

# **Conflict Management Strategies and the Role of Third Party in Managing Conflict in Complex Organizations**

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## **Abstract**

Conflict Management has been an area of interest in complex organizations for over the past decades. This is so because organizations have become more polarized with diversity of interest from the individual and group level which often leads to conflict. Since conflict is inescapable, it becomes imperative for it to be properly managed. Conflict management implies integration of all factors which can contribute to the prevention and resolution of conflict which involves the processes of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures by working parties involved in that conflict. The study analyse the conflict management strategies such as integration, obliging, avoiding, dominating, compromise, negotiation and the role of third party in managing conflict in complex Organizations. The conflict management strategies are model aimed at assisting conflicting parties to reach agreement and determine the condition for settlement. In spite of the seeming criticism of Neo Marxist Conflict Theory, it was adopted because of it ability to explain the conflict situation in complex organizations. As a descriptive type of study, the study utilizes secondary sources of data from textbooks, Seminar Papers, and Journals. From the literature reviewed, the study discovered that all the conflict management strategies and the third party role are effective in managing conflict in different ways in organizations. However, the study recommends that since conflict is an integral part of work organization, the government and stakeholders should encourage the utilization of conflict management strategies and third party role in dealing with conflict situations.

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### **Introduction**

Industrial conflict and management has been an area of interest to academics and policy makers' specifically social scientist. It is obvious that industrial conflict has affected many organizations despite the fact that some scholars like Edward, Hammed and Ayantuji, (2002) contended that conflict in organizations is usually perceived as something destructive, abnormal and dysfunctional; yet it could be an inventor of positive social change if constructively handled. It is usually common to say that conflict can be used constructively to explore different resolution to organizational problems; thereby deconstructing its destructive nature.

Conflict may have either productive or destructive outcomes for the parties and for their larger context. Productive conflict may clarify goals, mobilize energies, illuminate alternatives, promote rigorous analysis, and encourage creative solutions to complex problems (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). On the other hand, extremes of too much or too little conflict may both result in destructive outcomes; escalating cycles of distorted communications, negative stereotypes, and coercive influence attempts can produce violence harmful to both parties.

Complex organization of any kind is established for the purpose of realizing or achieving certain goal which are resident with both human and material resources that together make the organization function properly. Over the years Industrial Organizations in Nigeria have faced series of conflict which affected the purpose for which they were established basically as result of incompatible goals within the industrial relations. For instance the Academic Staff of Nigerian Universities have gone to strike for over three months in the last quarter of 2017 as a result of retirement age, funding of State Universities and Earned Academic Allowance to mention these three. Similarly, the health workers in Nigeria have gone to strike which led to the closure of government Hospitals. This has far reaching implication on the development of the country.

However, conflict management reduces the intensity of conflict if managed properly. Thus this study provides a clear understanding of conflict management strategies and the third party role in conflict management.

### **Conceptual Analysis**

Industrial Conflict is an interactive state in which the behaviours or goals of one actor are to some degree incompatible with the behaviours or goals of other actor or actors. Industrial conflict refers to any form of dissatisfaction that can manifest in several ways such as absenteeism, strike, low labour turn over to mention these three. It affects the immediate parties

involved which normally penetrate to the entire system specifically when it occurs at interpersonal level. Kornhauser and Durbin (1985) defined Industrial conflict as the total range of behaviour and attitudes that express opposition and divergent orientation between owners and managers on one hand and the working people and their unions on the other hand. Similarly Ehigie (1998) sees Industrial conflict as the state of tension when one party perceives that its expectations are being destabilized by another in the work relation.

Conflict involves a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has or is about to negatively affect something the first party cares about. Fisher, Ury, & Brett. (2004) defined conflict as a relationship between two or more parties (individuals or groups) who have or think they have incompatible goals. It therefore implies that conflict is a continuous interaction that span through lifetime of man and not just a one-off relationship. Oloyede (1999) sees conflict as a condition of disharmony or hostility within an interaction process which is usually the direct results of clash of interest by parties involved.

