

Workplace Conflicts in Educational Institutions: A Review

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Abstract

Conflicts are an inevitable phenomenon in life. Wherever two or more people meet, there are bound to be conflicts. Institutions of learning are no exception when it comes to the occurrence of conflicts. The purpose of this study was to determine the causes of workplace conflicts and mechanisms put in place to manage them in educational institutions. To do this, the study reviewed scholarly works on conflicts in educational establishments around the world. Studies from 25 countries published between 1990 and 2021 were examined. In total, 63 articles were analyzed in terms of two criteria, namely: 1) perceived causes of workplace conflicts and 2) mechanisms for managing workplace conflicts. The findings suggest that most of the conflicts in educational institutions (80%) are caused by personal factors arising from communication gaps, negative perceptions, value differences, personal interests, power relations, and emotional related issues. Structural aspects of the educational institutions such as specialization, common resources, goal differences, interdependence, authority relationships, status differences, jurisdictional ambiguities, and roles and expectations account for 20% of most of the conflicts in the educational establishments. Avoiding, integration, accommodating, obliging, competing, collaborating, dialogue, mediation, dominance, confrontation, and compromising are the most common conflict management styles in educational institutions. The study recommends that future researchers should consider using the mixed methods approach (pragmatism) in the study of conflicts in educational institutions. I think this will help both researchers who study conflicts in the educational system and educational institutions who want to improve their conflict management skills by doing their work.

Keywords: Conflicts, educational institutions, causes, styles, management

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1. Introduction

Conflicts may be explained as natural disagreements between individuals or groups who differ in attitudes, beliefs, values or needs' (Jones, 2008). Conflicts are inevitable phenomena in life. Wherever two or more people meet, there are bound to be conflicts. Conflicts occur within the individual, between individuals, groups, institutions, organizations and countries. Bagshaw (1998) notes that conflict is a fact of life in organizations as well as other areas of life, as people compete for jobs, resources, power, acknowledgment and security.

Institutions of learning are no exception when it comes to the occurrence of conflicts. Holton, (2000) argues that conflicts have been a part of academic life since time immemorial. Gmelch and Carrol (as cited in Adu, 2011) contend that conflict is "sewn into the fabric of educational institutions due to functional structural and relational characteristics of academic freedom. In the words of Miklas and Kleiner (as cited in Jones, 2008), educational Institutions are "perfect breeding grounds for conflicts".

Adu (2011) explains that conflict is a frequent occurrence in educational institutions whose members are human beings, therefore, their varied needs and interests can often clash. In Ghana for instance, over the years, the educational institutions have witnessed many conflict situations, the recent one being between the University Teachers Association of Ghana (UTAG) one hand and the Government of Ghana on the other. This industrial conflict arising out of disagreement and dissatisfaction over conditions of services resulted in a declaration of an indefinite strike by UTAG. This affected teaching and learning in the universities for over a month. Again in 2020, there was a disagreement between Teachers and Education Workers Union (TEWU) and University Senior Staff Association (SSA) on one hand and the Government of Ghana on the other. This again resulted in the two associations laying down their tools for weeks (<https://www.ghanaweb.com>,). The industrial action consequently resulted in the closure of some basic schools affiliated to the Universities (<https://citinewsroom.com>,). Furthermore on Monday October, 23rd 2018, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) was shut down indefinitely following student protests that occurred which turned violent. Students gathered in support of 11 other students who had been arrested the previous Friday night for participating in a weekly party, known as "jamborees"- a gathering that the Vice Chancellor had recently banned, claiming that the events caused "misbehavior" and "profanity" on campus. One of the students was injured in the process of being arrested. Increasing cases of conflicts in secondary schools have also been reported in Kenya (Kilonzo & Ivita, 2019), in Nigeria higher educational institutions (Osakede, et al. 2018), in Pakistani higher education (Mukhtar,

et al. 2015) and in Zimbabwe (Tshuma, et al. 2016). It thus appears that conflicts in the educational system are a worldwide phenomenon. It seems that students, academic and administrative staff of the various educational institutions have several concerns, unresolved grievances and there appear to be some sort of discontentment among staff and students of educational institutions. These growing trends have implications for the growth of educational institutions within the competitive global space. In view of the fact that little comprehensive review exist to help us deeply understand the trend in terms of causes and mitigation measures, there is the need to examine these conflicts in the light of literature review. This study try's to understand whether under the different settings and circumstance in which these studies took place, there could be some similarities in terms of causes and measures to manage these conflicts.

