

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN ORGANIZATIONS-AN ANALYSIS.

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**ABSTRACT:** *Conflict is as inevitable in every organization as change. Conflict is a potential element in all human interactions. Conflict can be harmful but also useful in achieving desired goals. Conflict resolution plays a vital role in the growth of an organization as it fosters creativity and innovation. The focus of the study was to analyse conflict resolution policies and practices, and employee perception of these conflict resolution policies in the sampled organization. A self-administered questionnaire was employed and administered among the management and staff of the sampled International Organisation in Accra, Ghana. Convenience sampling method was used in selecting 55 respondents from the various units of the organization and descriptive statistics were employed for analyzing the data collected. For the data analysis, SPSS (21.0) was used. The findings of this research revealed some major causes of conflict in the organizations. This research identified the conflict resolutions policies that the organization has put in place to manage and resolve conflict in the organization, and employees' perception of these policies.*

**KEYWORDS:** Conflict Resolution, Organizations

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### INTRODUCTION

*Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates invention. It shocks us out of sheep like passivity and sets us at noting and contriving. Conflict is a "sine qua non" of reflection and ingenuity (John Dewey)*

Conflict occurs between people in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings. It is an organizational reality everyone faced when working with others. It is inherently neither good nor bad in itself. According to Robbins and Judge (2009) and Spaho (2013), conflict has been defined variously by many authors but common to all these definitions is that conflict is a perception. Conflict is a process which begins anytime a person (A) perceives that another person (s) has/have or is capable of affecting anything of value to A. Due to the wide range of potential differences among people (which could be cultural, ethical, educational etc), the absence of conflict usually signals the absence of meaningful interaction. Three different views on conflict have evolved over time, interactionism, traditional (the belief that conflict is disruptive and must be avoided) and resolution focused view (Robbins & Judge, 2011; Verma, 1999). De Dreu and Van de Vliert (1997) suggest that conflict should be encouraged in organizations because any organization which is harmonious, peaceful, tranquil, or cooperative is prone to become static and unresponsive to change. There is a need to encourage some level of conflict in organizations to enhance creativity. Advocates of the resolution focused view hold the idea that conflict is inevitable but we should focus on productive conflict resolution. Conflict could be functional but in other instances, it is rather not productive. Conflicts cost organizations lots of time (Peterson & Behfar, 2003) as a result of interaction with customers and focusing on group members (Ikeda, Veludo-de-Oliveira & Campomar, 2005), produce stress (Penny & Spencer, 2005) leave painful feelings and reduces trust and respect (Jehn, Greer, Levine & Szulanski, 2008).

However, the manner in which conflict is handled determines whether it is constructive or destructive (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). In this regard, Ikeda, Veludo-de-Oliveira & Campomar, (2005) added that conflict resolution depends on lots of factors such as type of companies or organizations, personalities of individuals and culture of the conflicting parties. Consequently, a study involving sources of conflict and its resolution in an organization was worth undertaking.

## LITERATURE

### Overview of Conflict Resolution

Conflict occurs because individuals have different perceptions, beliefs and goals. Barki and Hartwick (2004) explain conflict as “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals” (p. 234). Jehn and Bendersky (2003) defined it as “perceived incompatibilities or discrepant views among the parties involved” (p. 189). Conflicts can produce severe problems in an organization; it can certainly hurt an organization’s performance and lead to the forfeiture of employees. Despite this, studies conclude that not all conflict is bad. Conflicts sometimes bring about positive consequences such as new ideas, stimulating creativity, motivate changes, and serves as a safety value to indicate problems. However, when conflict in an organization turns negative, it becomes necessary to take measures that might lead to consequences such as resource wastage, breaking of group cohesions creating of negative climate, threatens psychological well-being, increase hostility and aggressive behaviors.

According to Nahavandi and Malakzadeh (1998), conflict reduction or prevention can use the behavioral or attitudinal approach to manage conflicts. Behavioral conflict reduction and prevention methods include enforcing rules, separating employees, assigning clear tasks, having a common enemy, outside competition, increasing resources and rewarding cooperation. Attitudinal conflict resolution methods include, having a common enemy, rotating employees, increasing resources, team building and organizational development. Nahavandi (1998) also stated that since conflict can also bring about positive consequences, managers can stimulate conflict through introduction of change, increasing task ambiguity and creating interdependence or competition.