From the above view points, this study sees Industrial conflict as the employee/employer displeasure and disenchantment of organizational services which often threatens their terms of service and goals of the organization; hence, this situation spurs the existence of dispute because each party tends to work to pressure the other as against the expected work relationship and benefits. Industrial Conflict does not mean conflict between the owners of Industries and the workers rather conflict occurs when the organizational interest and goals are affected (Idris, 2016).

Thus, Ubeku (1975) observed that conflict in Organization is a consequence of enduring power struggle between worker and their employers over the control of various aspect of work, inequality in the distribute of proceeds of industry, job security of the employee and poor management control. Fajana (2002) contended that Industrial Conflict refers to the powerlessness of the employers and employees to arrive at a common agreement on any issue connected with employment relationships. In addition, Ogunbameru and Oribabor (2000) argued that Industrial Conflict takes place whenever there is conflict of interest and objectives in the labour- management relations.

Alebiosun and Akintayo (2007) noted that Industrial conflict emerges as a result of employers not taking into consideration the needs or request of their employees. Idris (2016) argued that Industrial Conflict is a long term contradiction of interest between owners of Industries and workers connected with specific issues that generate hostility and result to direct

confrontation; it is an action where employees show their grievance by refusing to work or work slowly. This entails that Industrial conflict is a regular phenomenon that is independent in any work or complex Organization; it is not only inevitable rather it is what keeps Industrial society going/moving.

### **Perspective to Understanding Industrial Conflict**

#### ***Traditional Model***

This model is also known as the Classical Organizational Model to the understanding of conflict in the organization. The birth of this model was in the 1930s and 1940s which was consistent about group behaviours. This model viewed organizational conflict as bad, violent, destructive, irrational and undesirable; hence, must be avoided. It also sees conflict as a dysfunctional outcome resulting from poor communication, lack of sincerity and trust between people, and failure of managers to be receptive to the needs and aspirations of their workers. The Traditionalist argued that conflict is a dysfunctional result that is result from low communication, lack of honesty and trust between people and inability to detect and work on the early signs or indicators of conflict in organization (Aja, 2007: 18). Thus, employers should redirect their attention to the causes of conflict and correct those malfunctions to improve organizational performance.

#### ***The Managed Conflict Model***

The managed conflict model believes in the inevitability of Industrial Conflict. The model posit that as a phenomenon that is in every organization, it produces stress, reduce trust, respect and group cohesion; thereby affect productivity. It is in this light that the managed conflict model focussed on managing the whole context in which conflict occurs and also move on productive conflict resolution. This model believes that conflict can be eliminated by encouraging limited level of conflict; and to find constructive methods for resolving conflict productively so their destructive influence can be minimized.

### **Sources of Conflict in Organizations**

Industrial conflict could arise from interpersonal, intra personal and intra organizational level. Thus this paper adopted Pondy's (1967) five stages of conflict

***Latent Conflict:*** Refers to the source of a conflict, such as role conflict or competition over scarce resources. The assumption is that due to certain antecedent conditions conflict 'should' occur. The situations outlined above are examples of latent conflict.

***Perceived Conflict:*** This is the type of conflict that neither party is upset about it. Perceived conflict may accompany latent conflict or be present when there is no latent conflict.

***Felt Conflict:*** Conflict which grieves the parties involved, but which neither would normally do anything about. Stress and tension are usual outcomes of felt conflict.

***Manifest Conflict:*** Involves openly aggressive behaviours ranging from mild passive resistance through sabotage to actual physical conflict. It is that behaviour which, in the mind of the actor, frustrates the goals of at least some of the other participants.

***Conflict Aftermath:*** This refers to the response to, and outcome of, conflict which may involve change. There may be no 'active' response but there will be an outcome, even if it is sustained chronic conflict (continuous, high-level conflict). If a conflict is actually resolved this can lead to greater satisfaction among the participants. If a conflict is not resolved then what appears to be a satisfactory resolution may only be a reversion to a prior level of conflict.

However, managing organizational conflict is a tool for promoting peaceful coexistence between employees, employers and or unions. Conflict management according to Adikpo (2006) is designing effective macro-level strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and enhancing the constructive function to improve effectiveness in organization. In the same perspective Obi, (2005) states that conflict management is the process of reducing the negative and distractive capacity of conflict through number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict. Best (2005) asserts that conflict management covers the entire areas of handling conflict positively at different stages including conflict limitation, containment and litigation.