This paper reviews digitally available scholarly studies on conflicts in educational Institutions. The following questions were of particular interest while reviewing the articles: a) what do study participants perceive to be the causes of workplace conflicts in educational institutions; b) what mechanisms have been put in place to manage workplace conflicts in educational institutions. Understandably, these questions are prioritized in this study with the anticipation that researchers interested in workplace conflicts in educational establishments may consider doing further research related to these issues. Importantly, such research might help academic institutions to improve their conflict management mechanisms and contribute in strengthening institutional reputation.

2. Method

Two electronic databases – Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Google scholar – were searched. ERIC was visited with the two key words – “Workplace conflicts,” “educational Institutions” – combined with the Boolean operator, AND; and Google Scholar was searched with all in title: “Workplace conflicts in educational Institutions.” The duration defined for the search was January 1990 to February 2021. The first search yielded 106 articles, and the second showed 91 articles. The intention was not necessarily to lumb the findings together but rather to establish a trend with regard to the causes and management measures against workplace conflicts.

The articles retrieved from ERIC were read, paying particular attention to the issues, methods, and conclusions; and, this process reduced the number of relevant articles to 77. Upon reading all these articles, 5 were found non-relevant: some of them dealt with the types of conflicts at school level, and others tested available instruments to assess workplace conflict. Further, 9 articles could not be retrieved. Thus, the number of eligible articles from ERIC went to 63.

Following the same process for 91 articles retrieved from Google Scholar, in addition to excluding duplicate articles found in ERIC, only 17 articles were concluded to be relevant but did not meet the criteria. The criterion includes 1. The study must have been conducted within an educational establishment (school setting). 2. The study must have taken place within 1990 and 2021. 3. The subjects of study must have been students, teachers, administrators other workers within the school. Cumulatively, 63 articles were found relevant and were subsequently reviewed.

3. Results

The finding of this review is presented, categorizing the themes under two major headings: causes of workplace conflict and mechanisms put in place to manage them.

3.1 Causes of Conflicts

Researchers (Kilonzo & Ivita, 2015; Johdi & Apitree, 2012) have classified the causes of organizational conflict into two. These include organizational and individual factors. Bennett (2007) defines an organization as a system composed of multiple networks of individuals that interact with their broader social and economic environment. Wanzer & McCroskey (2008) provide a typology that further categorizes sources of conflict.

Organizational factors or causes are the ones that develop from within the organization and originate from the organizational internal environment. Gray, Miller and Noakes (2005) report that causes of conflict at the level of the organization could also include resource availability and distribution; affirmative action programs; the scope and content of workload; the introduction of new management techniques; and differences of a cultural and racial nature.

Personal factors are those that emerge as a result of individual differences among employees. According to McCorkle and Miller (2002), relational factors are those which are related to interpersonal conflicts which they define as a negative interpersonal encounter characterized by a contentious exchange, hostility or aggression. Most of the conflicts in the review fall in line with these categories. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Causes of Conflicts in Educational Institutions

