

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN THE EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATION OF UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This paper explored conflict management strategies essential for the effective administration of universities. Over the years, universities have faced persistent crises involving conflicts between academic staff and administrators, students and lecturers, students and university authorities, as well as non-academic staff and management. These conflicts have fostered distrust, hostility, and inefficiency, undermining smooth institutional operation. The paper emphasized that effective conflict management depends on understanding and addressing the needs and interests of all parties involved, ensuring mutual satisfaction with outcomes. It highlighted the various types and causes of conflicts in university settings, noting that unresolved disputes often hinder progress and disrupt academic activities. Furthermore, the study identified different strategies for managing such conflicts, emphasizing the need for proactive, flexible, and context-based approaches. The paper concluded that conflict management is vital to achieving educational goals and maintaining industrial harmony. It was therefore suggested among others that; university administrators should identify the actual causes and nature of the conflict among the staff before implementing management strategies. Relying on a single approach is discouraged; instead, administrators should apply a combination of strategies suited to each situation. Ultimately, effective conflict resolution fosters cooperation, enhances productivity, and strengthens the overall administration of higher education institutions.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Effective Administration, Institutional Harmony, Organizational Effectiveness, University Administration.

Introduction

Educational institutions, like other social organizations, are complex systems composed of individuals with diverse backgrounds, needs, goals, skills, knowledge, and behavioral styles. This diversity naturally leads to disagreements and conflicts, which are inevitable and normal within organizational activities. Conflict should not be perceived as a sign of incompetence or

ill intent; rather, it represents opposition or disagreement between two or more parties, often manifesting as arguments, protests, demonstrations, or other forms of friction (Obizue et al., 2020).

The effective administration of universities largely depends on harmonious working relationships among administrators, academic and non-academic staff, and students. Conflict management, therefore, is a deliberate approach used by administrators to resolve disputes constructively, ensuring that all parties are mutually satisfied with outcomes. Management in this context involves coordinating resources through planning, organizing, leading, and controlling human activities to achieve organizational goals efficiently and peacefully. Administrators employ various managerial skills, such as directing staff, planning work, setting standards, reviewing procedures, and evaluating outcomes, to support effective decision-making and problem-solving.

Conflicts in universities arise due to differing interests and goals among members of the academic community. While conflicts are ubiquitous, their effective management is critical to maintaining a peaceful academic environment, cooperative relationships, and optimal organizational performance. Poorly managed conflict can disrupt academic processes, reduce productivity, and threaten institutional harmony. Conversely, well-managed conflict can stimulate innovation, resolve problems effectively, and improve relationships (Klein et al., as cited in Peretomode, 2020).

Several strategies are employed in conflict management, including effective communication, avoidance, dialogue, compromise, prevention, and mediation. Effective communication ensures the timely and respectful exchange of information. Avoidance allows issues to resolve naturally when confrontation is likely to escalate problems. Dialogue fosters collaborative inquiry and the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Compromise encourages negotiation to reach mutually acceptable solutions. Prevention involves proactive measures to avert conflict escalation, while mediation provides structured intervention to reconcile conflicting parties. Mastery of these strategies enables administrators to manage disputes constructively and maintain an environment conducive to effective university administration.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that propel the searchlight for this paper is Conflict Theory:

Conflict Theory

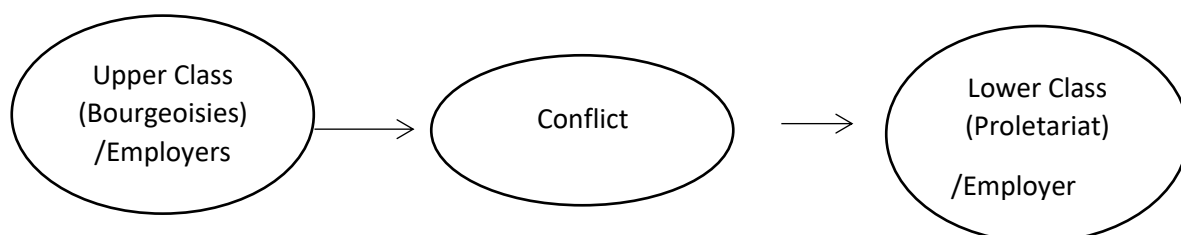


Fig 1: Model of Conflict Theory

Source: Karl Marx in Ashley et al (2016)