In the views of Otite in Obi (2007) Conflict Management is more of a long term arrangement involving institutionalized provisions and regulative procedures for dealing with conflicts whenever they occur. Conflict management is a process of planning to avoid conflict where possible, and organising to resolve where it does happen as quickly as possible. Despite the endemic nature of conflict and its inevitability in organizational life, its management is important because it reduces and terminates all forms of industrial conflicts through the use of collective bargaining, negotiations and mediation. Conflict Management is the process of limiting the negative aspect of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict. The aim of Conflict Management is to enhance learning and group outcomes; including effectiveness or performance in organizational setting (Rahim,

2003. Pp. 208). Luthans, Rubach and Marsnik (1995) succinctly agree with Rahim (2002) but argued that a proper managed conflict increases organizational learning by increasing the number of questions asked and encourage people to challenge the status quo.

Best (2006) contended that Conflict Management is the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict; it covers an area of handling conflict positively at different stages including conflict limitation, containment and litigation. From the above view point, this study perceive Conflict Management as the practice of being able to identify and handle conflict sensibly, fairly and effectively through a means of negotiation and mediation.

### **Methods of Settling Dispute**

There are various styles of behaviour by which organizational conflict may be handled. Blake and Mouton (1964) first presented a conceptual scheme for classifying the modes (styles) for handling interpersonal conflicts into five types: forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, and problem solving. They described the five modes of handling conflict on the basis of the attitudes of the manager: concern for production and for people. Their scheme was reinterpreted by Thomas (1976). He considered the intentions of a party (cooperativeness, i.e., attempting to satisfy the other party's concerns; and assertiveness, i.e., attempting to satisfy one's own concerns) in classifying the modes of handling conflict into five types.

Using a conceptualization similar to the above theorists, the styles of handling conflict were differentiated on two basic dimensions, concern for self and for others (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Rahim, 1992). The first dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy his own concern. For example, when the one of the conflicting parties feels that his desires are more important than the other party and place the other party's goal below his.

The second dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person wants to satisfy the concern of others. It should be pointed out that these dimensions portray the motivational orientations of a given individual during conflict where one party is obliged to consider the agitations of the other party so as to resolve the conflict.

Vliert and Kabanoff (1990) yielded support for these dimensions by combining the two dimensions to results in five specific styles of handling interpersonal conflict (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979, p. 1327). These styles are described as follows:

***Integrating:*** Refers high concern for self and others which involve collaboration between the parties; that is, openness, exchange of information, and assessing of their differences to reach a solution acceptable to both parties. “The first rule...for obtaining integration is to put your cards on the table, face the real issue, uncover the conflict, bring the whole thing into the open” (Follett, 1940, p. 38). Prein (1976) suggested that this style has two distinctive elements: confrontation and problem solving. Confrontation involves open and direct communication which should make way for problem solving. As a result, it may lead to creative solutions to problems. This style is usually adopted in complex organizations and it is aligned with the Decree No. 7, 1976 of the Industrial Dispute Act which gives room for collective bargaining for conflicting parties to sit and discuss their grievance.

***Obliging:*** This refers to low concern for self and high concern for others. The style is associated with attempting to play down the differences and emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. There is an element of self sacrifice in this style. It may take the form of selfless generosity, charity, or obedience to another person’s order. An obliging person neglects his or her own concern to satisfy the concern of the other party. Such an individual is like a “conflict absorber,” that is; a person whose reaction to a perceived unfriendly act on the part of another has low aggression or even positive kindness (Boulding, 1962, p. 171). Though this style is often neglected because report from the 2017 strike between the Asuu and the Federal Government of Nigeria proved that conflicting parties often doesn’t yield support for the goals and orientations of the other rather in a defence of interest.

***Dominating:*** High concern for self and low concern for others has been identified with win-lose orientation or with forcing behaviour to win one’s position. A dominating or competing person goes all out to win his or her objective and, as a result, often ignores the needs and expectations of the other party. Dominating may mean standing up for one’s rights and/or defending a position which the party believes to be correct. Sometimes a dominating person wants to win at any cost. A dominating supervisor is likely to use his position power to impose his will on the subordinates and command their obedience. For instance, the case of the Nasarawa State Government and the State workers where the government embarked on a no work no pay. Similarly, Solaja, (2015) in a study of three manufacturing companies in Nigeria contended that dominating is commonly used by managers in managing conflict in organizations.

