



## Conflict Avoidance and Its Impact on Performance in the Nigerian Civil Service

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### Abstract

Conflict is inevitable among humans. When two or more social entities (i.e., individuals, groups, organizations, and nations) come in contact with one another in attaining their objectives, their relationships may become incompatible or inconsistent. Relationships among such entities may become inconsistent when two or more of them desire a similar resource that is in short supply; when they have partially exclusive behavioral preferences regarding their joint action; or when they have different attitudes, values, beliefs, and skills. "Conflict is the perception of differences of interests among people" (Thompson, 1998, p. 4). Fadipe (2000) sees conflict as a form of disagreement in an establishment between two individuals or groups who have cause to interact formally or informally. Similarly, Miller and King (2005), see it as basically a disagreement between two or more individuals or groups over compatible goals. Conflict therefore is a process of incompatible behaviours. It may involve the interference or disruption by one person or group of persons, or in some way or ways which make another action less likely to be effective. According to Deutsch (1973), conflict inevitably means that people are working against each other, in such a manner that what one wants is incompatible with that which another wants. It could bring about competition in the pursuit of goals. What the competitor gets comes at the expense of others or the job. It is therefore counter-productive, disruptive, unnatural, and produces a deviation from the free flow of events. A major factor that can throw parties into a state of incompatibility is their perception of the issue at hand or issue of interest. There are other factors that can contribute to the creation of conflict in organizations like task interdependence, scarce resources, goal incompatibility, communication failures, individual differences and poorly designed reward system Mgbeke (2004). Conflict is a necessary and useful part of organizational life. It is inevitable and an integral part of the process of change. Indeed, it is an aid to cooperation, not an obstacle.

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### 1 Introduction

There are two sides to conflict, one is destructive and unhealthy and the other has a problem-solving base where those involved are willing to sublimate personality differences, to listen to others' views and to be open and candid to each other, to be supportive and helpful whereas the former defeats cooperation.

Jung (2003) declares that conflict is clearly associated with power and can emerge when goal achievement of an organization is avoided. It is also believed that people are aware of the factors that generate conflicts such as scarcity, obstruction and incompatible interests or goals (Robbins, 1983), Conflict can also be broken out when one party avoids the goal achievement of the other one. However (Pondy, 1992), opined that it is probable that causes for conflicts are not highly correlated with goal and objective achievement in situations of routine behavior where procedures are well defined and environment is stable. In these circumstances, conflict variables are probably more related to personality, autonomy reasons, functional interdependence and status. Some of the reasons that justify conflict escalation according to Ikeda *et al* (2005) are: (i) as departments grow, people lose contact with other departments, or yet, members of a department start to think differently from other areas; (ii) the increase of emphasis in the financial measures as a tool for motivation for managers and the establishment of different profit centers inside an integrated business system end up creating many conflicts; (iii) the increasing rise of emphasis in functional specialization, politics of promotion and recruiting reinforce the isolation of departments, generating conflicts; (iv) today there is more room for workers to show criticism among each other, while this freedom of speech can be beneficial for society as a whole, in organizational context can be transformed into conflicts and (v) consumers demand lower prices, better quality in products and services, creating pressures so that departments work more effectively which can result in conflicts among departments.

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## 2 Organizational conflict

Having recognized that conflict is an important social concept, we can then look into the special case of organizational conflict. Conflict is certainly one of the major organizational phenomena. Pondy (1967) observed that organization theories “that do not admit conflict provide poor guidance in dealing with problems of organizational efficiency, stability, governance, and change, for conflict within and between organizations is intimately related as either symptom, cause, or effect, to each of these problems” (p. 504).

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## 3 Causes of Organizational Conflicts

In any organization, there are many causes of conflicts; however, conflicts within an individual usually arise when a person is uncertain about what task is expected to do, if not clearly defined by the supervisor or the person in charge (Henry, 2009). Furthermore, if the tasks of individuals working as a group are not clearly defined by the management they will lead to more conflicts. Conflicts between individuals may result from role-related pressures. Conflicts would arise between individuals and groups if the goals were not specified for individuals within a group (Duke, 1999). Additionally, according to the literature, there are innumerable origins of organizational dispute and each produces its own variety of effects. In general, there are six major sources: (i) the interpersonal disagreements that arise when one person is experiencing individual stress; (ii) the problems resulting from role conflict, a condition that occurs when there is a clash over one's role in the organization; (iii) the power struggles that pit persons and groups against one another to achieve their own selfish objectives; (iv) the misunderstandings and disagreements from differentiation, i.e., the clashes that arise because people approach common problems from very different orientations; (v) the interdependence requirements for collaboration which, if not extensive and balanced between the parties, cause communication and interaction breakdowns which, in turn, if critical, lead to more intensive conflicts; and (vi) the external pressures from forces outside the enterprise that breed internal pressures as the system seeks to adapt but not to disrupt its internal order.

