Conflict Management: A simple approach

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Abstract
The paper discusses the overview of conflict from different points of view like administrative, relationship, ethnic and religious points of view. Different definitions including the types, forms and stages of conflict as written by different authors were given. Instances as drawn from the bible on forms of conflicts were showcased in this write-up. Causes of conflict as well as conflict indicators like body language, disagreements, surprises etc. were listed. It was identified in the study that the subject of conflict is a broad one, being very much inexhaustible as it can be treated from different views. In this paper, conflict management and skills for conflict managers were pointed out as well as conflict management approaches in Nigeria and South Africa which was followed by conclusion.

Keywords: conflict, conflict management, conflict prevention

Introduction
The subject of conflict management is a very broad one, owing to the fact it can be treated from various directions as many authors have done today. Moreover, conflict in itself is spurred by many factors, and this affects the way in which it is managed. Conflict management is all about the different ways and methods by which people treat situations, handle grievances. Depending on the type of conflict, the management varies. Conflict management is often considered to be distinct from conflict resolution. As it is often said, “there is no smoke without fire”, conflict is not just about simple inaptness, but is often connected to a previous issue. Conflict resolution refers to the approval of one or both parties, whereas conflict management concerns an ongoing process that may never have a resolution. Neither is it considered the same as conflict transformation, which seeks to reframe the positions of the conflict parties.

Conflict is not a new phenomenon but rather it is a problem that has grown with time (VAN DER STOEL, 1996). Shutte (1993) commented on conflict and stated that conflict can never cease to exist. Today, conflict is part of the human nature. As noted by Haruna (2009), conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of human existence. For instance, Francis (2007) defines conflict as “the pursuit of incompatible interest and goals by different groups”.

Different types of conflicts exist, and so demand different kinds of intervention. No matter the kind of conflict, it is crystal clear that they cause problem for everyone else. An environment filled with conflict is a very unhealthy one. Hence, there should be
ways and methods of preventing, curbing and, or managing such situations since it could be said it is an inevitable occurrence. Conflict is seemingly inevitable because it dates back as old as when the world was created – there existed conflict between God and his creatures; angel Lucifer and Adam. The aftermath of such conflict that existed between two parties is affecting millions of humans today, probably because there were no postulated preventive measures to manage the situation. This paper therefore, gives an overview of conflict, its types and causes and how it can be prevented and, or managed.

**Conflict: An Overview**

When people think of the word conflict, they often think of wars or violence. However, conflict exists at all levels of society in all sorts of situations. It is easy to forget that we experience conflict every day of our lives. *Conflict happens when two or more people or groups have, or think they have, incompatible goals.* When this happens, there is disagreement, argument, selfishness, hatred and at times, it results in violence. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines conflict as “a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument”. Conflict is when two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature and haven't been aligned or agreed about yet, including:

1. Within yourself when you're not living according to your values;
2. When your values and perspectives are threatened; or
3. Discomfort from fear of the unknown or from lack of fulfillment.

Conflict is inevitable and often good, for example, good teams always go through a “form, storm, norm and perform” period. Getting the most out of diversity means often-contradictory values, perspectives and opinions. Some factors indicate conflict, and therefore are referred to as *conflict indicators*. They are:

- Body language
- Disagreements, regardless of issue
- Withholding bad news
- Surprises
- Strong public statements
- Airing disagreements through media
- Conflicts in value system
- Desire for power
- Increasing lack of respect
- Open disagreement
- Lack of candor on budget problems or other sensitive issues
- Lack of clear goals
- No discussion of progress, failure relative to goals, failure to evaluate the superintendent fairly, thoroughly or at all.

Conflict is a struggle to resist or overcome; contest of opposing forces or powers, strife; battle. It is a state or condition of opposition; antagonism; discord. It is a painful tension set up by a class between opposed and contradictory impulses. Chaplin (1979) cited by Oyeshola (2005) defined conflict as “the simultaneous occurrence of two or more
mutually antagonistic impulses or motives”. Deutsh (1973) also cited by Oyeshola (2005) submitted that conflict is “wherever incompatible activities occur”. Evans and Newhan (1998) cited by Sani (2007) defined conflict as “a social condition which arises where two or more parties pursue goals which are incompatible”. The parties may be individual, small or large groups and communities. Sani (2007) submitted that conflict is “often associated with anything bad and negative which needs to be avoided. It is seen as an opposite of peace”. In a workplace, a simple disagreement between team members, if unresolved, may escalate into avoidance, inability to work together, verbal assaults, and resentment. In the worst cases, it may also lead to hostility or eventual separation from the organization. Therefore, it is important that this issue of conflict be traced from the origin so that it could be properly handled and resolved.