The theory was propounded by Karl Marx as cited in Ashley et al (2016). It states that the society is in conflict between the classes. He purported that due to society's never-ending competition for finite resources, it will always be in a state of conflict. The implication of this theory is that those in possession of wealth and resources will protect and hoard those resources, while those without will do whatever they can to obtain them. According to the conflict perspective, inequalities in power and reward are built into all social structures. Individuals and groups who benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained. For example, the wealthy may fight to maintain their privileged access to higher education by opposing measures that would broaden access, such as affirmative action or public funding. A situation where the Bourgeoisies continuously oppress the proletariat. This dynamic means there is a constant struggle between the rich and the poor. According to Marx's theory, conflict will always occur when someone or a group of individuals in a society becomes uneasy or dissatisfied with a situation that may cause inequality, such as economic inequality.

Relevance of the theory to this paper is that conflict theory examines any social phenomenon through the lens that there is a natural human instinct towards conflict. Marx is not saying that conflict is good or bad, but instead that it is an unavoidable aspect of human nature and helps explain why things are the way they are. For example, conflict theory can be used to look at wars, violence, revolutions, and forms of injustice and discrimination by explaining that there is a natural disparity in society that causes these problems.

One common criticism of Karl Marx' conflict theory is that it fails to capture the way in which economic interactions can mutually benefit the different classes involved. For example, conflict theory describes the relationship between employers and employees as one of conflict, in which the employers wish to pay as little as possible for the employees' labor, while the employees wish to maximize their wages. In practice, however, employees and employers often have a harmonious relationship. Moreover, institutions such as pension plans and stock-based compensation can further blur the boundary between workers and corporations by giving workers an additional stake in the success of their employer.

