Psychological Strategies for Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts among Administrators in Tertiary Institutions: A Case of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study was aimed at studying the psychological strategies for resolving interpersonal conflict among administrators in Tertiary Institutions with Nnamdi Azikiwe University as the case study. Gaining an understanding of these strategies may assist administrators of educational programs in handling interpersonal conflicts in more constructive and helpful ways. It may also provide the basis for further development of formal theory and the potential for theory testing. The conflict resolution strategies scales inventory of Howart and London (1980) guided data collection. The sample comprised of 20 administrative officers and secretarial staff of NnamdiAzikiwe University Awka. The descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used to analyse the opinion, while the inferential t-test statistics was used to test the hypotheses. The respondents in their opinion confirmed the five strategies for resolving interpersonal conflict. Thus we conclude that conflict can be resolved using any of the psychological strategies. The researchers hence, recommend the use of the strategies by counsellors especially in group counselling processes.

Keywords: Administrators; Institution; Interpersonal conflicts; Psychological strategies; Resolving.

1.   Introduction

Interpersonal conflict is a fact of life, and it is not necessarily a bad issue. In fact, a relationship with frequent conflicts may be healthier than one with no observable conflict. Conflicts occur at all levels of interaction, at work, among friends, with families, between relationship and among partners. When conflict occurs the relationship may be weakened or strengthened. However, conflict can be a critical event in the course of a relationship. According to Bellafiore (1998), conflict can cause resentment, hostility and perhaps the ending of the relationship. If it is handled well, however, conflict can be productive, leading to deeper understanding, mutual respect and closeness. Whether a relationship is healthy or unhealthy does not depend so much on the number of conflicts between participants, but on how the conflicts are resolved. Sometimes people may feel that their underlying anger may go out of control if they open the door to conflict, or they may see conflict as an all or nothing situation or they may find it difficult to face conflict because they feel inadequate in general or in that particular relationship.

Whenever two or more people interact, there is potential for disagreement to occur; especially where the association is related to work or if the association is social. Managing people over whom you have no real power is a challenge particularly in professional service firms like guidance and counselling. Conflicts are unavoidable when any group that works together comprises differing personalities with different forms of ideology. Thus, conflict may be avoided, talked out, negotiated, arbitrated, adjudicated, resolved by legislation, by political action or by violent. Hocker and Wilmot (1991), defined conflict as expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. That is to say that, a conflict exists when the reduction of one motivating stimulus involves an increase in another, so that a new adjustment is demanded. According to Akinman (1990), Conflict is a state of discord caused by actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests, which can be internal (intrapersonal) or external (interpersonal). It is pertinent to note that the external conflict that is conflict between two or more individuals is the one relevant as per this paper.

Nnamdi Azikiwe University is a fast growing Federal University located in the South Eastern Nigeria with campuses in Awka, Nnewi, Ifiteogbani and Agulu. Considering the high level of administrative activities, conflict among administrative staff cannot be ruled out. This prompted the researchers to ascertain the strategic ways of resolving the conflicts.

2.   Statement of the Problem

Conflict as a concept can help explain many aspects of social life such as social disagreement, conflicts of interests, fights between individuals, groups or organisations. In political terms conflict can refer to wars or revolutions which may involve the use of force, without proper social arrangement or resolution, conflicts in social setting can result in stress or tensions among stakeholders. When interpersonal conflicts occur, its effect is often broader than the two individuals involved and can affect many associates, individuals and relationship adversely. The effect sometimes can be in a humorous way, bearing in mind that interpersonal relationship could

be referred to as affiliations, connections, social associations between two or more people. Often times in the tertiary institutions, there is the clash of interests, values, and directions, this could be attributed to the inability of one to psychologically manage his emotions. In the institutions of higher learning there is the tendency for staff to yearn at each other as a result of perceived incompatibility. Thus, when two or more parties, with perceived incompatible goals, seek to undermine each other's goal seeking capability, clash of interests, values, actions or directions often spark off a conflict. According to Moore (1998), in most disputes, the parties involved have a variety of means at their disposal to respond to or resolve their conflict. The procedure available to them differ considerably in the way the conflict is addressed and settled and often results in different outcomes both tangible and intangible. Hence, researchers, theorists and scientists are constantly attempting to find order and systematization to our rather chaotic and unstable world.