Types of Conflict

There are many different types of conflict experienced by communities all around the world. As adapted from Working with conflict p.5, there are four types of conflict viz: No conflict, Surface conflict, Latent Conflict and Open conflict.

- **No Conflict**: Any peaceful community is likely to face conflict sometimes, although communities in this category are good at resolving conflict before it develops.

- **Surface Conflict**: This has shallow or no roots. It may be due to misunderstanding of goals, which can be addressed by improved communication and the conscious effort of opposing groups to understand each other’s needs and opinions.

- **Latent Conflict**: This is conflict below the surface. It might need to be brought out into the open before it can be effectively addressed.

- **Open Conflict**: This conflict is very visible and has deep roots, sometimes over several generations. Both the causes and the effects need to be addressed.

Communities experiencing surface or latent conflict are those where the disagreement can quickly turn into open conflict. Open conflict can cause more physical, social, psychological and environmental damage than the other types. It affects people who are not involved in the conflict as well as those who are.

We generally think of conflict as something to be avoided; in other words, as destructive. Conflict can, however, also be constructive. Conflict is destructive when it:

- Takes attention away from other important activities
- Undermines morale or self-concept
- Polarizes people and groups, reducing cooperation
- Increases or sharpens difference
- Leads to irresponsible and harmful behavior, such as fighting, name-calling

On the other hand, Conflict is constructive when it:

- Results in clarification of important problems and issues
- Results in solutions to problems
Types of conflict as identified by Owens-Ibe (2000) are Manifest Conflict and Latent Conflict. Manifest conflict is characterized by clear and overt indicators and expressions of grievances. Ultimately, it may lead to full-blown conflict. In his own contribution, Sani (2007) opined that marginalization is largely responsible for the spontaneous and widespread of latent conflicts; marginalization also engenders racial conflict.

Stages of Conflict
Oyeshola (2005) identified five stages of conflict as thus: the emerging stage, the escalating, the most severe, de-escalating and the rebuilding and reconciliation. At the emerging stage, which can also be referred to as the precipitating stage, signs and all communicative signals are given through verbal and non-verbal languages. At the next stage which is escalating, potential parties to the conflict are fully aware of what is considered wrong. If nothing is done to checkmate this, it leads to “point of no return” and usually as Oyeshola stressed “the time frame can be very short”. The third stage is the destructive one and it is known as severe stage. At this point, destruction of lives and properties are set-in with little or no exception to whosoever is a victim. As the saying goes, after rain comes thunder, after lives and properties had been destroyed come the resolution stage otherwise known as “rebuilding and reconciliation stage”.

Forms of Conflict
Conflict can take different forms such as ethnic, relationship, religious, political, etc. Some of these forms of conflict are as discussed:

[Ethnic conflict]
This form of conflict exists between ethnic groups. If not checked, ethnic conflicts are contagious and can spread quickly across borders like cancer cells. Ted Gurr and Monty Marshall have written that most African conflicts are caused by the combination of poverty and weak states and institutions. (Peace and Conflict, 2001:11-13; 2003).

Economic factors have been identified as one of the major causes of conflict in Africa. Theorists believe that competition for scarce resources is a common factor in almost all ethnic conflicts in Africa. In multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria and South Africa, ethnic communities violently compete for property, rights, jobs, education, language, social amenities and good health care facilities. In his study, Okwudiba Nnoli (1980) produced empirical examples linking socio-economic factors to ethnic conflict in Nigeria. According to J.S. Furnival, cited in Nnoli (1980:72-3), "the working of economic forces makes for tension between groups with competing interests."
The history of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria also traces back to the colonial transgressions that forced the ethnic groups of the northern and southern provinces to become an entity called Nigeria in 1914. Since the various ethnic groups living in these provinces were not consulted regarding the merger, this British colonial policy was autocratic and undemocratic, and thus led to conflict. It denied the people's basic needs of participation, equality and social well-being.