Conceptual Framework

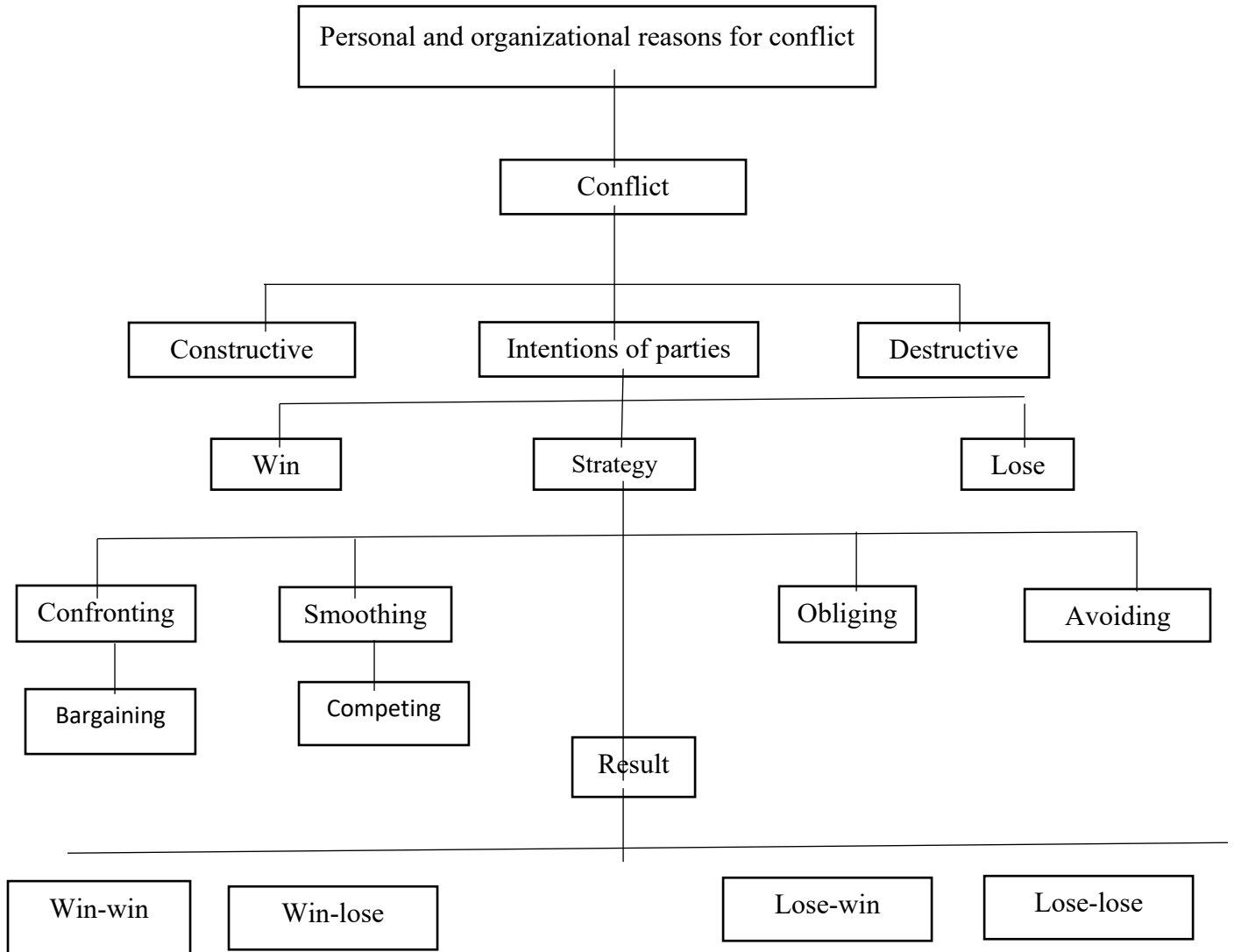


Fig. 2: Conflict Strategy Model

Source: Adapted from Bosch (2014)

Conflict

Conflict refers to a state of disagreement, opposition, or controversy, often arising when individuals or groups fail to meet societal expectations or violate agreements (Obizue & Ahukanna, 2017). It may manifest as arguments, clashes, or hostile behavior, either overt or covert. According to Schmidt and Kochan, as cited in Peretomode and Peretomode (2020), organizational conflict occurs when one person or group attempts to block the goal-directed behavior of another. Similarly, Wall and Callister, as cited in Peretomode and Peretomode

(2020), define conflict as a process in which one party perceives its interests as threatened by another, typically involving incompatible goals, scarce resources, or interference in achieving objectives. Nwaike, cited in Obizue et al (2020), emphasizes that conflict arises from inherent individual differences in culture, religion, and societal background, highlighting that no two people respond identically under the same circumstances. Kalagbor (2017) further notes that conflict emerges when perceived threats affect parties' needs, interests, or concerns, and it can occur at both the formulation and implementation stages of decisions, policies, or agreements.

Poorly managed conflict can escalate into distrust, hostility, and disruption of academic processes, affecting productivity and institutional harmony. Examples include disputes between academic staff and administrators, students and staff, or non-academic staff and university authorities (Ogbonna & Mbah, 2022). The prevalence of such conflicts highlights the importance of proactive conflict management, communication, and leadership in preventing escalation. Without proper intervention, conflicts can become destructive, undermining cooperation and creating an adversarial environment that is detrimental to the university community.

Conflict, therefore, should not be viewed solely as a negative phenomenon but as a natural aspect of organizational life that requires deliberate management to maintain a peaceful, productive, and cooperative academic environment.

Effective Administration

Effective administration refers to a university's ability to achieve its predetermined objectives efficiently. An administrator is an individual responsible for directing the affairs of an organization to accomplish its goals, ensuring tasks are completed promptly and effectively.

Administration can be understood as the strategic utilization of human, financial, and material resources to maximize the achievement of organizational goals.

