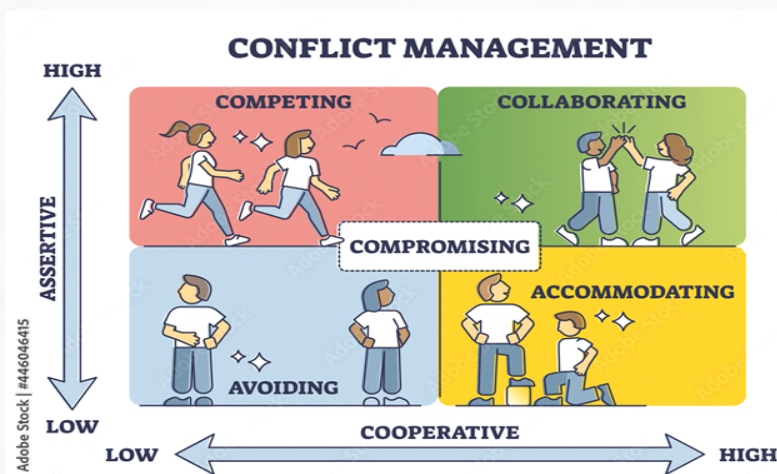# CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of any workplace, arising from the diverse mix of personalities, goals, and work styles. Whether it is a minor disagreement or a major dispute, conflict can disrupt the smooth functioning of an organization if not addressed properly. However, when managed effectively, conflict can serve as a catalyst for personal growth, innovation, and stronger interpersonal relationships within the team. This edition of the ST&DU Newsletter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of conflict by exploring its meaning, features, causes, effects, and strategies for resolution in the workplace.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

HIGH

ASSERTIVE

LOW

COMPETING

COLLABORATING

COMPROMISING

AVOIDING

ACCOMMODATING

LOW   COOPERATIVE   HIGH

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THE MEANING OF CONFLICT

Conflict in the workplace refers to a situation where there is a clash of interests, values, actions, or directions between individuals or groups. It can occur between colleagues, departments, or between employees and management. Conflict arises from a perceived threat to one's needs, interests, or values, leading to a state of disagreement or tension. This perception can be based on real or imagined differences and can manifest in various forms, from open confrontation to subtle undercurrents of discontent.

KEY FEATURES OF CONFLICT

Understanding the features of conflict can help in identifying and managing it effectively. Some key features include:

Divergence of Interests: Conflict often stems from differing interests or objectives among individuals or groups. For instance, a team member focused on quality might clash with another prioritizing speed.

Perceived Threat: Conflict arises when parties perceive a threat to their needs, goals, or values. This threat can be tangible, like resource allocation, or intangible, like recognition or respect.

Emotional Component: Conflict is often accompanied by strong emotions such as anger, frustration, or anxiety. These emotions can intensify the conflict if not addressed properly.

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Dynamic Process: Conflict is not static; it evolves over time. It can escalate or de-escalate depending on how it is managed.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT

Several factors contribute to conflict in the workplace, including:

Diverse Personalities and Work Styles: Differences in personality and work preferences can lead to misunderstandings and friction. For example, an introverted employee may struggle to communicate effectively with an extroverted colleague.

Miscommunication: Lack of clear communication or misinterpretation of messages can cause confusion and disagreements. For instance, unclear instructions from a manager can lead to different interpretations by team members.

Competing Interests: When employees or teams have competing goals or priorities, conflict can arise. For example, the sales team may want to promise quick delivery to close deals, while the production team may need more time to ensure quality.

Scarcity of Resources: Limited resources such as budget, time, or personnel can lead to conflict as teams compete for these resources to meet their objectives.

Organizational Changes: Changes in the workplace, such as restructuring, new leadership, or policy changes, can create uncertainty and conflict as employees adapt to the new environment.

Perceived unfairness: A member of staff could feel cheated when the staff appraisal is unfavourable or he/she is not recommended for promotion.

EFFECTS OF CONFLICT

Unresolved conflict can have some of the following significant negative impacts on an organization:

Low Productivity: Conflict can distract employees from their tasks and reduce overall productivity. Time and energy spent on conflicts could be better used for productive work.

Poor Morale: Persistent conflict can lead to a toxic work environment, causing stress and reducing employee satisfaction and engagement.

High Turnover of Staff: Unaddressed conflict can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, causing valuable employees to leave the organization. However, when managed effectively, conflict can have positive outcomes, such as:

Enhanced Innovation: Diverse perspectives and the healthy debate that conflict provokes often lead to creative solutions and innovations.

Improved Relationships: Resolving conflicts can strengthen relationships as parties develop a better understanding of each other's perspectives and learn to collaborate more effectively.

Organizational Growth: Successful management of conflict can improve organizational processes and policies, leading to growth and development.

STRATEGIES FOR RESOLVING WORKPLACE CONFLICTS

To harness the positive potentials of conflict, it is essential to manage it effectively. Here are some strategies for resolving workplace conflicts:

Open Communication: Encourage open and honest communication. Create a safe environment where employees feel comfortable expressing their concerns and perspectives.

Active Listening: Practice active listening to understand the underlying issues and emotions involved in the conflict. Acknowledge each party's viewpoints and feelings.

Seek Common Ground: Focus on finding common goals and interests that all parties can agree on. This can serve as a foundation for resolving the conflict.

Mediation: Involving a neutral third party, such as a mediator, can help facilitate discussions and guide the conflicting parties towards a mutually acceptable resolution.

Develop Conflict Resolution Skills: Provide training for employees and managers on conflict resolution techniques. This can empower them to handle conflicts constructively.

Establish Clear Policies: Implement clear policies and procedures for handling conflicts. Ensure that employees know the channels and processes for raising and resolving disputes.

UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISM

The University of Lagos employs a multifaceted approaches to conflict resolution and community well-being through the establishment of the Ombudsman Committee.

The Ombudsman Committee acts as an impartial intermediary to address and resolve conflicts within the University community. The Committee handles disputes involving students, the faculty, and staff, focusing on issues such as academic disagreements, administrative concerns, and interpersonal conflicts. It provides a confidential and neutral platform for individuals to voice grievances and seek fair resolutions without fear of retaliation.

The Counselling Unit also provides psychological and emotional support to the University community, interpreting behaviors and reactions to promote mental well-being. It offers counselling services for personal, academic, and career-related issues, helping individuals understand their own actions and the actions of others. The Unit employs professional counsellors who provide one-on-one sessions, workshops, and group counseling to address various psychological needs.

CONCLUSION

Understanding and managing workplace conflict is crucial for maintaining a healthy and productive work environment. Conflict, while often seen as negative, can drive innovation and improvement when approached constructively. By recognizing the nature of conflict and adopting effective resolution strategies, organizations can transform potential disruptions into opportunities for growth and development. Encouraging open communication, active listening, and mutual respect are key elements in resolving conflicts and fostering a collaborative and supportive workplace. As the University community navigates the complexities of working together, embracing these strategies can lead to stronger, more resilient teams and a more vibrant and innovative organizational culture.