Robbins and Langton (2001), defines conflict management as the use of resolution and stimulating techniques to achieve the desired level of conflict. They however identified the resolution technique as problem solving (face – face meeting), expansion of resource, avoidance, altering the structural variable, that is changing the formal organizational structure and interaction patterns of conflicting parties through job design and transfer. They also identified the stimulation techniques as communication where threatening messages are used to increase positive conflict level, appointment of devil’s advocate and restructuring of the organization.

Debra and Campbell (2005), indicate that for effective resolution and management of conflict, measures or techniques such as appealing to subordinate goals, expanding resources, changing personnel, changing structure, confronting and negotiation could be put into effect. They also stated that in negotiation, managers can use variety of conflict management styles including avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising and collaborating. In addition, managers should strive to create a conflict – positive organization that is one that values diversity empowers employees and seeks win – win solution to conflicts.

### **The Conflict Process**

The development of conflict and its resolution tend to follow a pattern. This is however based on the work of Pondy (2007), where he identified six steps of conflict process;

#### **(a) Antecedent conditions:**

A number of conditions have been linked with the degree of conflict (Walton, Dutton and Cafferty, 2009, Corwin 2009). They are not necessarily causes of conflicts but they seem to be associated with higher rate of conflict and may well predispose a situation in that direction. These conditions create room for conflicts to arise. According to Robbins and Judge (2011), the antecedence conditions can be condensed into three categories: communication, structure and personal variables.

#### **(b) Perceived Conflict**

Another part of the conflict process has to do with how parties perceive the situation of each other, this is an independent group. Parties often engage in conflict because one party perceives that his interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another.. The parties also engage in conflict because they perceive a situation as involving limited alternatives.

#### **(c) Felt Conflict**

In addition to perception, Pondy (2007), posit that feelings and attitudes alter the relationship between objective conditions and potentially result in conflictive outcome. Where parties value cooperation and believe that success in their relationship depends upon the attainment of the needs of both, their behavior is likely to be different than when the parties value competition and believe that one can win only at the others expense., Robbins and Judge (2011) explain this stage as a level which is characterized by emotions such as anxiety, frustration, tension or hostility.

#### **(d) Manifest Behavior**

Eventually “something happens”. The game being, the fight breaks out, the argument starts, the negotiation begins. It is also possible that the parties will perceive a problem to exist and begin problem solving behavior at this point, without ever having engaged in conflict. If conflict does occur, the parties will engage in activities which in some way interfere with the goal attainment of each other.

#### **(e) Conflict Resolution or Suppression**

Conflict resolution or suppression activities are those which are directed at reducing or sending such conflict. A variety of methods are used to resolve conflict. Some of these essentially involve the victory of side and the defeat of the other. Others involve splitting the difference, compromising or the use of problem solving. However, Filley (2009) suggested that the prevalence of the former method of domination and compromise over problem solving is probably due to the fact that they are so widely parched.

#### **(f) Resolution Aftermath**

The resolution of conflict leaves a legacy which will affect the future relations of parties and their attitude about each other. Where one party wins and the other loses, the defeat may lead to antagonistic or self-depreciation feelings on the part of the loser. Burke et al (1994), were of the view that they have given more than they have received, exhibit feeling of defeat, and manifest a low level of commitment to agreements. Finally, when conflicts are solved, it is likely that trust, commitment and future conflict will be handled effectively than when resolution are not the result of problem solving.

### **Strategies for Dealing with Conflicts**

Neill (2000) identified that the various methods for dealing with conflict may be grouped according to their outcomes. These outcomes may be called win-lose, lose-lose and win-win.

#### **a) Win-Lose Methods**

Methods that typically results in win-lose outcomes include dominance through power or authority, ignoring attempts at influence, majority rule and railroading. The use of dominance through powers or authority is common. Through it, arbitrary actions are justified by saying ‘you must follow my orders because I am the boss, parents or teachers and I know what is good for you’. The effect of this exercise of unilateral power is predictable. Losers typically engage in non-productive behavior than winners. They screen communication to the winners making it feel positive, address more remarks to the winner; become non aggressive in their statements and fail to identify with goals of organizations. The creation of losing feelings may actually alter the energy creativity, and measure intelligence of the loser in a negative direction.

Neill, also continued to identify that, ignoring or failing to another can result in a win-lose outcome. For example, in a company sale conference, if a sales person says ‘I think we ought to reorganize the sales territories’ and no one responds, the person will properly feel he has lost. Failing to deal with employees’ complaint may also have this similar effect.

A third win-lose method is majority rule. Majority rule appears to be functional where groups votes together over a period of time and voting factions are not fixed. Thus one person may win on some votes and lose on others. It also works where the voting alternatives are all acceptable to the parties, with some merely preferred more than others. It is not functional however, when a group split into fixed factions and when the result of voting is a disgruntled minority.

