

---

## Strategies for Effective Management of Organizational Conflict

---

By

B.N. IFEZUE

*Departement of Business Education,  
Nwafor Orizu College of Education,  
Nsugbe.*

### **Abstract**

*Conflict is an inevitable part of organization life because the goals of different stakeholder are often incompatible. Conflict occurs between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social/organizational settings because of the wide range of potential differences among people, the absence of conflict, usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction. Conflict in itself is neither good nor bad. However, the manner in which conflict is handled determines whether it is constructive or destructive. It is necessary for managers to develop the skills necessary to manage conflict effectively. The study examines source of conflicts and strategies adopted in the resolution of conflicts and recommended that the win-win approach is more suitable in the resolution of organizational conflict. The study concludes that for an organization to function successfully, effective management of conflict is imperative.*

Conflict is defined as an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and the antagonistic feelings towards each other Fisher (1990). The incompatibility of differences may exist in reality or may be perceived by the parties involved. Nonetheless, the opposing actions and the hostile emotions are very real hallmarks of conflicts.

Conflicts occur between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings. Because of the wide range of potential differences among people, the absence of conflict usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction. Conflict in itself is neither good nor bad. However, the manner in which it is handled determines whether it is constructive or destructive. Deutsch and Coleman, (2000).

Conflict has the potential for either a great deal of destruction or much creativity and positive social change, Ariesberg, (1998).

Conflict in work environment is inevitable when two or more people have to work together and combine ideas, the doorway for conflict is ever open. The goal is to learn how to use conflict as a tool that can benefit the whole, rather than destroy it and the idea of concern. A team must have common goal of success, Temma and Katzel, (1995). Several strategies have proven to be beneficial tools when resolving these destructive conflicts.

Conflicts is also defined as a disagreement or disharmony that occurs in groups when differences regarding ideas; methods and members are expressed, Wisinski, (1993). These differences, however, do not have to result in negative outcome. Used properly, the group can become closer and more aware of each other's differences. With respect for one another, the group can combine ideas and be more successful in the end.

Administration is ultimately responsible for recognizing a conflicts, instilling conflict resolution strategies, and making sure these strategies are executed successfully. In order for a manager, for example, to achieve this goal, he needs to be aware of the type of conflict; constructive or destructive. Constructive conflict is beneficial to teams. This style focuses on the issue while continuing to keep respect for other team mates. Team mates will exhibit flexibility, supportiveness, and cooperation among each other. Commitment to success for the team is apparent. Destructive conflict, on the other hand, exhibits selfish behaviors of personal attacks, insults, and defensiveness. No flexibility is present with the team, and competitiveness between the team mates is high. Avoidance of conflict is obvious. University of Phoenix (UOP), (2004).

Many outside influences may cause or add to conflict in a work place. Limited resources can cause stress between coworkers. UOP, (2004)

For management to be efficient it must devote some part of its time to the management of conflicts. Conflicts is part of the expectations in any social organization. Among all the programmes in management development, such as, leadership, crisis, decision making, planning, control, budgeting, communication skills, human resources, the one that occupies an important position is the management of conflict. Thomas and Schmidt, (1998). This is because conflict is inevitable and functional.

Essentially, the ability to deal with conflict effectively is seen as necessary skill efficient managers should possess. Conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life because the goals of different stakeholders such as managers and workers are often incompatible. Organization conflict also can exist between departments and divisions that compete for promotion to the next level in the organizational hierarchy.

The level of conflict present, in all organization has important implications for organizational performance. Lack of conflict in an organization often signals that managers emphasize conformity at the expense of new idea, resistant to change, and strive for agreement rather than, eliminating it. Managers should never try to eliminate all conflicts but rather should try to keep conflicts at a moderate and functional level to promote change efforts that would benefit the organization. To manage conflict, managers must understand the type and sources of conflict and be familiar with certain strategies that can be effective in dealing with it.

### **Concept of Organizational Conflict**

Jones (2003) defined organizational conflict as the discord that arises when the goals, interest, or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible and those individual or groups block or thwart each others attempts to achieve their objectives. Aswathappa (2004) observed it as the struggle between incompatible or opposing needs, wishes, ideas, interest, or people. Conflict arises which people/individuals or group encounters goals that both parties cannot obtain satisfactorily.