In the views of many psychologists, it is the inner self image that leads one to act in a given manner. Transactional analysis theory states that there are three types of identification that one can have when relating to others, those three types of identity are child, adult and parent. That is to say that one can relate to another individual as a child, as an adult or as a parent. All individuals according to Hartwell (2000), possess these three identities. The parent identity is that of responsibility. The adult identity is more closely aligned with an intellectual being. The child identity is associated with feelings. Thus keep in mind that all three identities exist in all beings and that all these identities present themselves at different times. With the existence of all three identities, it should be apparent that individuals will act or respond differently in different settings, that a child could very well act as an adult under a variety of circumstances. According to transactional analysis, conflict generally arises when one party assumes the wrong identity when interacting with another person. While no conflicts should result when the identities assumed are consistent for both interacting individuals.

3.   Theoretical Studies
3.1 Conflict Resolutions principles and approaches
There are underlying principles that underscore all successful conflict resolution. According to Bellafiore (2004), both parties must view their conflict as a problem to be solved mutually so that both parties have the feeling of winning or at least finding a solution which is acceptable to both. Each person must participate actively in the resolution and make an effort and commitment to find answers which are as fair as possible to both. We may get so caught up with our own immediate interests that we damage our relationship. If we disregard or minimise the position of the other person, if fear and power are used to win or if we always have to get our own way, the other person will feel hurt and the relationship may be wounded. In line with Carney (2008), problems with other people may be the result of ineffective conflict approaches. She posited approaches to interpersonal problem solving for teens, as passive, aggressive, assertive approaches. Theorists have claimed that parties can respond to conflict according to a two – dimensional scheme; that is concern for one's own outcomes and concern for the outcomes of the other party.

3.2 Basic psychological strategies for an effective conflict resolution
Conflict is constructive when the differences are resolved in outcomes favourable to group cohesiveness, or organisational innovation, increased performance and productivity. Viraponge (1998), defined conflict as incompatible preference ordering between individuals or situation where one party perceives that the other has frustrated or is about to frustrate his concern. According to him it is destructive when the outcomes are poor productivity, and loss of personnel and morale, with possible physical and psychological hardship. In fact, some conflicts may be necessary to attain optimum organisational effectiveness, organisations with too little conflict may ultimately stagnate but the question is how can we achieve the positive qualities of interpersonal conflict and convert them into an organisational gain?

3.3 Thus, the five strategies identified by psychologists include the following
Collaboration: - a win, win resolution. This is a collaborative, mutual acceptable goal, with anticipated reward agreed upon by the participants. Issues are faced by participants in such a way that they can develop a resolution that are fully satisfactory to both of them. The needs, desires and feelings of participants are taken into account and the concerns of both parties are expressed. Each party is involved in the search for the best resolution to the conflict in a constructive manner, for instance, an intergroup conflict, where the Personnel, Records and Admission units of the Registry in a tertiary institution are having over time sharing of the only Computer in the department. Members of Records and Personnel are accusing the Registrar of being unfair, by using his nominal power, to designate more service and browsing time to Admissions. Deputy Registrars have already been drawn into it and have made several phone calls to the Registrar, each pointing his being partial. The Registrar calls a meeting and asks each to express his perception of the problem. Each assigned to draw time table so that time sharing can be done objectively, based on the projected needs of each unit. Thus at the next meeting all felt satisfied with the decision and the conflict was resolved.

