

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE WORKPLACE: BEST PRACTICES

**Being the Text of a Paper Presented By
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Protocol

Preface

I am humbled to be given this rare privilege by the Honourable Administrator of the National Judicial Institute, Hon. Justice Salisu Garba Abdullahi to deliver this paper at this forum; and I must note with humility that the National Judicial Institute has continued to grow in leaps and bounds in her continuing judicial education mandate under His Lordship's guidance and leadership. I extend my sincere appreciation to His Lordship for finding me worthy to serve as a Resource Person at this very important Workshop.

The Topic for presentation "Conflict Management in the Workplace; Best Practices" is a well chosen subject given that the target participants are the key and chief bureaucrats whose responsibility it is to ensure the optimal performance of judiciary work force including the smooth running of the machinery of justice throughout the country. But it is very important to note

that nothing can be achieved in an atmosphere of conflict, so managing conflict in the workplace is necessary for productivity. Much more, it is the responsibility of the participants to maintain standards in the workplace. The Theme of this year's Workshop "Nurturing High Standards of Performance for Better Service Delivery" is appropriate.

Introduction:

Conflict is an inevitable fact of life. It is borne out of differences and will arise in any situation where people are required to interact with one another. It is an inherent part of human existence, ever-present aspect of our lives, manifesting in various forms and context; a dynamic force that shapes our interactions, relationships, and societies. Within the families, conflict can arise from myriad sources, often stemming from differences in values, perspectives, and needs.

However, though conflict raises tension and discord, it creates opportunity for growth, understanding, resilience and progress. It is generally regard as an impediment to progress but it is not always a bad thing as it can be creative force for an organisation when it is managed effectively or constructively.

Interestingly, conflict can assist in making changes if properly managed, but if it is left unresolved, it can result in feelings of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, depression, stress as well as hopelessness. These feelings can manifest

themselves in behaviours such as aggression, violence, emotional withdrawal, breakdown in communication and personal relationship etc.

In places of work or place of employment which is a location where people come together to perform tasks, jobs, duties or projects for their employer(s), an office, construction site etc people of different backgrounds, orientation, interest, behaviours meet to work together and because of their different backgrounds, needs, interest, aspiration and orientation, and more so because they are humans there abound to be conflict which must be managed for good and cordial relationship necessary for performance duties and productivity.

In this discussion, we shall attempt to define and describe conflict, dissect common causes of conflict in the workplace, conflict management strategies and best practices in the workplace.

Objectives:

The main objectives of this paper is to ensure that at the end of this presentation participants will be able to define and describe conflict, causes of conflict in the workplace and acquire the skills and strategies of managing conflict in the judiciary in line with best practices.

Method of Presentation:

The presentation will be by definition and discussion. Preferably interactive session.

1.0 What is Conflict?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “conflict” to mean discord, strife, contention, dissension, variance as well as a state or condition marked by a lack of agreement and harmony.¹Flowing from the brief definition above, one can deduce that a conflict is when two people or groups of people disagree, and the disagreement causes friction; because one party may assume that the other’s point of view will have a negative effect on the final outcome.²

1.1 Origin: Scholars believe that the word ‘*conflict*’ was coined from the *Latin* words ‘*confligere*’ or ‘*conflictus*’³; ‘**con**’ being the Latin word for together while ‘**fligere**’ means ‘to strike’. Thus the word ‘*conflict*’ deemed-- to mean “*struck together*”.⁴

1.2 Further definition or description: Conflict can be defined as a clash or disagreement between individuals or groups, characterised by opposing interests, goals or viewpoints. It can show in overt expressions such as arguments or physical altercations as well as in subtler forms like passive-aggressive behaviour or emotional withdrawal.

¹<<https://www.merriam-webster.com>> accessed on Friday 17 May 2024 at 4:11pm

²What is Conflict? Organizational Behaviour and Human Relations <<https://courses.lumenlearning.com>> accessed 4:17pm on Friday 17 May 2024

³ Meaning ‘a contest’

⁴See n3

1.2 Conflict Management: Noting that the foundation has been laid to understand the meaning of conflict, the question to be addressed going forward is how is conflict managed?