#### **b) Lose-Lose Methods**

According to Neil (2000), these methods are based on the notion that ‘half a loaf is better than none’, or that ‘something beats nothing all to hell’. Typically lose-lose methods are compromise, bribing resort to arbitration and resort to rule. Arbitration is the settlement of disputes between two parties by means of the binding decision of an impartial power. In compromise, the parties generally disagree about two solutions and settle for something in-between. Example, a lose-lose strategy involves side payment or bribes, as when company overpays people who dislike their work.

A lose-lose method is the resort to third parties as arbitrator. The reason why arbitration is sometimes lose-lose method is that, the third party seems to want an outcome in which each party can get something. Therefore neither party wins at all or what they want. Finally lose-lose outcome frequently occurs when parties resort to rules for solution to a conflict like arbitration by third party, resort to rule may result in a lose-lose outcome. The result of such approaches is illustrated when a driver runs out of gasoline and attempts to purchase some with a check. If the station owner emphasizes that the station policy of not taking checks, both parties lose. (The station master may choose to problem solve, of course by determining a way to provide the driver with gasoline without running the risk of accepting a bad check.)

#### **c) Win-Win Methods**

The third set of method is distinctly, they involve consensus and integrative decision making. Consensus decision occurs when group of two or more people, who are dealing with judgmental issues, reach a decision which is not unacceptable to anyone.

Hall (2001), has shown that when certain group's process rules are used, the group decision is frequently better than the individual decision. For the reason, consensus decision is recommended for the final selection of alternatives in integrative decision making.

Filley (2009) conducted a stimulation exercise where groups of people were requested to rank in order, groups of items of their desirability for a trip across the moon. Typical process rules that lead to consensus decision in such case suggested that participants focused on defeating the problem rather than each other; that they avoid voting, trading or avenging to make their decision. They use facts rather than force to solve problems that they accept conflict as helpful, providing that does not elicit threat or defensiveness; and avoid self-oriented behavior to exclusion of consideration for others needs or position.

The second win-win method is integrative decision making, integrative method involves a joint identification the needs and values of both parties, an exhaustive search for alternative which might meet these goals and selection of the best alternative. This process is quite familiar, its relevance is highlighted, however, when one observes that conflict ordinarily occur because of arguments about two solutions. Integrative methods change such solution-minded situations into problem-oriented situations, and for that reason they are useful when two parties are polarized in their positions.