Withdrawal/avoidance - A lose-lose resolution whereby there is lack of concern for either the relationship or outcome. Both parties avoid the issues and fail to confront the reality of the conflict by rationalizing or by delegating the problem to another party. The outcome is the least desirable and produces no winner while isolating both parties. The assumption in this strategy is that conflict is unnecessary and irrelevant to either party. For instance, two medical officers want to use a particular instrument in the laboratory to study a particular disease in patients, but are afraid to confront the director in-charge of the equipment, with their plan for a joint research because of his reputation as being very "territorial" they tried telling him informally, but he refuted. They decided that the situation is hopeless and that he would never listen to their suggestions. While the director feels that both staff are poor investigators and their proposal would never amount to much, so he avoids them. And the project failed. Both parties now feel strong resentment toward the other and their relationship is strained.

Forcing

A win-lose resolution. The concern for the outcome here is high and requires the use of authority by the forcing individual. The user of this strategy is firm not willing to give ground, intent on pursuing his goals. When both parties use this strategy, considerable hostilities is likely, because each is trying to gain the upper hand. But during an interpersonal conflict the strategy can be used effectively, but it often builds up resentment and hostility. Only one participant or group will be happy with the outcome. For instance, an administrative officer who wants to go on leave in December, and hands his Head of Department his letter, but the head is reluctant to grant it because he will be left with overload of work, if the staff goes on leave. He decides he cannot let this staff go and tells him so in an authoritative manner. He asks the staff to postpone the leave. The administrative officer accepts but is not satisfied with the directive.

Smoothing: a lose win resolution. The concern for the relationship here is very high. And in order to make a good relationship, the user is willing to give a favourable outcome to his adversary, giving in to the demands of the adversary. Thus the outcome produces a loser and a winner. But the handicap of this strategy is that it provides only temporary solution to the immediate encounter. The underlying assumption in this strategy is that agreement is impossible and that the use of power will resolve the problem. For instance, assistant lecturer is requested by his Head of Department to increase his academic time from 50% to 60%, so that the Head of Department (HOD) can have lesser work load. The head being an elder professor who because of his added responsibility as the head is spending more time on administration and wants to reduce his academic time. If the assistant lecturer takes the problem of his increase in academic load to the higher authority who is afraid to challenge the HOD, because he need the professors support in another matter or for fear of reprisal. The Assistant lecturer feeling exploited and frustrated, begins to think that the only way he can solve this predicament is to leave the department.

Compromise: in this strategy, there is concern for outcome as well as relationship. Both parties try to reach an agreement that would give both, some of what they want and have no effect on their relationship. This could be considered A lose-lose strategy, because both parties, none is likely to feel fully satisfied with the result, and the relationship is likely to be strained. Frequently used in resolving conflicts in labour and political negotiations, as it seeks to modify the positions of both parties by trying to find a middle ground. For instance, the final accounts and payroll units of bursary department are short of staff personnel. And no staff wants to stay, because of the reputation of both Heads as being difficult to work for and staff cannot be recruited from outside. Then a junior staff in payroll decides that final accounts offers opportunity for taking inventory of stock, and therefore would want to do final accounts full time, which delighted the head of final accounts unit, but insinuating a developing conflict the head of payroll unit calls a meeting with the head of final accounts, and the junior staff. And a compromise was reached after their discussion that the junior staff will spend $2\frac{1}{2}$ days per week working in each unit.

3.4 The choice of Strategy

The choice of strategy may depend on several factors. For instance if one has authoritative power and favourable outcome is essential, one could chose a strategy from forcing or collaboration. But if one is concerned about maintaining a good relationship then collaboration or smoothing are more appropriate. But if time is not available, only smoothing and forcing strategies may be possible. Inherently, according to Virapouse (1998), a survey performed on 158 Deans of accredited nursing colleges showed that Deans use the five conflict strategies in such order of compromising, collaborating, avoiding or withdrawal, smoothing, and forcing. Forcing was the least frequently used.

4.   Method

However, the researchers carried out a study using non-teaching staff of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. The sample for the study consists of 25 non-teaching staff drawn from the different units of the administrative cadre. No sampling was done since the population was considered manageable, thus Administrative Officers and Secretarial Cadres were purposively selected.

4.1 Research Question

What psychological strategies, are to be adopted for resolving interpersonal conflicts?