**Avoiding:** Low concern for self and others has been associated with withdrawal, buck-passing, sidestepping, or “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” situations. It may take the form of postponing an issue until a better time or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation. An avoiding person fails to satisfy his or her own concern as well as the concern of the other party. This style is often characterized as an unconcerned attitude toward the issues or parties involved in conflict. Such a person may refuse to acknowledge in public that there is a conflict which should be dealt with.

**Compromising:** Intermediate in concern for self and others it involves give-and-take or sharing whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision. It may mean splitting the difference, exchanging concession, or seeking a quick middle-ground position. A compromising party gives up more than a dominating but less than an obliging party. Likewise, such a party addresses an issue more directly than an avoiding party, but does not explore it in as much depth as an integrating party. Additional insights may be gained by reclassifying the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict according to the terminologies of the game theory. Integrating style can be reclassified to positive-sum (win-win) style, compromising to mixed (no-win/no-lose) style, and obliging, dominating, and avoiding to zero-sum or negative-sum (lose-win, win-lose, and lose-lose, respectively) style.

**Negotiation:** Negotiation is another method in settling dispute in complex organizations in Nigeria where parties sit and work together on their own terms to resolve their problems through constructive dialogue. It helps the conflicting parties to build an atmosphere of confidence, tolerance and respect with the aim of resolving their conflicts. Negotiation takes place at various levels before conflict escalation or during conflict situation; though it helps with a condition of friendly communication. At this level, the negotiators inquire on the causes of conflict and negotiate on the best way to end the conflict or reduce its intensity in complex organizations. It usually occurs when two or more parties decide how to allocate scarce resources thereby exchanging goods or services and attempt to agree on the exchange rate for them (Robbins, 2013). It is a deliberate process, conducted by representatives of groups, designed to reconcile differences and to reach agreements by consensus. The outcome is often dependent on the power relationship between the groups and often involves compromise - one group may win one of their demands and give in on another.

Negotiation is designed in a situation where conflicting parties build mutual confidence in their ability and capacity to come together and resolve the incompatible issues in a favourable environment in case there would be

another conflict. This is based on the fact that conflict is a continuous phenomenon in complex organizations. This method has been the conventional method since 1976 industrial Dispute Act no. 23 where parties are expected to sit and collaborate on their problems and resolve. This style is also aligned with compromise as argued by Rahim & Bonaman, (1975).

### **Third Party role in Complex Organizations**

Third Party is a conflict prevention mechanism designed to handle grievance effectively at first contact to minimise the possibility of it developing to any form (strike). It is a form of alternative conflict management aimed at assisting conflicting parties to reach agreement and determine the condition for settlement. It is the voluntary, informal and non-binding process undertaken by an external party that fosters the settlement of differences or demands between directly invested parties (Miller, 2002:23). Miall et al (1992:22) sees Third Party as a voluntary process in which the parties retain control over the outcome (pure mediation), although it may include positive and negative inducements.

The Third Party is a neutral person who command mutual respect and recognition from both parties and often act only in an advisory capacity - and have no decision-making powers; and cannot impose a settlement on the conflicting parties rather helps the parties with an environment that is controlled by communication and enhances the confidence in building capacities for the parties to dialogue without losing interest with the need to arrive at a ground to overcoming their discontentment, fears and satisfy their real needs or goals.

Kozan, Ergin & Varoglu (2007) in their study stressed out the following role played by the third party in conflict management:

**i. *Advising or Facilitation:*** At this point, the third party plays the role of advising the disputants on the intensity and implications of their conflict and then tries to facilitate their negotiation process in order to limit influence so that both parties could reach a conclusion without confrontations. At this point, the third party is mindful of his limitations not to overrule rather him/she inspired them to understand the need for resolution. From this view point, it shows that this process of advising by the third party is usually at the beginning of the conflict situation. A prototypical example of this is the role the Traditional Rulers played in Nasarawa State before the Academic Staff of the Nasarawa State University embarked on strike on the 7<sup>th</sup>, February that lasted for over three months.