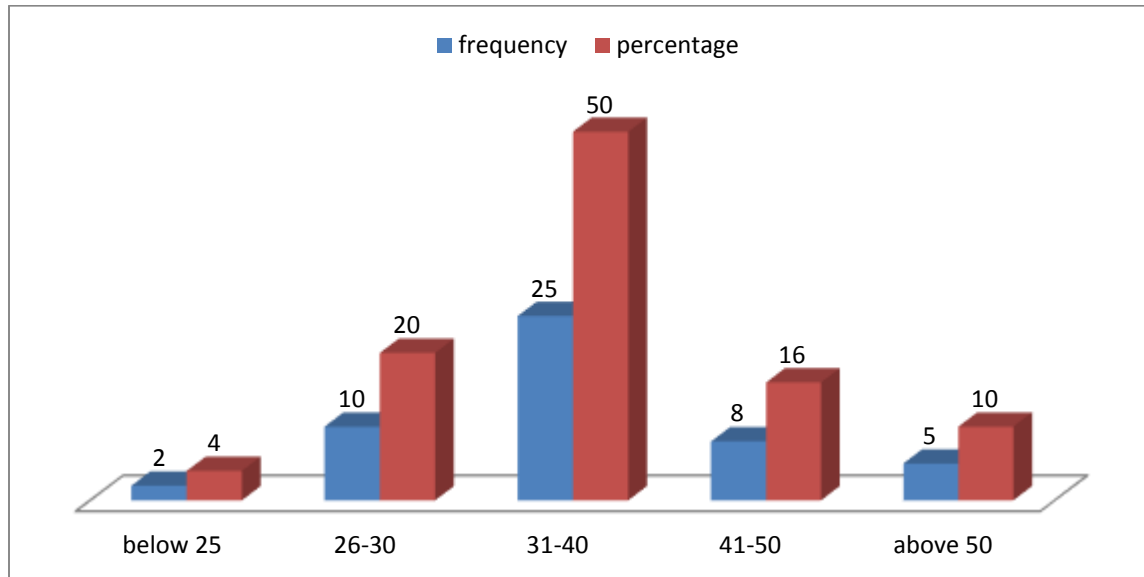
## **METHODOLOGY**

The research design was a quantitative descriptive approach. The major purpose of descriptive research is to provide a description of the state of affairs of a phenomenon as it exists at present. In the words of Cresswell and Clark (2007), research designs are useful because they help guide the methods and decisions that research must make during the studies and set the logic by which interpretations are made at the end. Besides, Brink and Wood (1998) have indicated that studies of this nature ought to adopt descriptive in its approach. The target population for the research was an international organization with a subsidiary in Accra, Ghana with about 55 workers. A total of 55 respondents were sampled for the study but only 50 responded. This comprised 10 management workers and 40 lower level employees. The convenience sampling technique was used to select respondents. This is because respondents were selected based on willingness to respond to the questionnaire. The five-point Likert scale of measurement was used to collect the data from the respondents. In this regard, respondents were made to indicate their level of agreement or disagreements on a symmetric agree-disagree scale for a series of statements.

The major instrument used for collecting data was questionnaire. Questions used in the questionnaire were structured in a way that caused the required data needed to achieve the objectives of the study. The close-ended response strategy was used to design the questionnaire which were administered and retrieved within a period of two weeks. Descriptive analysis was the method used to analyze the data. Descriptive analysis gives vivid description of the results gathered. Data treatment and analysis, the SPSS software (version 21.0) was used with frequencies and percentages.

## RESULTS

Findings were presented with frequencies and percentages. The first section presents information on the respondents' demography.



**Figure 1: Demographic and Basic information on Respondents**

Gender wise, the distribution was dominated by male staff (54.0%) of the sampled firm. In terms of age, out of the 50 respondents, two were below 25 years. Ten (10) respondents fell within the age range of 26-30. Another 8 respondents were within the ages of 41 and 50. The age range of 31-40 dominated with 25 respondents while 5 respondents were found above 50 years. The tenure of office of the various respondents were, 30% worked not more than 5 years, 54%, between 6 to 10 years, 10% between 11 to 15 years while the remaining 3 employees had worked for not less than 16 years in the organization.

### Sources of conflict in the organization

According to Nahavandi and Malakzadeh (1998) conflict occurs due to several reasons such as individuals' different perceptions, beliefs or goals. In view of this, the researcher sought to identify factors that cause conflict at the work place. It was revealed that out of the five sources presented to employees none was rejected, rather four new ones were added. A convincing percentage (94%) of the respondents strongly agreed to poor communication, differing interests, poor performance, scarce resources, and different values as the main sources of conflict. These were also identified by the same percentage; perceptual difference, lack of accountability, competition among employees, and ambiguity in the design of work-flow. The remaining 6% were uncertain.

This result confirmed the findings of Nahavandi and Malakzadeh (1998) who equally found poor communication, different values, differing interests, scarce resources, and poor performance as sources of conflict in organizations. . In other studies, Robins and Langton (2001) posit that conflict can take substantive and affective forms. To this end, they mentioned that substantive conflicts can be caused by disagreements, debates, or disputes over resource distribution, task

performance, and role assignments. Affective conflicts can be caused by a variety of interpersonal dynamics, including rivalries, jealousies, role definitions, or struggles for power and favor.

### **Conflict Resolution Policies or Practices in the Sampled Organization**

The researcher, after identifying the causes of conflict in the organization, sought to examine management role in conflict resolution. According to Rue (2000) any policy put in place has an influence on employees and their performance as well. In view of this, the researcher explored the perceptions of the respondents regarding this. Four main conflict resolution policies used in the organisation (open communication channels, informal complaint process, mediation, and arbitration) were presented to the respondents to choose which of the practices is administered and preferred. All the respondents admitted that the four conflict resolution strategies are implemented. In terms of preference, 64% were for open communication strategy, 22% for the informal complaining strategy and the remaining 14% preferred mediation. No one opted for arbitration strategies. Further enquiries revealed that 38% of the respondents felt that those policies are just on paper but are not actually implemented or used when issues crop up. . Therefore, it is important for managers to go by the policies they have put down in resolving conflicts when necessary.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study indicated that employee conflict arise as a result of specific reasons that warrant the attention of employers or management of an organization. The study revealed that, there were other sources of conflict that had not been researched into. Also management of organizations should remember that policies that are put in place have an impact on employees in the long run and can affect productivity. Practical experiences have shown that, conflict should be solved by first or middle line managers. Top management involvement in conflict resolution o indicates inefficiencies in the levels below.

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