4.2 Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the opinions of respondents regarding psychological strategies for resolving interpersonal conflicts as a result of gender.
2. There is no significant difference in the views of respondents regarding psychological strategies for resolving interpersonal conflict as a result of their status.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The Instrument for data collection was titled conflict resolution scale. It was developed by the researchers with insight gained from the conflict resolution strategies scale inventory (CRSS) by Howat and London (1980). Whose purpose is to measure the approaches used in organisations or families to resolve conflict. However, for this paper, the researchers, had 5 suggested psychological strategies in the instrument for resolving conflict, in work environment and respondents were requested to indicate their views as per their superior officers, regarding the suitability of each psychological strategy on 4 point response scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. A pilot test was carried out using 6 administrators from another tertiary institution. Data collected from the pilot test was analysed with crombach Alpha (a) and reliability coefficient of 0.76 was obtained indicating that the instrument was appropriate for the study.

Out of the 25 copies of the instrument 20 copies were retrieved and used for the study. Data Collected from the study were analyzed with descriptive Statistic of mean, and standard deviation (SD) as well as the inferential statistics of t – test. The mean and the standard deviation were applied to the research question while the t-test was used to test the level of significance as stated in the hypotheses.

Table 1 presentation of class limits.

Category	weight	Class limit
Strongly Agree	4	3.5 – 4.49
Agree	3	2.5 – 3.49
Disagree	2	1.5 – 2.49
Strongly Disagree	1	0.5 – 1.49

5.   Data Presentation and Analysis

The data collected from the study are presented and analyzed in tables 2 to 3 below.

Table 2: Mean ratings and standard deviation of respondent's opinion on the resolving of interpersonal conflicts.

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Decision
1	My boss considers the needs, desires and feelings in resolving conflict	3.31	1.21	Agree
2	My boss does not drop the issue until it is resolved	3.41	1.07	Strongly Agree
3	My boss gives in easily	2.50	1.15	Agree
4	He withdraws from the situation	2.60	1.16	Agree
5	He forces acceptance of his/her point of view	3.04	1.29	Agree
6	He insists on one solution	2.49	1.10	Agree
7	He tries to smooth over our differences	4.00	0.54	Strongly Agree
8	He acts as though our common goals are of prime importance	3.45	1.24	Agree
9	He is concerned for outcome as well as relationship	4.11	0.73	Strongly Agree
10	He searches for an intermediate position	4.06	0.58	Strongly Agree

The results in table 2 show that the respondents agreed that their office Heads adopts the (5) five listed strategies, namely: - collaborating, withdrawal, forcing, smoothing, and compromising. Item 1 and 2 are for collaborating, Items 3 and 4 for withdrawal, Items 5 and 6 for forcing, Items 7 and 8 for smoothing and lastly items 9 and 10 for compromising with their different mean ratings and standard deviations as shown on table 2.

Table 3

T-test comparison between males and females based on their opinions regarding resolving interpersonal conflict.

Variable	No.	Mean	SD	T cal.	DF	Tab.t	Decision
Male	8	3.70	1.00	0.24	18	2.101	S*
Female	12	3.65	1.15				

The result in table 3 indicates that male respondents (8 in number) had a mean rating of 3.70 (SD = 1.00) while the females (12 in number) had the mean rating of 3.65 (SD = 1.15) yielding a calculated t-test of 0.24 since the calculated t-test is less than the table value of 2.101 at 18 degree of freedom, it was considered to be non-significant. The null hypothesis was therefore not rejected. The implication of this is that both male and

female administrators and secretaries see the need to use the five psychological strategies by their boss depending on the nature and cause of the conflict.

Table 4

t-test comparison between administrative officers' and secretaries' opinion on strategies for resolving interpersonal conflict.