It is a situation where there is perceived (real or imagined) incompatible differences which result in crisis, blocking, disagreement, frustration, interference, intolerance, and opposition. Ahuja, (2005). Conflict manifests itself in overacts such as riots, strikes, demonstrations, terrorism, looting, war, etc. and such other forms as frustration, withdrawal etc.

Sharma (2003) recapitulated organization conflict as a disagreement between two or more members or groups of the organization. The conflict may arise due to;

- i. Sharing of scarce resources or work activities,
- ii. Different statuses, goals, values or perceptions,
- iii. Disagreement over facts, methods and
- iv. Social, economical and psychological reasons.

According to Aswathappa (2004) the conflict can be viewed in different perspectives.

- i. The classical perspective, this perspective views conflicts to be harmful, destructive, violent, irrational, something that is bad and management in organization must do everything to avoid it. This is because it has malfunctioning effects. This represents the traditional view:
- ii. The human relations perspective; this perceptive sees conflict as natural, inevitable, healthy and a human phenomenon. It is never evil except if it is mal-handled. It is then that it becomes a threat and source of tension, otherwise, it should be accepted. It has some positive outcome when properly managed.
- iii. The interactionist perspective: this perspective encourages conflict in organizations. For an organization to perform efficiently there is need for conflict. It creates room

for innovation and change and removes the tendency for organizations to be static and unresponsive to the needs of the organizational members and changes in the environment. According to this perspective, conflicts is desired because its existence, makes managers to become innovative and creative. There must be a tolerable level of conflict to knit the various units together, make them viable, creative, reflective broad-minded and accommodating.

### **Sources of Organizational Conflict**

1. **Miscommunication:** According to the University of Phoenix (UOP), (2004) on learning team tool/kits management, miscommunication may cause conflict among staff. Two workers with the same goal may not explain their points clearly to one another. If messages are not clear, confrontation and conflicts will, more than likely be the outcome. Staff who share different attitudes, values and perception, open the door for conflict UOP, (2004). Personality clashes are probably the most common issues between a group, and possibly the most easily to overcome. If dealt with in a mature, adult mentality, personality differences should not influence ones work environment or the groups goals.
2. **Lack of Training, Accountability and Favoritism by Administration can also cause Conflict:** management and staff should always keep the objectives of the organization in focus. As adults, they are individually and collectively responsible for their actions.
3. **Incompatibility of Goals:** Members in the organization, the various sub-units and the organization itself have different goals. Most often these differ and are antagonistic, even to the detriment of the organizational objectives.
4. **Diversity:** Interpersonal conflict in an organization can arise because of diversity. Old workers may feel uncomfortable or resentful about reporting to a younger supervisor or a female top-manager may fell that members of her predominantly male top-management team may band together whenever one team disagrees with one of her proposal. Whether these feelings are justified, or not, they are likely to cause recurring conflicts.
5. **Scarce Resources:** Resources are hardly enough to go round because the demand for them is enormous. Organizations find it difficult to meet with satisfaction of the needs of its members because of the meager resources available to it. This situation is most evident with disagreement of workers with management with respect to wages, working conditions, leave allowances, retirement benefits and so on.

6. **Denial of Participative Management:** This occurs where workers are denied opportunities to participate in decision making process especially in matters directly affecting them. Participative managements gives workers greater opportunity to express their opinions on issues. It encourages industrial harmony. Where workers are not consulted in mattes they perceive to concern them, disagreement and conflict arise.
7. **Absence of Standard Rules:** Rule and regulations are used by organizations in order to standardize procedure and divert behavior of organization members. They are used to reduce conflict and minimize ambiguity.

### **Levels of Organizational Conflicts**

Conflicts can occur at a number of levels of human functioning. Conflicts in your head between motives or ideas is shown by your “internal dialogue” and is at the interpersonal level. Beyond that the primary concern here is with social conflict, i.e. conflict between people whether they are acting as individuals, as members of groups or as representatives of organizations or nations.