In the context of universities, effective administration requires applying appropriate principles, policies, and practices to achieve optimal outcomes. Administrators must ensure that resources—both human and material—are efficiently managed to support teaching, learning, and institutional development. Successful administration ultimately enhances organizational performance, promotes a conducive academic environment, and ensures that the university fulfills its educational mission.

Types of Conflicts

The three major types of conflicts in the universities as identified by Ejiogu as cited in Ogolo et al (2024) are:

Conflict due to hierarchy of positions

- 1 Subordinate conflict - between the boss and their subordinates such as between lecturers and students; vice chancellor versus academic staff, non-academic staff versus other professionals.

- 2 Superordinate conflict - between the administrator and an authority over him e.g. Vice Chancellor and the Visitor, Government versus the academic staff/students.
- 3 Lateral conflict - between administrator and his peer e.g. between Vice Chancellors of two universities; between heads of department in the same faculty, between academic staff union and non- academic staff union.

Conflict based on the relationship between the objective/current state of affairs and the perceived state of affairs by conflicting parties: this conflict could be veridical, contingent, displaced, misattributed or latent;

Conflicts based on antagonistic source: such as conflict between cultural values and institutional expectations, role expectation and personality roles, and deriving from personality discord.

Causes of Conflict in the Universities

Potentials for conflicts are multifarious within the university system. Some of these are indicated below:

Continuous competition for scarce resources: Workers in a workplace need access to certain resources ranging from office supplies, help from colleagues or even a meeting room to do their jobs effectively and efficiently. When more than one person or group needs access to a particular resource, conflict can occur.

Gross mismanagement of available resources: These conflicts could take the form of strikes, demonstration, boycott of lectures and violent riots.

Working styles Conflict: Everyone works differently according to their individual needs and personality. For instance, some workmen love the thrill of getting things done at last minutes, while others need the structure of strict deadlines to perform. However, when working styles clash, conflict can often occur. In the school system, the above situation could lead to a conflict particularly, between the administrator and a lecturer (superordinate-subordinate relationship) or between the lecturer and student.

Perceived goal incompatibility: For instance, a manager might prefer speed as the most important goal in an organization while another prefers in-depth, high-quality services is the top priority. It is sometime quite difficult to reconcile the two.

Conflicting Pressure: We often have to depend on our colleagues to get our work done. This happens when you need a report from your colleague by noon, and he is already preparing a different report for someone else by the same deadline.

Non clarity of job description: Sometimes we have to perform a task that's outside our normal role or responsibilities. If this causes us to step into someone else's "territory" then conflict and power struggles can occur.

Different Personal Values: In this perspective, when work or directive conflicts with one's personal value, conflict can quickly arise. However, value conflicts are caused by perceived or actual incompatible belief systems.

Unpredictable policies: When rules and policies change at schools and the school authority fails to communicate that change clearly to the staff and students, confusion and conflict can occur.

Favoritism: if the administrator fails to apply workplace policies consistently with the university-community members, the disparity in treatment can also become a source of dissension.

Communication Gap: There is need for adequate communication flow: In the university system, poor communication could lead to conflict, if academic staff, non-academic staff and students are not being briefed from time to time about the happenings in the system.

Management style of universities: Managers who have tendencies to authoritarianism and dogmatism are particularly conflict-prone.

Role Ambiguity/Role Dissatisfaction: Conflicts occur when the role prescriptions are vague and uncertain. This includes work interdependence, differences in performance criteria and reward systems, differences in units and subunits orientation, goals and differences in status and jurisdictional ambiguities, Personal or behavioural.

Politics and national issues: Political control of education in terms of financial and administrative policies brings about conflicts between the university and the government. Policies such as privatization, university autonomy and democratization of university management usually spark off controversies. Politics especially on campus relating to appointment of key officers such as Vice Chancellor also result into conflicts. These conflicts often lead to disruptions of academic activities and university calendars.