[Religious conflicts]

This type of conflict exists mostly where there are differences in religious beliefs. This is typical of Muslims and Christians who share entirely extreme differences in belief system. This has resulted in many religious riots, especially in Nigeria. There is litany of religious conflicts in Nigeria such as:

- December 1980 – the first religious disturbance in Kano, masterminded by Maitastine, a Camerounian from the Kotok tribe.
- December 1982 – the second religious riot happened at Bulumkutu on the outskirts of Maiduguri, Borno State, and Kaduna.
- February 1984 – another major religious uprising broke out in Kafanchan, Kaduna State.
- April 26, 1985 – religious fanatics struck in Gombe and Bauchi States killing more than 100 people…. (See TELL. August 10, 2009. p. 36).

Some other forms of conflict exist such as relationship, marital, interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup and intragroup. There are accounts of some of these forms of conflicts as drawn from the bible.

Forms of conflict in the bible

[Intrapersonal Conflict]

- Psalm 32: David experienced conflict within himself over his sin.
- Psalm 73: Asaph experienced conflict within himself over the contradictions of life, that the wicked often prosper and the righteous often suffer.
- Mat. 27:46: Jesus experienced intense conflict within himself because he felt forsaken by the father.
- Rom 7:14-25: Paul experienced inner conflict because of the sin nature within him.

[Interpersonal Conflict]

- Gen. 27: Conflict between Jacob and Esau over the matter of the birthright.
- Ist Sam. 19: Saul feels intense conflict with David because of his jealousy of David.
- Job: a powerful account between Job and his three friends, and conflict between Job and God.
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- Amos 7:7-17: Conflict between Amos, the prophet and Amaziah, priest of Bethel.
- Jonah: an extensive account of conflict between Jonah and God.
- James 4: 1-3: Interpersonal conflict which is due to our own desires and motives.

[Intagroup Conflict]

- Gen. 37: Conflict between Joseph and his brothers because of jealousy
- Ex. 32: Conflict between Moses and Israel because of the golden calf. There follows the conflict between Moses and God.
- Num. 12:1-5: Conflict between Moses and Aaron and Miriam because they resented his leadership.
- John 11: Conflict between Jesus and the disciples as to whether they ought to return to Judea because of the danger involved (vv 7-16); followed by conflict between Jesus and Mary and Martha because he hadn’t been there when Lazarus died (vv. 21-32).
- Acts 21: 7-15: Conflict between Paul and the believers at Caesarea over whether he ought to go to Jerusalem:2-9 (and Gal 5:7-12:)

[Intergroup Conflict]

- 1 Kings 18: The story of dramatic conflict between Elijah and the Prophets of Baal. Behind the scene, it was really conflict between Yaweh and Baal.
- Neh. 4: conflict between those following Nehemiah and those following Sanballat and Tobiah over the Prophet of the rebuilding of the temple.
- Mt. 21:12,6: Sharp conflict between Jesus and the Merchants in the temple.
- 1 Cor. 1:10-12 (and 3:3-4): Conflict between groups in the Corinth church over leadership.
- Phil. 3:2-9 (and Gal. 5:7-12): Conflict between Paul and his colleagues in ministry, and the Judaizers over the issue of keeping the law as a requirement for salvation.

In studying these passages in the light of conflict, we are well aware that the biblical personalities involved were not consciously adopting a “style” of conflict management nor were they necessarily aware of applying or violating conflict management principles. It is necessary to know how to manage and prevent any form of conflict. The basics of conflict management is hereby discussed.

Benefits of Conflict

While the term conflict generally is associated with negative encounters, conflict itself is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. In fact, engaging in conflict can have positive effects on relationships and organizations. Consider these benefits:

- Conflict fosters an awareness that problems exist.
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- Discussing conflicting views can lead to better solutions.
- Managing conflict is quicker and more efficient than letting conflicts fester.
- Challenging old assumptions can lead to changes in outdated practices and processes.
- Conflict requires creativity to find the best outcomes.
- Conflict raises awareness of what is important to individuals.
- Managing conflicts appropriately helps build self-esteem.
- Managing conflicts well is a sign of maturity.
- Conflicts are challenging.
- Conflicts are exciting.
- Conflicts encourage people to grow.
- Conflicts create opportunity.