1. Interpersonal conflict occurs when two people have incompatible needs, goals, or approaches in their relationships. Communication breakdown is often an important source of interpersonal conflict and learning communication skills is valuable in preventing and resolving such difficulties. At the same time, very real differences occur between people that cannot be resolved by any amount of improved communication. “Personality conflict” refers to very strong differences in motives, values or style in dealing with people that are not resolvable. For example, if both parties in a relationship have a high need for power and both want to be dominant in the relationship, there is no way for both to be satisfied, and consequently a power struggle ensues. Common tactics used in interpersonal power struggle include exaggerated use of reward and punishments, deception and evasion, threats and emotional black-mail, and flattery or ingratiation. Unresolved power conflict usually recycles and escalates to the point of relationship breakdown and termination.
2. Role conflict involves very real differences in role definitions, expectations of responsibilities between individuals who are interdependent in a social system. If there are ambiguities in role definition in an organization or unclear boundaries of responsibilities, then the stage is set for interpersonal friction between the persons involves. Unfortunately, the conflict is often misdiagnosed as interpersonal conflict rather than role conflict, and resolution is then complicated and misdirected. The emotional intensity is often quite high in role conflict since people are directly involved as individuals and there is a strong tendency to personalize the conflict.

3. Intergroup conflict occurs between collection of people such as ethnic or racial groups, departments or levels of decision making in the same organization, union and management. Competition for scarce resources is a common source of intergroup conflict, and societies have developed numerous regulatory mechanisms, such as collective bargaining and mediation, for dealing with intergroup conflict in less disruptive ways. Social-psychological processes are very important in intergroup conflict, (Fisher, 1990), Group members tend to develop stereotypes, (oversimplified negative beliefs), of the opposing group. They tend to blame them for their own problems, (scapegoating) and practice discrimination against them. These classic symptoms of inter group conflict can be just as evident in organizations as in race relations in community settings. Intergroup conflict especially tense and prone to escalation and intractability when group identities are threatened. The costs of destructive intergroup conflict can be extremely high for a society in both economic and social terms.
4. Multi-party conflict occurs in society when different groups and organizations have varying priorities over resource management and policy development. These complex conflicts typically involve a combination of economic, value and power sources. This complexity is often beyond the reach of traditional authoritative or adversarial procedures, and more collaborative approaches to building consensus are required for resolution. Cornick G, Dale N, Edmund P., Sigurdsson S.G., Steward B.D. (1976); Gray (1989).
5. International conflict occurs between states at the global level. Competition for resources certainly plays a part, but value and power conflict are often intertwined and some times predominate. The differences are articulated through the channels of diplomacy in a constant game of give and take, or threat and counter threat, sometimes for the highest of stakes. Mechanisms of propaganda can lead to many of the same social-psychological distortions that characterize interpersonal and intergroup conflicts.

### **Conflict Resolution Strategies**

Regardless of the level of conflict, there are different approaches to deal with the incompatibilities that exist in organizations. Three general strategies haven been identified that he parties may take toward dealing with organizational conflict; win-lose, lose-lose, and win-win, Blake, Shephard and Monton (1964).

- i. The **win-lose** approach is all too common. People learn the behavior of destructive conflict early in life-competition, dominance, aggression, and defense permeate many of our social relationships from the family to the school playground. The “fix pie” assumption is made often incorrectly, that what one party gains, the others lose. The strategy is thus to force the other

side to capitulate. Sometimes, this is done through socially acceptable mechanism such as majority vote, the authority of the leader or the determination of the judge. Sometimes, it involves secret strategies, threat, innuendo-whatever works is acceptable i.e., the end justifies the means. There is a strong “we-they” distinction accompanied by the classic systems of inter-group conflict. The value outcome is to have a victor who is superior, and a vanquished who withdraws in shame, but who prepares very carefully for the next round. In the long run, everyone loses.