Author	Causes
Ciuladiene and Kairiene (2017)	Unfair assessment of the student work, inappropriate reaction of a teacher to a situation.
Plessis and Cain (2017)	Limited possibilities for promotion, limited resources, unmet self-esteem needs, abuse of power, favoritism, lack of respect and tolerance.
Sarpkaya (2012)	Administrative style, limited resource improper distribution of tasks, communication gap, and organizational size.
Sumera and Sumera (2017)	Work requirements, relationship and disaster related causes
Umo (2014)	Conflict of job satisfaction, Conflict of educational funding, Conflict of population/infrastructural facilities.
Bolton(2016)	Contract negotiations, limited office space, negative behaviors, unfair treatment.
Turay(2001)	Inadequate school supplies, unsafe drinking water, lack of conducive classrooms and disrespect for human rights.
Antwi (2013)	Communication gap and subordinates shirking their responsibilities.
Adeyemi (2009)	Disagreement over issues relating to religion, imposition of decision by authority without due consultation, Conflicts on personality, hike in school fees, inadequate school space.
Ignace (2014)	Lack of proper communication, differences in perception, dictatorial techniques.
Barmao(2012)	Restricted and poor, communication Channels.
Tshuma, et. al.(2016)	Differences in personalities, poor dissemination of information and favoritism.
Šafránková and Emrová(2018)	Poor communication, inadequate resources.
Olasunkanmi(2015)	Competition for the scarce resources, differences in work characteristics, divergence of values, aims and goals.
Toku(2014)	Communication gaps, competition for resources, lack of cooperation.
Fareo and Jajua (2018)	None payment of salaries
Olaleye and Arogundade (2013)	None payment of salaries, sudden change in University policies, imposition of decisions on employees, inadequate provision of physical amenities.
Shahmohammadi (2014)	Skills and abilities, Personality conflicts, Diversity, communication.
Barnett-Vanes, et. al.(2016)	Insecurity, lack of communication, personality factors.
Ogunbodede et. al. (2020)	Not catering for student's welfare.
Opoku-Asare, Takyi	Insolence, indiscipline, use of offensive language, harsh punishment and verbal assault, excluding pupils from teaching and learning activities and denying them the rights to ask and answer questions.
And Owusu-Mensah (2015)	
Ghaffar (2019)	Anger, lack of communication, self-interest.
Özgan(2015)	Existence of poor and insufficient communication between the parties involved, and teacher dominance in such interactions.
Okoth and Yambo(2016)	Personality differences
Akparep(2019)	Communication gap, delay in meeting students' demand, no guarantee for security of lives and properties, inadequate facilities and drastic rules and regulations
Wondimu(2019)	Communication problems, Individual difference, and role ambiguity.
Cervantes and Fernández (2016)	Communication differences in interest, personality differences.
Thapa(2015)	Politicization, feeling of local teachers vs. outsiders, frustration
Bazewew and Neka (2017)	Ethnic differences, religious diversity, sexual abuse, theft and insulting.
Idris et. al. (2017)	Misuse of powers, misunderstanding of stakeholders, poor Communication, biased attitude, personal interests.
Schroeder(2014)	Communication, self-interest personality.
Gyan and Tandoh-Offin(2014)	Misunderstanding of motives, role conflicts, favoritism, indiscipline, youthful exuberance.
Morake, et al.(2011)	Clashes of personalities, communication breakdown, limited or lack of resources.
Musah (2007)	Indiscipline, bad human relations, school policy implementation rigidity, power struggle.
Nyasio(2015)	Conflicting interests, goals and values.

Author	Causes
Chui (2016)	Indiscipline, disobedience, delinquent behaviours, time wastage , truancy, verbal or physical confrontation
Valente and Lourenço (2020)	Communication, power struggle, interest conflict.
Obraztsova (2018)	Injustice towards oneself, Conviction in own beliefs, Anger or offense
Hakvoorta, et. al. (2018)	Limited resources, power relations, deficiency in the organization, inappropriate organization.
Omondi(2016)	Students background factors
Makibi(2010)	Poor communication or lack of dialogue, inadequate conflict management skills, ineffective school leadership, and teacher stress within schools.
Orapeleng(2017)	Poor conditions of service, slow progression and salary issues, accommodation problems, dissatisfaction and discontentment at work.
Khurshid & Khan (2012)	Work overload, personality differences, attitudinal differences and frustration
Ramani & Zhimin(2010)	Discrimination, feelings of superiority, difference in perceptions, preferential treatment, differences in individual capabilities, differences in their social-cultural backgrounds, limited resources.
Kapusuzoglu(2009)	Differences in their social-cultural backgrounds, limited resources
Yi(2019)	Limited resources, work overload, differences in perception.
Yasmin & Aleya (2017)	Political differentiations, economical reasons, emotional forces, behavioral reasons, lack of information, personality variations, gender, ethnicity, lack of knowledge misunderstanding, communication gap.
Isabu(2017)	Limited resources; interdependent work activities, differentiation of activities, communication problems differences in perceptions
Johdi & Apitree(2012)	Different perception, different working styles
Kilonzo & Ivita (2019)	Conflicting needs, conflicting roles and pressures, unpredictable policies conflicting styles and perceptions
Derby & Kusi (2019)	Obstructions in promotion procedures, work expectations, pressure to meet deadlines, competition for power.
Osakede et. al. (2018)	Communication
Mukhtar et. al. (2017)	Lack of facilities, teaching style and communication
Shahmohammadi(2014)	Common resources, Goal differences, Interdependence,
Afful-Broni(2012)	Threat to students' autonomy, disregard for teachers and students' needs, and struggle over power and scarce resources.
Gyan(2015)	Lack of communication, poor leadership, lack of student participation in decision making, misapplied policies, use of power- based and authoritative methods, inadequate resources and ideological differences.
Yusuf and Ibrahim(2019)	Communication
Tayebeh et al.(2017)	Scarcity of resources, division of functions and tasks, power of relations, differentiation and organization roles in society.