Conflict Management

According to Wikipedia, conflict management refers to the long-term management of intractable conflicts. It is the label for the variety of ways by which people handle grievances – standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Those ways include such diverse phenomena as gossip, ridicule, lynching, terrorism, warfare, feuding, genocide, law, mediation, and avoidance.

Conflict management is a key skill for all successful long-term relationships. It may well be that the key skill in all long-term committed relationships is conflict management--certainly the data on marriages suggest this is true. The presence of conflict does not determine the quality of a marriage; rather, how the couple handles conflict situations determines the quality of the relationship. Even beliefs about conflict are more important to marital, happiness than whether or not the two partners actually agree with one another (Crohan 1992).

“Conflict management is a key skill for all successful long-term relationships”.

How you handle conflict spreads to other members of your family. For example, it has been noted that adult children who are taking care of their parents usually have high levels of conflict with siblings (Merrill 1996). Learning effective skills for dealing with your younger brother or sister is far better than engaging in a family dispute that will affect your children and subsequent generations as well.

A manager may not feel it necessary to intervene when a minor exchange of words occurs between employees--unless such an incident becomes a daily occurrence and expands beyond the employees initially involved. However, a situation where one employee threatens another requires immediate action. When handling conflict, some basic guidelines apply. Reg Adkins at Elemental Truths and our regular guest contributor
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has done a great series at his blog on conflict management. Everyone has their own way to deal with conflict, there are five of them:

- Collaborating
- Competing
- Avoiding
- Harmonizing
- Compromising

There is not one type superior to other, but it is all depends the people, environment and the context.

[Reaching Consensus through Collaboration]

Groups often collaborate closely in order to reach consensus or agreement. The ability to use collaboration requires the recognition of and respect for everyone's ideas, opinions, and suggestions. Consensus requires that each participant must agree on the point being discussed before it becomes a part of the decision. Not every point will meet with everyone's complete approval. Unanimity is not the goal. The goal is to have individuals accept a point of view based on logic. When individuals can understand and accept the logic of a differing point of view, you must assume you have reached consensus.

Follow these guidelines for reaching consensus:

- Avoid arguing over individual ranking or position. Present a position as logically as possible.
- Avoid "win-lose" statements. Discard the notion that someone must win.
- Avoid changing of minds only in order to avoid conflict and to achieve harmony.
- Avoid majority voting, averaging, bargaining, or coin flipping. These do not lead to consensus. Treat differences of opinion as indicative of incomplete sharing of relevant information, keep asking questions.
- Keep the attitude that holding different views is both natural and healthy to a group.
- View initial agreement as suspect. Explore the reasons underlying apparent agreement and make sure that members have willingly agreed.

According to McNamara (2008), there is no one best way to deal with conflict. It depends on the current situation. Here are the major ways that people use to deal with conflict:

- Avoid it. Pretend it is not there or ignore it.
  a. Use it when it simply is not worth the effort to argue. Usually this approach tends to worsen the conflict over time.
- Accommodate it. Give in to others, sometimes to the extent that you compromise yourself.
  a. Use this approach very sparingly and infrequently, for example, in situations when you know that you will have another more useful approach in the very near future. Usually this approach tends to worsen the conflict over time, and causes conflicts within you.
- Competing. Work to get your way, rather than clarifying and addressing the issue. Competitors love accommodators.
  a. Use when you have a very strong conviction about your position.
- Compromising. Mutual give-and-take.
  a. Use when the goal is to get past the issue and move on.
- Collaborating. Focus on working together.
  a. Use when the goal is to meet as many current needs as possible by using mutual resources. This approach sometimes raises new mutual needs.
  b. Use when the goal is to cultivate ownership and commitment.

Skills for Conflict Management

"The skills required for conflict management are simple, but they rarely are acquired as part of growing up. Learn them and use them" (Mayer, 1990, 58). The consensus in the professional literature is that if we are to become competent managers of interpersonal conflicts, skills in two arenas must be mastered:

- Conceptual arena
- Skill competence arena

Conceptual skills. The first arena is conceptual: an individual must understand conflict's causes, styles, strategies, tactics, and world-views. An individual must understand theories of how and why conflicts arise, where and when conflicts habitually occur, and the range of strategies and tactics that may be utilized to manage conflict.