Conflict Management

Conflict management refers to attempts to control or regulate conflict through a number of measures. Successful conflict management occurs by listening to and providing opportunities to meet the needs of all the parties and to adequately address interests, so that, each party is satisfied with the outcome.

The art of conflict management according to Nze as cited in Obizue et al (2020) is grounded on the fundamental principles of management processes as outlined by Fredrick Taylor. Conflict management as a process entails assembling of activities of planning and monitoring the performance of a process, especially in the sense of a conflict resolution process. It involves the application of knowledge, skills, tools, techniques and systems to define, visualize, measure, with the goal to harmonious environment of coexistence. In managing conflicts, it is pertinent to know the causes of such conflicts and the influence it will have on the school

system, as well as the methods of resolving conflicts which may include among others; compromising, avoiding and competing.

According to Kalagbor (2017), Conflict management refers to processes and programmes that teach individual's concepts and skills for preventing and resolving conflicts non-violently. This process is also applicable in the school system where proper conflict management, mechanisms and strategies are established to resolve the differences, grudges, quarrels, disputes, squabble and disagreement amongst school members.

Conflict Management in the Universities

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 system. In resolving university conflict, developing a constructive communication process and influential conflict negotiator's personality are very important. No doubt, schools cannot avoid experiencing one conflict or the other but a great deal of such conflict can be managed and be guided from disrupting school efforts towards attaining its manifest and latent goals if the conflicting parties are systematic in the way they communicate their grievances, situation of the conflict and their readiness to negotiate for peace and if the negotiator mediating the resolution process is of good personality (Ogbonna & Mbah, 2022).

Focusing attention on super-ordinate goals that are shared by parties in conflicts may also help to defuse hostility and lead to more cooperative behaviour. Providing valid information and avenue for expression of views. Effective management information system (MIS) is essential to provide requisite information which minimizes delays and ensures maximum utilization of resources. Most universities lack effective computerized management information system for capturing, processing, storing, retrieving and disseminating relevant information. There is need for better understanding and cooperation between the University system as a whole and the government. The decision-makers and their advisers need to be better informed on how the universities operate, while the university community needs to acquaint itself with the ways of the government, generally. Invariably, the universities will neither develop attitudes of hostility or servility towards the government, nor the government intolerant of the universities.

Conflict Management Strategies

Strategies for conflict management are those skills for managing and peacefully resolving conflict. According to Arop et al (2018), Conflict management strategies refers to those techniques or approaches that can be used to prevent, control or resolve conflicts. Conflict management strategies are very important to any school because it is through these strategies that negative effects resulting from conflicts can be minimized or controlled. Conflict management strategies include among others:

Win-Lose Strategy: This is characterized by assertiveness and uncooperativeness that occurs when the parties involved work for their respective at the expense of opposite party. Both parties are determined and resolved that one will win and one will lose.

Lose-Win Strategy: This represents low concern for self and high concern for others and identified with a lose-win orientation.

Lose-Lose Strategy: It is a conflict management strategy in which one of the parties or the manager, in some cases, simply totally avoids, ignores, “looks the other way”, pays no attention to or withdraws from the conflict situation in hope that the situation will eventually resolve itself in time. This represents low concern for self and low concern for others and identified with lose-lose orientation.

Win-Win Strategy: This is defined as the process by which two conflicting parties exchange offers, counter-offers, and concessions either directly or through representatives in an attempt to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. It is also referred to as compromising which is a form of a “give and take” exchange; there is no clear winner or loser.

Constructive Communication: is a method of resolving conflict in the universities whereby the management ensures that both staff and students are carried along the activities of the institutions (Nwofia, 2015).

Right Information: Provision of right information is panacea to conflict resolution as deficiency of information enhances disparity of opinions and social differences.

Persuasion: Here, the parties in conflict are encouraged to confront their differences and work them out among themselves. According to Reitz as cited in Peretomode (2020), the parties are requested to search for some higher order objectives which they both agree on and then attempt to convince each other that their approach makes a greater contribution to that goal.

Bribing: This is a conflict resolution strategy in which one party to the conflict accepts some compensation from the other in exchange for ending the conflict in question.

