

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE WORKPLACE: BEST PRACTICES.

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INTRODUCTION.

As human beings, we all have different experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives, which shows that we all see and view things differently. We react to situations at work or in life in general in ways that are synonymous to us as individuals no matter how closely we work or relate with each other.

It is hard to pin down a precise definition of conflict; one person's perception of a difficult situation can differ from someone else's. Some conflicts can even be positive, such as healthy competition to reach goals or solve a problem. A workgroup may have a conflict in deciding what strategy to pursue, or how to allocate responsibilities, for example. These conflicts can have a fruitful outcome if managed correctly. However, there is a fine line between this kind of conflict and a conflict that becomes negative such that it is unfair, unethical, and causes pain and disruption to an individual, group, or organization.

The most common negative attitude in conflict is lack of respect, which boils down to failing to relate to each other as individuals in a healthy way.

1.0 WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Conflict as defined by the new international webster's comprehensive dictionary of the English language is simply put as a struggle to resist or overcome; a contest of opposing forces or powers; strife; or battle².

Directing conflict positively or negatively may either be beneficial or destructive³. It is imperative to understand that if interpersonal conflicts are not handled appropriately, they can lead to bad feelings, high turnover, and costly litigation⁴. Nonetheless, if dealt with suitably, conflict can increase the innovativeness and productivity of individuals⁵, further offering interpersonal relationship satisfaction, creative problem solving, the growth of the global workforce, and domestic workplace diversity⁶ and leads to "improved efficiency, creativity, and profitability Litterer⁷ define conflict as "a type of behavior which occurs when two or more parties are in opposition or battle as a result of a perceived relative deprivation from the activities of or interacting with another person or group". Tedeschi⁸ term conflict as "an interactive state in which the behaviors or goals of one actor are to some degree incompatible with the behaviors or goals of some other actor or actors". Here "actor" refers to any social entity, starting from the individual to the corporate body itself.

² New international websters comprehensive dictionary of English language. deluxe encyclopedic edition.typhoon media corporation.2010 edition P.274

³ Cetin, M. O., Hacifazlioglu, O. (2004). Conflict management styles: A comparative study of university academics and high school teachers. Journal of American Academy of Business. 5(1/2) p. 325-332 <http://www.academia.com> .accessed 10th June 2022

⁴ Hirschman, C. (2001). Order in the hear. HR Magazine. 46(7) p. 58-64 232 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication> accessed 10th June 2022.

⁵ Uline, L. C., TschannenMoran, M., & Perez, L. (2003). Constructive conflict: How controversy can contribute to school improvement. Teachers College Record. 105(5) p. 782-816. <https://www.academia.edu> Accessed 10th June 2022

⁶ TingToomey, S., & Oetzel, J. G. (2001). Managing intercultural conflict effectively. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. [35]. Tjosvold, D. (1998). The Conflict-Positive Organization. NY: Addison-Wesley. 232 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication> accessed 15th June 2022

⁷ Litterer, J. A. (1966). Conflict in the organization: A re-examination. Academy of Management Journal. 9 p. 178-186. 232 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication> accessed 15th June 2022

⁸ Tedeschi, J. T., Schlenker, B. R. & Bonoma, T. V. (1973). Conflict, power, and games: The experimental study of interpersonal relations. Chicago: Aldine.P.232 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication> accessed 15th June 2022

1.1 WORKPLACE CONFLICT.

To understand the effect of workplace conflict on organizational performance as well as causes, types, reasons, and strategies for managing conflicts in some service organizations in Nigeria⁹, found that limited resources were the chief cause of conflict.

However, such conflicts occur in different ways. Most often when there is a disagreement amongst employees due to opposing interests, personality clash, beliefs or ideas, unfair treatment, bullying, and harassment. Conflict in the workplace is natural and bound to occur when you have people of different backgrounds working together.

Workplace Conflict can be expressed in various ways some are obvious while others might be less visible. Some likely sources are lack of cooperation, verbal insults, bullying, anger, poor quality or delayed work, etc.

It can be heated arguments or less visible like excluding someone from a given task.

Workplace conflict is inevitable as such you must not be scared, if it happens what is most important is how you handle it. Workplace conflict is natural and can even be healthy when dealt with appropriately.

We tend to be fairly selective in identifying conflict, with relatively small numbers reporting more than one dispute or difficult relationship. This may be because we do not consider most clashes to be serious enough to warrant labeling them ‘conflict’. However, we may also focus on the most significant or recent clash, and

⁹. Hotepo, O. M., Asokere, A. S. S., Abdul-Azeez, I. A., & Ajemunigbohun, S. S. A. (2010). An empirical study of the effect of conflict on organizational performance in Nigeria. *Business and Economics Journal*, 15, 1-9.) 232 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication> accessed 15th June 2022

underreport others. Employee perceptions of how common conflict is in their organizations vary a good deal. There is a general tendency to think it is not commonplace, but it is nonetheless significant that one in four employees considers conflict a common occurrence.