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## 4 Types of Organizational Conflict

Ikeda *et al* (2005) observed that organizational conflict involves interpersonal conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, or intergroup conflicts within different sections of an organization. There are two essential types of conflict in organizations: vertical and horizontal (Imazai and Ohbuchi, 2002). Vertical conflict occurs in groups of different hierarchical levels, such as supervisors and salesmen, whereas horizontal conflict occurs between individuals of the same level, such as managers in the same organization. In the vertical conflict, differences in status and power between groups are in general larger than in the horizontal conflict (Robbins, 1983) because these aspects tend to equalize in equivalent hierarchical levels. When vertical conflict takes place between operational workers and administration, their sources refer to: (i) psychological distance: workers don't feel involved in the organization and feel that their needs are not met; (ii) power and status: workers feel powerless and alienated; (iii) differences in value and ideology: this difference represents underlying beliefs on objectives and goals of an organization and; (iv) scarce resources: disagreements regarding benefits, salary and work conditions.

In vertical conflict, apparently individuals in lower organizational level seek to avoid conflicts with higher hierarchical levels (Brewer *et al*, 2002). Pondy (1992) observed that it is expected that the top management peers perceive more conflict internally between their groups than those of lower position. This happens because of the following reasons: (i) people in higher hierarchical level, rather than the lower ones, are engaged in non-routine activities and development of politics, where orientation for the actions are less clear and chances for disagreement, bigger and; (ii) people in higher hierarchical level, rather than the lower ones, are probably less flexible in their points of view. Hence conflict resolution is more difficult. Considering the vertical conflict (Imazai and Ohbuchi, 2002), research examines the short-term and long-term effects of perceived fairness in organizational conflicts between employees and supervisors.

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## 5 The functional and dysfunctional outcomes of conflict in organizations

### Functional Outcomes

- i. Conflict may stimulate innovation, creativity, and growth.
- ii. Organizational decision making may be improved.
- iii. Alternative solutions to a problem may be found.
- iv. Conflict may lead to synergistic solutions to common problems.

- v. Individual and group performance may be enhanced.
- vi. Individuals and groups may be forced to search for new approaches.
- vii. Individuals and groups may be required to articulate and clarify their positions.

## 2. Dysfunctional Outcomes

- 1. Conflict may cause job stress, burnout, and dissatisfaction.
- 2. Communication between individuals and groups may be reduced.
- 3. A climate of distrust and suspicion can be developed.
- 4. Relationships may be damaged.
- 5. Job performance may be reduced.
- 6. Resistance to change can increase.
- 7. Organizational commitment and loyalty may be affected.

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## 6 Managing Conflicts

Conflict can be managed in different ways, some focusing on interpersonal relationships and others on structural changes. Robinson *et al* (1974) advocates that managing conflict toward constructive action is the best approach in resolving conflict in organization. When conflict arises, we need to be able to manage them properly, so that it becomes a positive force, rather than a negative force, which would threaten the individual or group. Parker (1974), argued that if conflicts arise and are not managed properly, it will lead to delays of work, disinterest and lack of action and in extreme cases it might lead to complete breakdown of the group. Unmanaged conflict may result in withdrawal of individuals and unwillingness on their part to participate in other groups or assist with various group action programs in the organization.

*Avoidance* of the situation that causes the conflict is an example of an interpersonal approach (Robert and Jane, 1969). Another way of coping with conflict is through *smoothing*, emphasizing the areas of agreement and common goals and de-emphasizing disagreements. A third way according to Robert and Jane (1969), is *forcing*, pushing one's own view on others; this, of course, will cause overt or covert resistance. A traditional way of coping with conflict is to compromise, agreeing in part with the other person's view or demand. The biggest problem in developing the institutions of conflict control in organization is to develop an action of plan to identify conflicts at its initial stage. Conflict situations are frequently allowed to develop to almost unmanageable proportions before anything is done about them, by this time it is often too late to resolve the conflict by peaceable and procedural means.