Variable	No.	Mean	SD	T cal.	DF	Tab.t	Decision
Administrative Officers	14	3.65	1.10				
				0.24	18	2.101	S*
Secretarial Cadre	6	3.81	1.08				

The result in table 4 shows that administrative officers have a mean rating of 3.65 (SD = 1.10) while secretary to deputy registrars' had a mean rating of 3.81 (SD = 1.08), yielding a calculated t-value of – 0.56. The calculated t value is less than the table value of 2.101, at 18 degree of freedom, which means that the null hypothesis was not rejected. This implies that both the administrative officers and the secretaries to the deputy registrars' have the same opinion regarding the five psychological strategies for resolving conflict.

6.   Findings

In answer to the research question, the findings of the study, table 2 shows that the administrators and secretaries support the use of the five psychological strategies as posited by Howat and London (1980).

7.   Discussion

The findings of the study support the five conflict resolution strategies. Bearing in mind that, Moore (2006), pointed out that in most disputes, the parties involved in interpersonal conflict have a variety of means at their disposal to respond to or resolve their conflict. The way the conflict is addressed and settled depending on the available procedure confirms Bellafiore (2004), that people adopt a number of different styles in facing conflict. That is to say that it is possible to see a person avoiding or denying the existence of conflict, or another version of one person getting mad and blaming the other person, or by using power and influence, also people appear to compromise in resolving the conflict.

Thus, the study shows that variables like gender, status, have no influence on the opinion of the respondents on the use of the psychological strategies. The findings also confirm the survey of Viraponge (1998), on the choice of strategy, that all the five strategies are being used with compromising being the highly used followed by collaborating, withdrawing among others. In the analysis of data, compromising was seen as being strongly agree, alongside the others, which all read positive, these show that the five strategies are being used.

8.   Recommendation

Conflict resolution is a growth industry. Mediators are now called on to help settle interpersonal conflict. The growing rate of mediators and other conflict resolutions professionals still have to mature in at least two ways. First it has to become much more visible so that people who currently do not know that it exists, would learn of it and turn to it when a conflict arises.

Secondly, the managers and even Guidance Counsellors have to become more political and seek out ways to make win-win conflict resolution the norm, in the interpersonal level. However, there is an underlying principle that underscores all successful conflict resolution; which is both parties must view their conflict as a problem to be solved mutually, so that both parties have the feeling of wining – or at least finding a solution which is acceptable to both. Mutual trust and respect, as well as a positive, constructive attitude, are fundamental necessities in relationships that matter.

Most government agencies have already taken steps to reduce the most violent forms of interpersonal conflict, such as spousal abuse. Most observers, however, believe that government also have a long way to go in preventing violence and punishing those who commit it, also the government should help promote the win-win conflict resolution at any level. And rather than litigation use mediation in divorce cases or promotes the use of alternative dispute resolution which is usually cheaper. Individuals have a primary responsibility to choose the "unite" option and solve their problems cooperatively. And today it is not hard for them to learn how to do so. Most communities in Nigeria today have local mediation services which can help people settle disputes and offer training in basic conflict resolution skill, the Igbo tribe for instance, the "Igwe, (king) Cabinet Council". However, interpersonal conflicts can be avoided before they reach crisis proportion by group meetings, thus conflict handling is an inevitable part of a Counsellor's job.

9.   Conclusion

As we saw earlier, interpersonal violence is almost always counterproductive. For instance the story of David and Goliath in the bible could be used to illustrate our options when facing intractable conflict. In the biblical story, the normal sized David slays Goliath using a stone and a sling short. As far as the bible is concerned the

story ends there. But in today's world David will probably get arrested spend time in jail. Or if Goliath is not killed he will get back up again and try to exact revenge against David. In other words, in most real world settings, interpersonal violence, used in response to interpersonal violence, produces even more interpersonal violence in return. In other words, individuals have a primary responsibility to choose the unite option and solve their problems cooperatively. Bearing in mind the adage that says "when we treat man as he, we make him worse than he, when we treat him as if he already were what he potentially could be, we make him what he should be. Haus (2003), pointed out that during the 1960's, the civil rights activist Eldridge Clearer claimed that "if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem" which is true of any interpersonal conflict. Thus the role of the guidance counsellor in resolving interpersonal conflict is a very crucial one.

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