Forcing: Interpersonal or intergroup conflict can be resolved by forcing it to a conclusion by the intervention of a third party – the manager of the organization or the school administrator.

Deterrence or Detraction: Deterrence is the prevention of something especially war or crime by having something such as weapons or punishment to use as a threat. This is done to detract the parties' attention from the conflict situation.

Arbitration: This is a conflict management strategy in which the conflicting parties agree to submit (a dispute) to the judgment of a third party called an arbitrator to decide; a decision by the arbitrator is expected to be accepted and binding on both parties.

Prevention: Prevention strategy is the object of a wide range of policies and initiatives. Its aim is to avoid violent escalation of a dispute

Mediation: This is an alternative dispute resolution (ADR) method where a neutral and impartial third party, the mediator, facilitates dialogue in a structured multi-stage process to help parties reach a conclusive and mutually satisfactory agreement.

Majority Rule: This technique is sometimes called democratic means to resolving conflict. In employing this approach, the manager or leader simply just allows the larger group or organization to settle the issue or conflict by vote.

Resort to Rule: This conflict management approach is often used in formal organizations such as the school. Hellriegel and Slocum as cited in Peretomode (2020), described the technique as one in which the “deadlocked rivals agree to go by the “book” and let the rules decide the conflict outcome”.

Altering the Human Variable: This approach involves the manager or school administrator, attempting to change the behaviour of the members of one or both parties to the conflict by personally speaking to the members or send them to attend staff development programmes on sensitivity training outside the organization.

Changing the Individual Involved: This requires the management to change personnel in the conflict situation and /or alter their relationship in the organization. This requires that the conflicting parties are to be separated, kept apart until they agree to a solution, or transferring one or both to another job or parts of the organization.

Restructuring the Organization: This strategy requires the management to change the formal structure of the organization. Restructuring of an organization involves a number of things such as relocating members of the confliction group, rotating members of the conflicting groups and redefining task responsibilities.

Superordinate Goals: An organizational goal that is more important to both parties in a conflict than their individual or group goal is a super ordinate goal. Super ordinate goal converts a conflict between departments to friendly interactions, develops favorable attitudes and seeks to achieve solutions that are mutually satisfactory.

Fair Hearing: Administrators are required to be unbiased and to listen patiently, carefully, diligently and constructively in order to identify and analyze the obvious facts that could be valuable during resolution processes in order to validate and justify their positions.

Contingency strategy: No one style is automatically better than another. People's styles undergo change in order to adapt to the demands of new situations. This style is contingent upon the prevailing situation.

Participatory Decision Strategy: A more participatory and supportive style of leadership and management behaviour is likely to assist in conflict management.

Dialogue: Warring parties sit around the table to iron out their differences and arrive at amicable resolutions.

Clarification of goals and objectives: The clarification and continual refinement of goals and objectives, role definitions and performance standards help avoid misunderstanding and conflicts.

Conclusion

Conflicts are inevitable in universities, but their impact depends on how they are managed. When disagreements shift from ideas to emotions, effective leadership becomes vital. Administrators who listen, communicate openly, and address the needs of all parties create a peaceful environment for teaching and learning. Through cooperation, clear communication, and wise resource management, universities can turn conflict into a tool for growth rather than disruption. Ultimately, proactive and strategic conflict management ensures harmony, productivity, and the steady achievement of institutional goals.

Suggestions

- i. University administrators should first determine the true causes and nature of conflicts among staff before applying appropriate management strategies.
- ii. Administrators and members of a designated Conflict Management Committee (CMC) should receive regular training on effective conflict resolution techniques to enhance service delivery and maintain harmony on campus.
- iii. Administrators should apply multiple conflict management approaches, selecting methods that best suit each situation rather than relying on a single strategy.
- iv. Conflicting parties should engage in open dialogue to express their views and emotions, while staff are encouraged to maintain positive attitudes, apologizing when necessary to prevent or de-escalate disputes and foster a peaceful learning environment.

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