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## 7 Impact of avoidance in staff performance

According to Fisher (2000), avoidance occurs when the cooperation and persistence of satisfying one's personal needs is very low. Conflict is a natural element of high-performing workplace teams. When conflict is managed well, it can be a highly effective means of identifying and resolving tough workplace challenges, often resulting in improved relationships and solutions Armstrong (2009). Avoiding conflict, discouraging it or allowing chronic unhealthy conflict to remain unresolved can be disastrous to organizational health, Moriarty (2007). Avoidance is characterized by behavior that either ignores or refuses to engage in the conflict. While avoidance is considered as a negative strategy that shows low concern for both parties' interests. Avoiding conflict is sometimes a strategic reason especially when the relationship is short-term and the issue is not important or when the situation has a potential to escalate to violence. Avoidance may include saying the issue isn't important enough to spend time on or saying there isn't enough time to do the topic justice Moriarty (2007). The goal of using avoidance is to delay. It is appropriate to use this style when there are issues of low importance, to reduce tensions, or to buy time. Avoidance is also appropriate when you are in a low power position and have little control over the situation, when you need to allow others to deal with the conflict, or when the problem is symptomatic of a much larger issue and you need to work on the core issue. Overuse of the avoidance style can result to a low level of input, decision-making, and allowing issues to fester, which can produce a breakdown in communication between teammembers as put by Okoth (2012). People who overuse avoidance cannot speak frankly without fear of repercussions. The overuse of conflict avoidance can often be a result of childhood experiences, past work-related incidents, and negative experiences with conflict resolution. A milder form of avoidance behavior is

when the team member procrastinates about getting work done and deliberately takes an opposing point of view inappropriately during a decision-making situation, or is timid, withdrawn, or shy. Extreme behaviors can occur when avoidance is overused. A person begins to be negative, critical and sarcastic.

Other extreme avoidance behavior includes becoming passive aggressive by being late and not paying attention at meetings. It also lends a greater importance to this style as compared to the other styles because you have devoted such a disproportionate amount of time to the style.

Underuse of the avoidance style results in hostility and hurt feelings. In addition, work can become overwhelming because too many issues are taken on at once, resulting in an inability to prioritize and delegate. When avoidance is underused a team member may deny that there is a problem and allow their hurt feelings to prevent communication. Briscoe and Schuler (2004) have offered procedures for turning dysfunctional conflict into functional conflict, stating that too many organizations tend to take a win-lose, competitive approach to conflict or at worst avoid conflict altogether. Such a negative view of conflict ensures that a group is ineffective and the activity within it becomes destructive. Some practicing managers view group conflict negatively and thus seek to resolve or eliminate all types of disputes (Dowling et al, 2008). These managers contend that conflicts disrupt the organization and prevent optimal performance. As such, conflicts are a clear indication that something is wrong with the organization and that sound principles are not being applied in managing the activities of the organization. In the workplace, managers sometimes avoid directly dealing with conflict among co-workers by simply separating them. In workplaces and other situations where continued contact with a person cannot be severed, workers may abstain from confrontation as being too risky or uncomfortable, opting instead to avoid directly dealing with the situation by venting to others or engaging in passive aggressive methods of attack such as gossip. Unresolved conflict in the workplace has been linked to miscommunication resulting from confusion or refusal to cooperate, increased stress, distrust. According to Kehinde (2011), some possible results of conflict-averse include poor-performing executives can survive because the president doesn't investigate or act on employee complaints; conflict can become malignant between departments, because there is no tie breaker to force resolution; and ineffective managers are passed from one department to the next. Kehinde (2011) is in agreement with Ogungbamila (2006) who note that this strategy has the tendency to prompt counterproductive work behavior.

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## 8 Conclusion

Knippen and Green (1999) cited in Henry (2009), argued that the best way to handle conflicts objectively is to follow six process that involves describing the conflict situation to the other person, asking the other person how he sees the conflict situation, responding the way the other person sees the situation, jointly deciding how to resolve the conflict, making commitment to resolve the conflicts, and promising to be committed in future to continue resolving conflicts, which might arise. Another way of coping with organizational conflicts is to make structural changes. This means modifying and integrating the objectives of groups with different viewpoints. Moreover, the organization structure may have to be changed and authority-responsibility relationships clarified. New ways of coordinating activities may have to be found. Tasks and work locations can also be rearranged.

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