 2007). Since organisations are made up of individuals it is obvious that relationship conflicts can exist. This can reduce the team performance due to the distraction. The study of Cronin and Bezrukova (2006) affirmed that relationship conflict was positively associated with negative emotions and aggravation, which in turn reduced members' ability to process information. Arguably, conflict might escalate and lead to nonproductive results, or conflict can be beneficially resolved and lead to quality final products.

As ascertain by The Foundation Coalition (2013) learning to manage conflict is integral to a high-performance team. Conflict results because of miscommunication between people with regard to their needs, ideas, beliefs, goals, or values. Orji (2010) in his study on Theories and Practice of Ethnic Conflict Management in Nigeria asserted that conflict is a highly significant social phenomena because of its complexity and the social and political threats it pose to the society. On the other hand, Hoban (1992a) noted that Conflict is not always negative. In fact, it can be healthy when effectively managed. Healthy conflict can lead to Growth and innovation, new ways of thinking, additional management options in organisations (Hoban, 1992; Demirtas, Doganci, & Ozdemir, 2007). In similar vein, Segal & Smith (2013) upheld conflict as normal part of any healthy relationship. After all, two people cannot be expected to agree on everything, all the time. Thus, they opined that learning how to deal with conflict – rather than avoiding it – is crucial.

Mismanage conflict can cause great harm to a relationship, but when handled in a respectful, positive way, conflict provides an opportunity to strengthen the bond between two people likewise parties in an organisations. These skills for conflict resolution, keep personal and professional relationships strong and growing (Segal & Smith, 2013). In addition, Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance, VYMA (2013) outlined conflict as capable of bringing about change; presenting an opportunity to learn; encouraging a person to do better; helping people to see and understand differences; helping people to become more flexible; clearing the air and helping people to move on. This calls for the need to properly handle, resolve or manage conflicts. More importantly, skills and understanding are required couple with the ability to confront and manage conflicts which bring lasting solutions or result in mutual benefit (Hoban, 1992).

Management, which implies the organization and coordination of activities or situations in order to achieve defined goals, is a skill that is necessary for handling conflict at any given time. Unmanaged or poorly managed conflicts generate a breakdown in trust and lost productivity. For small businesses or organisation, where success often hinges on the cohesion of a few people, loss of trust and productivity can signal the death of the business or organisation (Eric Dontigney, 2013). When we manage our conflicts more effectively, we use less energy on the burdensome tasks such as systemic conflict and get to spend more of our energy on our projects at work and building our relationships and less apt to practice destructive behaviours that will negatively impact their organisation (Foundation coalition, 2013). All teams and organizations have a conflict culture (the way the team responds to conflict). However, most teams never discuss what the conflict culture is, therefore providing the opportunity for individual team members to make assumptions that can be counterproductive to the team. As affirmed by Foundation Coalition (2013), practicing one's conflict management skills leads to more successful engagement in conflict with outcomes of relief, understanding, better communication, and greater productivity for both the individual and the team. It was also observed that people do not come to organisations with all the social skills they need to collaborate effectively with others. Therefore, imparting people with appropriate communication, leadership, trust, and decision making skills related conflict management in order for groups to function effectively is vital. In addition, when people learn to effectively manage and resolve conflicts with others, then more opportunities for successful team memberships are available to such people.

Importantly, unresolved conflict can lead to aggression. Most people do not resolve conflicts because they either have a faulty skill set and/or because they do not know the organization's policy on conflict management. Research and personal experiences show us that, when we avoid conflict, the conflict actually escalates and our thoughts and feelings become more negative. All team members need to know their conflict styles, conflict intervention methods, and strategies for conflict skill improvement. There are factors which influences how we respond to conflict in our organisations or institutions. These factors, includes but not limited to gender, self concept, expectations, situation, position (power), practice, communication skills, and life experiences. Discerning how we manage our conflict, why we manage conflict the way we do, and thinking about the value of engaging in conflict with others is important. With better understanding we can make informed choices about how we engage in conflict and when we will engage in conflict Foundation Coalition (2013).

RELEVANCE TO PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

The private sector of any economy plays a vital role in its development. It is therefore necessary to have an harmonious existence in this critical sector of the economy in order to enhance development. Conflict management is critical in this all important sector to ensure growth and development. When there is harmony, there will be peace and progress. The workers will be sure of having a peaceful atmosphere to carry out their assignments without any fear of intimidation in their minds.

It is therefore necessary for managers in this critical sector to employ the use of conflict management strategies and also encourage negotiations to ensure peace working environment so that organisational goals and objectives can be achieved.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article brings to limelight critical issues revolving around conflict management in an organisation. The position of this article is that conflict management is a process that brings

about changes and should prompt proactive responses in assessing possible causative factors. Enabling environment should be created to promote healthy expression of opinions, feelings, values, needs and positions. Management of organisations should be quick to identify situations that are pointers to suppressed opinion or values that are predisposing factors to conflict in an organisation. As stated by Greg (2012), absence of conflict suggests the presence of deadened emotions or a hardened heart, or that one “party” is being suppressed. The outcome of this is very dangerous to any organisation at the long term.

Ultimately, Greer, Jehn & Mannix (2007) recommends that group members should possess high conflict resolution efficacy (beliefs that conflict can be easily resolved) which helps them to curtail conflicts and stop it from transforming into other forms of conflict.

Leaders and members of organisations at the stage of absorption of members should focus seriously on intentional development of good communication skills because poor communications or processing of information play a significant role in inflaming conflict and also nurturing it. Therefore, managers would do well to allow their employees to engage in conflict trainings or team building exercises early in the team’s time together wherein the employees can increase their conflict resolution efficacy. These approaches afford readers the opportunity to explore the pivotal role of conflict management strategies as it pertains to the organizational harmony and team work.

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