This should also be seen in the context that recent data has found a rise in workplace conflict¹⁰ and fear of discrimination or victimization¹¹.

word cloud showing what a 'good' workplace culture looks like, according to managers¹²:



¹⁰Chartered institute of personnel and development. (2011) Conflict management [online]. Survey report. London: CIPD. Available at: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/survey-reports/conflict-management.aspx> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

¹¹) Green, f., felstead, a. And gallie, d. (2013) Job-related well-being in Britain: first findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2012 [online]. London: Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies, Institute of Education <http://www.llakes.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/6.-Job-related-Well-being-in-Britain-mini-report.pdf> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

¹² Getting Under the Skin of a Workplace Conflict: Tracing the Experiences of Employees, chartered institute of personnel and development. April 2015 Conflict management [online]. Survey report. London: CIPD. Available at: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/survey-reports/conflict-management.aspx> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

Mutual benefit

Mutual support

Value everyone
Co-operation

Word cloud showing what a 'bad' workplace culture looks like, according to employees who had experienced conflict¹³:



1.2 TYPES OF WORKPLACE CONFLICT

- I. **PERSONALITY CONFLICT:** differences in personality style or working styles are part of the human race, clashes due to these different personalities are impossible to avoid because we all have our personalities and won't get along with every person we meet. Personality-based conflicts can be

¹³ Ibid

challenging and frustrating, but it's beneficial to learn how to work with individuals whose approaches and perspectives are different from yours.

- II. **INTERDEPENDENT TASK-BASED CONFLICTS:** these occur between the various subunits in the various organization these happens when there's a failure from any or all units in carrying out a given task thereby making it harder for the others to work efficiently.

- III. **STYLE-BASED CONFLICT:** this sometimes occurs because people have different styles of getting work done. Maybe one of your employees moves at a rapid pace, while the other is methodical and takes time to think tasks through before performing, these two employees with very different working styles may find it challenging to work together. It's important to note everyone's work styles are different, and various strategies may need to be used for them to be able to work and achieve progress at work. Collaboration, absenteeism, turnover & terminal, emotional stress.

- IV. **LEADERSHIP STYLE CONFLICT:** differences in leadership styles can lead to conflict. Some leaders are direct and short, while others may come across as more open and collaborative. No matter your approach to leadership, it is essential to understand your style so you can communicate how best to work with your team.

- V. Taking credit for other people's work or ideas.

If these or more subtle behaviors are ignored and not tackled over time, they will inevitably lead to conflict in the workplace. Such disagreements must be nipped in the bud before they escalate.

Handling workplace conflict proactively and positively will help improve the worker's morale, retain valuable skills and talent and reduce absenteeism from sickness.

1.3 BEHAVIOUR AND RESPONSE TO WORKPLACE CONFLICT

The most common negative behavior reported in conflict is the lack of respect that comes with it, another major aspect of conflict in the workplace is workers failing to relate to each other healthily. Aside from this, you will find a wide spread of reported behaviors, including bullying and refusal to co-operate, shouting, and verbal abuse. Actual or threatened physical abuse is far rarer and typically comes from people outside the organization.

Informal approaches to resolving conflict are by far the most common, including discussing the matter with one's director or immediate boss as applicable to your organization, Human Resource (HR) personnel, or the other person directly. Most times we often talk to friends and family, although this does not appear to help resolve conflict perhaps a case of complaining to the wrong person. The use of formal options, such as grievance and discipline procedures, is less often recorded maybe one in ten cases of conflict¹⁴.

¹⁴. Getting Under the Skin of a Workplace Conflict: Tracing the Experiences of Employees, CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF PERSONNEL AND DEVELOPMENT. March 2015 Conflict management a shift in direction [online]. Survey report. London:CIPD. <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/survey-reports/conflict-management.aspx> <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/research-reports> Accessed 9 June 2022.

However, it should be noted that different approaches tend to be used for different issues. In particular, we are most likely to take a direct and informal approach in conflict about individual performance and levels of support or resources. While formal procedures are most likely to be used in more serious cases.