1.2.1 *what is conflict management?* Conflict management can be described as the deployment of various methods, processes, tools and skills to find creative and respectful ways to douse tensions or disagreements between opposing parties.⁵ It may involve the use of effective communication skills such as active listening and assertive speaking.⁶Conflicts arise daily in the everyday routine of co-workers in the workplace as well as among family members; as a matter of fact conflict arises among comity of nations hence the need to constructively deal with conflict whenever it arises.

1.2.2 *Conflict management in the workplace:* The workplace is a mix of various people with different value systems, different educational and religious backgrounds as well as different family orientation and upbringing. As such the tendency to clash with a colleague or co-worker in the workplace is almost inevitable as no two persons think alike in specific terms.

⁵<<https://www.bidenschool.udel.edu>> accessed on Friday 17 May 2024 at 4:34pm

⁶See n6

Therefore in order to effectively manage conflict one must first take a mental note of the fact that conflict may arise in the workplace in the course of daily interactions as this is inevitable. In addition, it must equally be noted that whenever conflict arises in the workplace, the first approach must be to identify the immediate and remote causes of the conflict before making any attempt to manage same. Towards this end it is important to identify or itemise some common causes of conflict in the workplace.

1.2.3 *Some common causes of conflict in the workplace:* Though the list of causes of conflict is not exhaustive, some causes of conflict are highlighted below:

- (i) Making unkind and hurtful comments about colleagues and subordinates;
- (ii) Rudeness;
- (iii) Using a sarcastic, mocking, or cynical tone of voice when addressing superior officers or colleagues;
- (iv) Constantly complaining;
- (v) Being aggressive;
- (vi) Being deliberately uncooperative;

- (vii) Spreading rumours;
- (viii) Constantly criticizing (be it office/workplace policies, colleagues/co-workers/superior officers);
- (ix) Painting others in bad light;
- (x) Tribalism/Nepotism/Favouritism/Promoting officers on criteria not based on merit;
- (xi) Where an officer is constantly being abrupt, or frequently interrupting others when they speak; and more negative traits that cannot be listed as the list is in-exhaustive.

1.2.4 Strategies for Handling Negative Co-workers: It is trite to note that only one thing can be controlled when dealing with difficult people, which is one's own personal reaction to them. **The least helpful way to handle negative co-workers or negative situations is to get angry and fight back, or equally be critical of such negative colleagues.**

1.2.5 Alternatively, a more constructive goal is to minimize, or neutralize the situation so that YOU can have some peace. Why? Difficult people are typically experts in propounding negative traits/behaviour, and chances remain that such behaviour will not change. There are several strategies which

are effective with dealing with difficult co-workers. It is important to note however that every situation or scenario is different as no two conflict situations in the office/workplace are the same. Some of the strategies/techniques mentioned below might be ideal for one person but disastrous with another. As court administrators, it is sacrosanct to carefully assess situations to carefully determine which technique might work best for you in managing conflicts in your various courts.

1.2.6 As stated in paragraph 2.2.4 above, the following strategies can be used in management of conflict in our various courts:

- a. **By Carefully Reviewing the Situation:** Before taking any action, it is best to carefully evaluate what has happened. For example, one can ask “is this behaviour normal, or is the other person just having a bad day?” if perhaps a member of staff is manifesting negative behaviour regularly, it might be time to do something about it. If however, such erratic behaviour is triggered by spontaneous circumstances, it might be best to stay out of his or her way for the rest of the day.

b. **Calmly Confront the Person in Private:** As a leader/court administrator, it is trite to note that you might want to confront a badly behaved subordinate officer inside your office where no one else can hear. There's a chance that this person truly doesn't know that he or she is being rude or unkind. As a matter of fact, it is important to give he or she the benefit of doubt and address the problem privately. In this scenario, it is important to explain what's bothering you as superior, and what you as his superior would like him/her to do about it. Don't go on the attack. Tell him what it feels like, from your perspective, to be on the receiving end of this type of behaviour. Use "I" statements such as: "When you criticized me in front of the group yesterday, I felt humiliated and upset."