- ii. The **lose-lose** strategy is exemplified by smoothing over conflict or by reaching the simplest of compromises. In neither case is the creative potential of productivity conflict resolution realized or explored. Disagreement is seen as inevitable therefore why not split the difference or smooth over difficulties in as painful a way as possible? Sometimes, this is the reality of the situation, and the costs are less than in the win-lose approach, at least for the loser. Each party gets some of what it wants, and resigns itself to partial satisfaction. Neither side is aware that by confronting the conflict fully and cooperatively they might have created a more satisfying solution. Or the parties may realistically use this approach to divide limited resources or to forestall a win-lose escalation and outcome.
- iii. The **win-win** approach is a conscious and systematic attempt to maximize the goals of both parties through collaborative problem solving. The conflict is seen as a problem to be solved rather than a war to be won. The important distinction is we (both parties) versus the problem, rather than we (one party) versus they (the other party). The method focuses on the needs and constraints of both parties rather than emphasizing strategies designed to conquer. Full problem definition and analysis and development of alternatives precede consensus decisions on mutually agreeable solutions. The parties work toward common and super ordinate goals, i.e. ones that can only be attained by both parties pulling together. There is an emphasis on the quality of the long term relationships between the parties, rather than short term accommodations. Communication is open and direct rather than secretive and calculating. Threat and coercion are proscribed. The assumption is made that integrative agreements are possible given the full range of resources existing in the relationship. Attitudes and behaviours are directed towards an increase of trust and acceptance rather than on escalation of suspicion and hostility. The win-win approach requires a very high degree of patience and skill in human relations and problem solving.

## **Conclusion**

Conflict can result in destructive outcomes or creative ones depending on the approach, if we can manage conflicts creatively, we can often find new solutions that are mutually satisfactory to both parties. Sometimes this will involve the distribution of power or resources in a way that is more equitable than before, or in creating a larger pool of resources or forms of influence than before. Creative outcomes are more probable when the parties are interdependent, as with the case in any organizational setting. Effective management of organizational conflict is necessary for the growth and effective running of the organization. If an organization is to achieve its goals, managers must be able to manage conflict in a proper manner.

## **Recommendations**

This study however recommends the following strategies for managers to effectively manage organizational conflicts. There should be increasing awareness of the sources of conflict. By increasing people's awareness of these sources of conflict, a manager can help to resolve conflict. When managers effectively manage diversity, they not only encourage other managers to treat diverse members of organization fairly and justly, but also realize that diversity is an important organizational resource that can help an organization to gain a competitive advantage. Managers should practice job rotation or temporarily assign works. Job rotation or temporary assignment will expand organizational members' knowledge base and appreciation of other departments. This can be a useful way of resolving organizational conflict. A more participative and supportive style of leadership should be adopted by managers.

Other strategies open to managers to handle conflict in an organization include: expansion of resources to at least make them available to the conflicting parties; increasing interaction between the organization members and between sub units, where the conflicting units are unrelenting in the claim, management may decide to merge the units. This makes some of the units to expand their boundaries as well as absorb the source of their irritation. Changing an organization structure, managers can effectively resolve conflict. Finally it is recommended that organizational conflict should be effectively resolved by the use of the win-win approach. This will ensure sustained peace and harmony in the organization and also make the organization grow.

## **References**

- Ahiya, K.K. (2005). *Industrial Management* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) New Delhi India: CBS publishers.
- Aswathappa, K. (2004) *Organizational Behaviour* (5<sup>th</sup> ed). New Delhi, India, Himalaya Publishers Home.
- Blake, R.R, Shephard, H.A. & Mouton, J.S. (1964). *Management Intergroup Conflict in Industry*, Houston, Texas; Gulf.



- Cormic, G., Dale, N., Emond, P., Sigurdson, S.G. & Stuart, B.D. (1976) *Building consensus for a sustainable future; putting principles into practice*. Ottawa: National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy.
- Deutsch, M. & Coleman, P. (2000). *The handbook of conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Fisher, R.J. (1990). Third Party Consultation: a method of the study and resolution of conflicts. *Journal of conflict resolution*. 1972 16:67-94.
- Friesberg, L. (1998). *Constructive Conflict: From escalation to resolution* Lanham. MD: Rowman and Little filed.
- Jones, G.R. (2003). *Contemporary Management* (5<sup>th</sup> eds) U.S.A McGraw Hills Publishers.
- Shama, S.C. (2003). *Management of Systems* (5<sup>th</sup> ed). New Delhi, Khana Publishers.
- University of Phoenix (UOP) (2004). *Learning Team Toolkit*.  
<http://e.campus.phoenix.ed>.
- Wisinki, J. (1993). *Resolving Conflict on the Job*. New York: American Management Association. Pp 27-31.