Skill competence. The second arena is skill competence. In addition to understanding communication and conflict theory, an individual must become competent in a variety of basic communication skills and develop a working repertoire of conflict management skills. A lengthy [list of abilities and tactics] can be specified for advanced conflict management. However, two basic communication skills are required if parties hope to manage conflict productively:

- listening
- asking questions

Individuals new to conflict management should work first to enhance basic communication skills. Wilmot & Hocker suggest some basic skills for conflict managers. More advanced assessment tools follow these basic skills.
Conflict Management Approaches: the case of Nigeria and South Africa

In view of the intensity of the ethnic conflicts that have rocked Nigeria and South Africa, both countries have worked to develop constitutionally backed institutions for conflict management.

In South Africa, after a difficult and courageous political negotiation between the country's various interest groups, the state has prevented further violence by developing multiple democratic approaches to create a foundation for peace and security. The architects of the new South African constitution crafted an impressive document aimed to heal the wounds of the past and establish a society based on social justice, fundamental human rights and rule of law. The constitution guarantees freedom of association, languages and religion and includes a bill of rights.

Secondly, the government has created affirmative action packages for disadvantaged groups, which emphasise "management of diversity." They are meant, among other things, to address the structural racism created by the apartheid state.

Thirdly, the structure of the South African government was constitutionally changed to make way for a government of national unity. Power-sharing mechanisms were included in the constitution to prevent the ethnic or racial domination of any group. The composition of the new government confirms a trend towards accommodation and tolerance, which also helped to legitimise the government.

Fourthly, the constitution dismantled the homelands. This act signified the end of apartheid. As mentioned above, the conditions in the black reservations were inhuman. Poverty was endemic and social amenities and jobs were scarce. The neglect of the homelands and townships made the people vulnerable to ethnic entrepreneurs and warlords who were fighting for power and economic resources. Following the dismantling of the ethnic homelands, the constitution provided for the creation of nine provinces in place of the former four provinces that existed during apartheid. This decision aimed to distribute power between sub-national units. The provinces enjoy relative autonomy, thus helping to de-escalate conflict.

The fifth step taken towards peaceful conflict management was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) chaired by Arch-bishop Desmond Tutu, which helped to heal the wounds inflicted by the apartheid system. It also helped to inculcate a commitment to accountability and transparency into South African public life.

The sixth step the ANC government took was meant to address the roots of economic inequalities. The ANC introduced an ambitious plan of action called the "Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The RDP was aimed at encouraging disadvantaged groups, especially blacks, to participate equally with others in business.
To manage her complex ethnic problem, Nigeria, like South Africa, has developed mechanisms for ethnic conflict management. Constitutionally, Nigeria opted for federalism and secularism to manage ethnic and regional misunderstanding. Like South Africa, a bill of rights was included in the 1999 constitution, which was intended to allay the fears of ethnic minorities in the South.

Past Nigerian dictators had been under enormous pressure from minority groups for a more fair distribution of power. From 1967 to 1999, thirty-six states were created in Nigeria, which cut across ethnic and religious lines. This move was meant to further allay the ethnic groups' fears of being dominated by the three major linguistic groups, the Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo and the Yoruba.

However, the viability of these new states is unclear, with the exception of the oil-producing states in the South. Some of these states have recently become conduits for the personal enrichment of the elites at the expense of alleviating poverty and creating job opportunities for the rest of the population.

There have been reports of disparities in the distribution of the oil resources in Nigeria for many years. This contentious issue has fuelled most of the recent ethnic conflicts in the country. Though the constitution provided for a new system of resource allocation, ethnic groups from the oil and mineral producing areas see the new system as inadequate, arguing they are not receiving enough money for their own regional development. These are the dynamics behind the Ogoni crisis and the recent sporadic ethnic violence in the oil producing Niger Delta states. I would argue that unless this issue is resolved, by a national conference, the economic base of the country will be jeopardised.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to define conflict, giving the different types of conflict and the forms it can take. Additionally, conflict management as a skill has been treated, with a listing of skills of managing conflict. It is therefore, hoped that individuals, administrators, nation and state leaders, religious groups, office managers, subordinates, and religious leaders imbibe some of the stated skills and learn how to avoid manage, and resolve conflicts.
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