As seen in Table 1, the analysis reveals that most of the conflicts in educational institutions (80%) are caused by personal factors. These factors are mostly communication, perception, value difference, interest, power relations and emotional related causes. See for instance (Opoku-Asare, Takyi & Owusu-Mensah, 2015, Ciuladiene & Kairiene, 2017; Adeyemi, 2009; Ramani & Zhimin, 2010; Yasmin & Aleya, 2017; Johdi & Apitree, 2012 Valente & Lourenço, 2020). The results are a clear confirmation of the social conflict theory of Karl Marx (Engels & Marx, 1848). The theory states that individuals and groups (social classes) within society interact on the basis of conflict rather than consensus. Through various forms of conflict, groups will tend to attain differing amounts of material and non-material resources (e.g. the wealthy vs. the poor). More powerful groups will tend to use their power in order to retain power and exploit groups with less power. In the classic example of historical materialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that all of human history is the result of conflict between classes, which evolved over time in accordance with changes in society's means of meeting its material needs, i.e. changes in society's mode of production. According to the theory, conflict can take many forms and involve struggle over many different types of resources, interests, values, power and status as exemplified in the review. From the social conflict theorist point of view, social class and inequality apparently emerges in the educational institutions because the social structure is based on conflict and contradictions. Contradictions in interests, values, beliefs, perceptions, communication and conflict over scarce resources between groups and individuals are the foundation of social society, according to the social conflict theory

(Engels & Marx, 1848).

The structural aspects of the educational institutions such as specialization, common resources, goal differences, interdependence, authority relationships, status differences, jurisdictional ambiguities, and, roles and expectations which constitute organisational factors according to the literature account for 20% of most of the conflicts in the educational establishments. See for instance, (Shahmohammadi, 2014; Tayebah et al., 2017; Gyan, 2015; Orapeleng, 2017). These findings confirm the structural-functional theory of Persons (1960) which states that human beings normally adjust to a given structure in society. However, any adjustment in the system might lead to conflict. It means that people are resistant to change in organisations and without proper management it may lead to destabilize the organisational objective. Structural changes in educational institutions such as changes in leadership and policy might invariably lead to specialization, conflicts over scarce resources, goal conflicts, interdependence, authority relationships, status differences, jurisdictional ambiguities, role conflicts and expectations which are the main drivers of conflicts. The group most affected by these structural changes might always be in conflict. Alabi (2002) is of the view that conflict should be managed by minimizing structural changes in order to maintain stability with both the individuals and the institutions. The implication is that tertiary institutions should be proactive to organisational structures and in policymaking without taking into consideration the benefits of the stakeholders (Agbonna 2009).

3.2 Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Empirical studies on the categories of conflict management mechanisms are mostly based on the management grid theory of Blake and Mouton (1968). These researchers designed a conflict grid model and divided conflict management into five types.

1. *Avoidance*: Managers regard the possibility of avoiding conflicts as an effective way to relieve sudden emergencies.
2. *Moderation*: It considers that differences between the two parties to a conflict can coexist peacefully by easing tension or maintaining superficial harmony, but in fact, the root causes of the conflict remain unresolved.
3. *Press*: Most people would think that conflict can force both sides of the conflict to obey through power.
4. *Compliance*: In this way, both sides of the conflict need to make submission or negotiation. As a result, no one wins or loses. It is a more practical way to solve the conflict.
5. *Face*: In this way that the conflict problem can be solved by facing actively. It is a more active way of conflict management, which can thoroughly resolve conflicts.

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) based on the “management grid” theory and describe the conflict management behaviors in organizations and teams with five conflict management modes: Competition, cooperation, avoidance, accommodation, compromise, from the two dimensions of caring for themselves and others. Rahim (1983) divided conflict management into five types: cooperation, Obliging, competition, avoidance and compromise from the perspective of caring for himself and others. Researchers in the conflict management literature have used some of these categorizations in their study of conflict management in educational institutions. The results of the literature review on conflict management techniques are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Conflict Management Mechanism in Educational Institutions

Author	Conflict Management Mechanism
Ciuladiene & Kairiene (2017)	integrating, forcing, avoiding, accommodating
Plessis & Cain (2017)	Did not torch on conflict resolution mechanisms
Sarpkaya (2012)	Did not torch on conflicts
Sumera & Sumera (2017)	Putting by faith in God, Soliciting support, Managing time efficiently, establishing good relationships with personnel having undesirable behaviors.
Umo (2014)	Transparency and accountability, employing the services of faith based organizations.
Bolton(2016)	Data driven decisions, ask questions and collect data, utilize process to collaborate with the stakeholders, evaluate processes for effectiveness.
Turay(2001)	Judging, avoidance, fighting and use of other forms of physical abuse, arbitration, giving Advice,
Antwi (2013)	Win-win, co-operative and confirming approach
Adeyemi (2009)	Provision of basic amenities, involving students in upholding discipline in schools, free flow of communication, mediation, using the dialogue strategy, setting up of committees to resolve conflicts.
Ignace (2014)	Competitive, avoiding, collaborating, smoothing.
Barmao(2012)	Not part of study scope
Tshuma, et. al.(2016)	Not part of study scope