1.4 IMPACTS OF CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

- The most common impact of conflict is that people find it stressful and experience a drop in motivation or commitment.
- Fewer but still sizable proportions of employees in conflict witness a drop in productivity or relationships becoming unworkable.
- One in ten cases of what we call work conflict results in one or other party leaving their organization or moving job¹⁵.
- The greatest impact of conflict is on employee well-being, which has ethical implications for good employment practice. More tangible work impacts, such as sickness absence, are less common, but the sizable impacts perceived on factors such as motivation and productivity highlight that interpersonal conflict is an important workplace issue. From any angle these issues are looked at, they must not be brushed under the carpet.
- Violence
- Mental health concerns
- Sabotage, theft

¹⁵ chartered institute of personnel and development. (2015) Conflict management a shift in management. research report. London: CIPD. <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/research-reports /conflict-management.aspx> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

2.0 WORKPLACE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

Conflict management styles are patterned responses or clusters of behavior used in conflict situations employing various interaction methods.

Concern for self and others has been identified as two fundamental elements of handling workplace conflict¹⁶ based on these, five styles of handling conflict have been described by Sorenson and Hawkins¹⁷ as follows:

a. **Integrating Style:** This is identified with managing conflict that has a high concern for self and others. It involves the assessment of their differences so that an effective solution can be amicably reached and acceptable to the conflicting parties. It is further associated with openness and the exchange of information for the purpose.

b. **Obliging Style: using this method, places** high concern for others and low for self, it is related to emphasizing commonalities and playing down the differences to satisfy the concern of the other party/parties.

c. **Compromising Style:** This method of conflict management acts as an intermediary in concern with self and others, which means a reciprocal relationship to make a mutually acceptable decision.

d. **Dominating Style: It** has a high concern for self and low for others. This style is associated with lording one's behavior over the other to emerge victorious.

¹⁶ Follet, M. P. (1940). Constructive conflict. In H. C. Metcalf & L. Urwick (Eds.), *Dynamic administration: The collected papers of Mary Parker Follet* p. 30-49. New York: Harper & Row, Thomas, K. W. (1976). Conflict and conflict management. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* p.889-935. Chicago: Rand McNally.

¹⁷ Sorenson, P., & Hawkins, K. (1995). Gender, psychological type, and conflict style preference. *Management Communication Quarterly*. 9 p. 115-127.

e. **Avoiding Style:** This is associated with pulling out or sidestepping from a situation and passing the buck. The peculiarity of this approach is low concern for others as well as for self.

However, Nigerian employees are having a significant difference in the way and manner they handle conflicts in their offices. Most organizations' styles are more of integrating, obliging, and compromising in handling organizational conflicts.

There is a very significant difference between married and single employees in all the conflict handling styles.

In Nigeria today we place little or no value on using either the compromising, dominating, or avoiding styles.

It can be easily deduced that several demographic variables have an important role to play as far as conflict and how it is handled is of great concern and should be taken jointly.

2.1 WAYS TO MANAGE WORKPLACE CONFLICT.

It takes a lot of courage for someone to speak up about inappropriate behavior at work, sometimes there are mixed and disappointing results on the ability of organizations to deal compassionately and effectively with complaints. Many people have over the years felt their organization did not act swiftly or fairly to resolve the complaint, or that they were even being blamed for the situation.

It's encouraging that employees show a willingness to speak up if they feel they are being unfairly treated at work, but if the organization's response falls short of the expectations of the employee, confidence could be short-lived. Much more focus is needed by organizations to create genuinely inclusive cultures that

recognize and nip conflict in the bud, respond quickly and sensitively to complaints, and ensure people managers are part of the solution and not the problem.

In resolving conflict, the employee's view on how well their conflict was resolved should be taken into consideration and spread right across the board, from fully resolved to not at all resolved. This breeds transparency and they are most likely to feel that the conflict is resolved if it is adequately done and they were involved. This again points to the significant influence of power dynamics and thus the importance of having effective procedures that can cut through them.

The use of both informal discussions and formal channels substantially raises the chances that employees will perceive a successful resolution of conflict however, as mentioned above, to some extent this is a case of horses for courses, as we tend to use different approaches in different scenarios. Thus, it is crucial to have a balanced suite of options for conflict resolution. In particular, this should include approaches such as mediation, which are currently rarer options than formal channels, but importantly provide a way to facilitate informal discussions. It does little good to rely on grievance and discipline procedures alone, as this will often mean conflict embitters until it escalates to a serious level.

A more influential factor in conflict is organizational size. It is particularly interesting to note at what point the greatest shifts occur: not between medium and large organizations, or even between small and medium, but between micro organizations (fewer than ten employees) and anything larger. Essentially, micro organizations appear to deal with conflict more informally and more effectively¹⁸.

¹⁸ Chartered institute of personnel and development. (2015) Conflict management [online]. Survey report. London: CIPD. Available at: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/survey-reports/conflict-management.aspx> . <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/research-reports> [Accessed 9 June 2022].

Thus, it seems that as organizations grow in size, their complexity and structures can very quickly get in the way of resolving conflict swiftly and effectively. Our organizations may be less social, and we may be less able to resolve our differences with open conversations than we might like to think.