c. **Don't Fight and Don't Retreat:** When confronted with aggression by a co-worker, such aggressive person is expecting that (a) you fight back or (b) retreat and walk away. In order to make an impact, you should do neither. It is therefore important to stay calm, and speak calmly/plainly about the person's actions. For instance, when confronted

with negative behaviour/aggression in the office by a co-worker, you may respond by saying; “Are you trying to intimidate me with verbal abuse?” or “Are you trying to make fun of me?” ; as this can be effective especially if other co-workers are listening.

d. **By Using Behaviour Modification:** This technique depends on how much leverage and control you have, and on your relationship with the difficult person. In short, behaviour modification is a way to “train” someone to act in a more civil, polite manner. When a negative co-worker acts aggressively towards you, completely ignore him/her. This may help send the message that you will not tolerate that type of behaviour. When he acts more politely and acceptably, “reward” the behaviour. Say “thank you”, and respond in a positive way. This technique can also be incredibly effective in a group setting (when a team is dealing with a difficult team member).

e. **Involve Your Boss:** If after trying a few techniques to resolve a situation on your own and you still see opposition, it might warrant reporting to a superior authority. Meet with

your superior privately to explain the situation clearly, and what you would like to see happen.⁷

- f. **Consider Changing jobs:** If nothing works, and your life is truly miserable, you may want to seriously consider transferring to another department, or finding a new job elsewhere. If you are unhappy at work, it may affect your physical and mental health. Life is short and as such, no job is worth that.

2.2.7. CREATING AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE:

As Court Managers and administrators, it is trite to ask, is there anything you can do to prevent all of this from happening in the first place? Well, there is no guaranteed way to avoid difficult people, but you can help turn your organisation/court or department into an emotionally healthy place to work. Some recommendations are hereby proffered below:

- a. **Develop rules of behaviour-** As court administrators, standards and defined rules/values for your courts can be developed and communicated

⁷*Leadership Development: Self-awareness, Skills & Strategies*; being Module 1 of Leadership Mastery: Realising your Leadership Potential through Self-Discovery, presented by Rodger Pyrah at the Fairmont Hotel, Dubai, U.A.E. 31 Dec 2017 – 04 Jan 2018

to everyone. For example, you could put the rules on a big poster or some-place where everyone can see them. Encourage good manners in the office.⁸

- b. **Create a reward system-** As court administrators, or court managers, do you reward good ideas or good behaviour? All too often, negative behaviour gets all the attention, while good behaviour is ignored. In reality, it should be the opposite.⁹
- c. **Hold people responsible for their actions-** When there is accountability and transparency, people are less likely to ignore bad behaviour, or let it continue. Accountability ensures that bad behaviour is rebuked or sanctioned.¹⁰

2.0 Conclusion: All experts on leadership theory agreed that no single model is perfect for organization; however, good leaders are expected to be dynamic and flexible with the ability to adopt, adapt and apply the right model and attitude that will ensure effective and efficient attainment of goals and objectives of the organization. As good leaders, it is important to note that empathy and communication with subordinates will go a long way in ensuring greater service delivery. It is very crucial that as leading bureaucrats we should eschew or desist from actions and gestures that could generate or breed

⁸See footnote n8

⁹See footnote n8

¹⁰See footnote n8

or sustain conflict in our various offices or workplaces and be proactive in stifling budding conflicts. It gives great relief to both leaders and subordinates when workers relate cordially and work as team peacefully. There should always be constructive approach to work managing employees' issues using emotional intelligence. Finally, staff welfare, career growth and development should be the major index of assessing performance and organizational growth, as any strategy that informs greater service delivery while neglecting staff welfare and well-being can only work but for a short time.

Thank you.