**ii Mediation:** The third party here mediates and retains the process of control but allow the disputing parties to select their resolution; though the mediator still retains relative control over the process. Thus, the mediator uses appropriate motivational techniques of peace building by being objective, balanced, supportive, non judgemental and astute in questioning; and try to drive the parties towards win-win as opposed to win-lose outcomes (Miller, 2003:24).

**iii. Arbitration:** This step or role is higher than mediation where the third party renders binding decisions after evidence provided by the parties. Who so ever feels that the decision is not at his favour would definitely take, though there is a desire by the third party to ensure that the outcome is fair enough because of the virtue of status they represents in the society.

From this view points the third party assist where the parties in conflict are both committed to resolving, but he/she manages the negotiation process and does not impose a solution on the parties. In other words, third party retains the characteristic of negotiation except only the presence of neutrality. Basically, the third party are usually Traditional Rulers, Religious Leaders, Elder Statesmen and top Government officials to mention these.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### ***Neo-Marxist Conflict Theory***

This theory was championed by Dahrendorf in (1959). The theory was rooted from Marxian and Weberian perspective. The theory came in reaction to Marx on the notion that society is polarised based on two class model and conflict is between the classes; the bourgeoisies and the proletariats based material conditions. Dahrendorf saw conflict as resulting from interest based on Relations of Authority. He did not reject Marx believe that conflict is inherent where there are classes of the Haves and the Have not; rather what constitute conflict is the relations of authority and production. The theorist argued that conflict can never arrive without consensus within the social structure.

The structural origin of conflict is sought in the arrangement of social roles endowed with expectations of domination and subjection (Darhrendorf, 1959: 165). Authority is a legitimate power attached to the occupation of a particular social role within an organization. Complex organizations have positions of domination and subjections; some are able to legitimately issue command while others are not. This to Darhrendorf is the basis for conflict in the society not economic or material conditions. However, within these

associations interest exist between groups and those in dominant position seek to uphold their interest to maintain the status quo; whether or not the interest benefits the subordinate or subjected groups. Those in subordinate positions on the other hand have an interest of changing it.

Further more, Darhrendorf contended that these conflicts of interest is present in a much wider range of social relationships than the economic conflict of interest between those who own the means of production and those who do not own the means of production. However, in spite of the many criticism of Darhrendorf theory of social conflict, it explains the phenomenon of conflict from the context of differentiation of authority.

The applicability of this theory to the study is that conflict does not just occur as a result of economic issues or domination based on material result, but also as a result of power and condition of work based on relations of authority accrued in the work place.

### **Effects of Industrial Conflict in Complex Organizations**

Conflict is not only seen as reconstructive but its destructive nature affects the development of any organization in the world. The effects of Industrial Conflict in complex organizations in Nigeria could be understood based on the loss of revenue generation. Despite strike is one of the major issues in industrial conflict, it is an approved exercise which is agreed by the employer and employees and government; strike is considered the rule of the game. Hence, strike is a necessary evil for greater good which does more harm than it heals; it is more destructive to economic and social life of the people and the society at large (Idris, 2016).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Literature has revealed that Industrial Conflict is a natural phenomenon if any organization is to exist. These positions made it necessary for a proper and well manage conflict through measure of avoidance, obliging, compromise, integration, Negotiation and third party's role. The theoretical framework (Conflict theory) explains the scenario of conflict in complex organizations. Thus the study concludes that conflict is what keeps organizations moving and that if not managed well, its evil will destroy the setting or structure of the work place. Conflict management strategies show how greatly conflict could be managed. Hence, the third party could seem to be a conflict management strategy commonly used in complex organizations.

However, this study recommends that both management and representatives of workers should create a better environment for

understanding conflict situations and ensure that conflicts are dealt with before escalating to strike or any form of protestation. Managers should ensure repeated training. It is also recommended that government should ensure a well regulatory body to checkmate the affairs of heads or management of complex organizations in Nigeria. The study has implications for further studies and for training of managers for conflict intervention. It is for scholars to begin the study of measuring conflict so as to advice stakeholders on its deconstructive nature in the organizational settings.

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