This reinforces the message that relying purely upon formal procedures to resolve conflict is not a healthy option. Alongside these, even in relatively small organizations, we need concerted action to develop the skills and encourage methods, such as mediation, that enable more direct and informal approaches. Such action may not make the more established grievance and discipline procedures redundant but will help nip potentially very damaging conflict in the bud.

When dealing with unfair treatment at work, prevention is better than cure. Employers should strive to develop cultures where harassment is known to be unacceptable. Policies dealing with equality and diversity, and bullying and harassment, are important but will only have an impact if they are visible and brought to life across the organization. Employers should promote the importance of respect between employees at every level of the organization and ensure that people's behavior reflects the right values. Leaders need to take a visible lead on the issue and set the tone for fostering a working environment where people feel empowered to speak up. They should be exemplary role models and consistently champion appropriate behavior so that people managers and employees know exactly what's expected of them¹⁹.

Every employee should be trained in managing people effectively, including how to address conflict in their teams and deal with any concerns or complaints. All

¹⁹ Ibid

employees should know how to raise a complaint and to whom, and organizations should deal promptly, seriously, and discreetly with any issues that are raised. Organizations may want to consider using more proactive and innovative reporting channels such as anonymous and/or confidential methods like telephone helplines run by third parties to provide support for employees wishing to report bullying or harassment²⁰.

2.2 Another important factor to consider to achieve excellence and mutual respect as co-workers is paramount to get to know your colleagues better, by so doing you will build a sustainable relationship that will last the test of time, foster good working relationships, understand each person, and help you to talk frankly on issues.

- Understand what matters to your team and remember that everyone's unique and different.
- You must study to understand what triggers stress and what calms them.
- Do they have a sense of belonging and inclusion as a team or not?
- Get to know their preferred working styles. This will encourage effective teamwork and reduce workplace conflict.
- Make yourself available to talk, show empathy and listen to their concerns. This will encourage them to open up and approach you always.

Although disciplinary and grievance procedures remain the most frequently used methods of handling conflict, employers do have a range of other choices.

2.3 Effective Communication: Having open and honest communication is very important as it will help you ascertain the cause of the conflict which will invariably

²⁰ Ibid

enable you to understand the root cause of the problem and how best to get the parties to discuss it. It breeds unity and trust amongst workers.

2.4 Impartial: while trying to resolve any workplace conflict there must be a fair playing ground for all parties involved irrespective of gender, status, religion, or position at work, and a lot of equal time for parties to express their thoughts. The parties involved must see justice to be truly served. the issue at hand must be Assessed judiciously this will foster unity amongst the workforce.

2.5 Listen: A good listener will always make good judgment, but when you talk more than you listen, there is every tendency that your judgment will be in error or at most given out of context. learn to talk less, listen with keen interest, except where necessary you should be seen more than you talk, and allow the parties to voice out their views without interruptions except when necessary. comprehend their viewpoints, summarise them, and if possible re-read it loud for all parties to be on the same page.

2.6 Intimidate: Do not coerce or intimidate the parties involved in the conflict, this will give room for fairness and open conversation. The parties involved will not be intimidated to speak out and that would make your job easier to handle.

2.7 Unyielding: In managing conflict in the workplace you must be firm in your actions, this will promote respect and credibility from members of staff, you must be firm and assertive so you are not seen as unserious as that would defeat the aim of the entire procedure. Act decisively, set ground rules and be well informed, don't work on assumptions or here say, carry out fact-finding missions, and don't rely on hearsays as you might be getting wrong pieces of information. Review every piece of information gathered to the best of your ability.

2.8 Workplace Mediation: This refers to the consensual process of resolving a dispute with the support of a third party whose value stems from enhancing communication, and encouraging reflection and reality testing. Since Conflict has become an integral part of every workplace, we must find means of ameliorating its effect on those involved. Rather than using punitive measures always, we can mediate and reconcile workers to be at peace with one another and not turn every person you have any conflict with into your enemy in the long run. The purpose of mediation is always to settle, but to clarify expectations and reset relationships²¹

CONCLUSION

Workplace conflict can either make or mar an organization, when the conflict is on how a particular task should be done, it brings in healthy competition amongst the staff. Conflicts should be handled with due diligence at all times, trained personnel should be saddled with such responsibilities. Policies that will serve as preventive and reactive modules should be modeled for the staff on workplace conflict. An integrated conflict management system represents an organization's deliberate effort in ensuring a healthy workforce and that should be a guiding principle for every workplace.

²¹ Cloke, K, Goldsmith.J.2000 Resolving personal and organizational Conflict. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass conflict Resolution Quarterly [HTTP://www.academia.com](http://www.academia.com) accessed 12th June 2022