Author	Conflict Management Mechanism
Šafránková & Emrová(2018)	Confronting, forcing, smoothing and avoiding
Olasunkanmi(2015)	Compromise and avoiding
Toku(2014)	Integrating dominating, obliging, compromising and avoiding.
Fareo & Jajua (2018)	Force Strategy, mediation Strategy
Olaleye & Arogundade (2013)	Dialogue, prevention, Mediation and participatory decision making
Shahmohammadi (2014)	Cooperating, mediation
Barnett-Vanes, et. al.(2016)	Was not part of researcher's scope of the study?
Ogunbodede et. al. (2020)	Dialogue and round table discussions. Consultation consolidation and confrontation.
Opoku-Asare, Takyi & Owusu-Mensah (2015)	Guidance mechanisms and encouraging peer mediation
Ghaffar (2019)	Mediation, avoiding, problem solving, smoothing and compromising.
Özgan(2015)	Domination strategies
Okoth & Yambo(2016)	Was not part of researcher's scope of study?
Akparep(2019)	Was not part of researcher's scope of study?
Wondimu(2019)	Avoiding, accommodating, competing, and compromising.
Cervantes & Fernández (2016)	Was not part of researcher's scope of study?
Thapa(2015)	Was not part of researchers scope of study
Bazewew and Neka (2017)	compromising, avoiding and collaborating
Idris et. al. (2017)	Negotiation, dialogue, resolution needs to discover the basic cause of conflict, acceptable communication skills, collaborative approach and mediation.
Schroeder(2014)	Negotiation, mediation, ignoring harsh comments, direct apology, clarifying statements
Gyan & Tandoh-Offin(2014)	Study did not find a strong case for conflict management.
Morake, et al.(2011)	Accommodating, avoidance, competing and compromising.
Musah (2007)	Ensuring mutual trust and respect, being open in all manner of negotiations.
Nyasio(2015)	Not found
Chui (2016)	Was not part of researchers scope of study
Valente & Lourenço (2020)	Use of emotional intelligence
Obraztsova (2018)	Compromise
Hakvoorta, et. al. (2018)	Integrating conflict management style, followed by obliging, avoiding, compromising and dominating
Omondi(2016)	Was not part of researchers scope of study
Makibi(2010)	integrating, obliging and compromising
Orapeleng(2017)	Employing innovative educational leaders, benchmarking, using bottom-up communication skills, and the engagement of policy analysts,
Khurshid & Khan (2012)	Confrontation, compromising and withdrawal
Ramani & Zhimin(2010)	Dialogue, regular consultation, and punishing the involved parties by assigning them harsh tasks, corporal punishment, and giving suspensions.
Kapusuzoglu(2009)	Peer mediation
Yi(2019)	Avoid, Moderation, Press, Compliance, face, Competition, cooperation, accommodation, compromise, Obliging, coordination, concession, confrontation, Problems solving behavior, facing up to behavior, informal behavior
Yasmin & Aleya (2017)	Mediation, collaboration, compromising
Isabu(2017)	Accommodation, avoidance, competition and Collaboration.
Johdi & Apitree(2012)	Identify the cause, then identify the appropriate management, Use the Quran to solve the conflict.
Kilonzo & Ivita (2019)	Was not part of researchers scope of study
Derby & Kusi (2019)	Was not part of the scope of researcher's study
Osakede et. al. (2018)	Was not part of researchers scope of study
Mukhtar et. al. (2017)	Cooperation, avoided arguing and blaming staff and students when

Author	Conflict Management Mechanism
Shahmohammadi(2014)	problems, arose. Mediation
Afful-Broni(2012)	Cooperation, avoided arguing and blaming staff and students when problems, arose.
Gyan(2015)	Reconciliation, mediation and negotiation.
Yusuf & Ibrahim(2019)	Dialogue, competition, prevention, and communication
Tayebeh mahvar et al.(2017)	Cooperative and problem solving strategies, avoidance strategies and punishment strategies.

The literature presented several strategies to manage or resolve conflicts in educational institutions. It has been found that twelve (12) conflict management styles such as avoiding, integration, accommodating, obliging, competing, cooperating, collaboration, dialogue, mediation, dominating, confrontation, and compromising are the common techniques that have been applied to manage conflicts in educational institutions around the globe (Ignace, 2014; Šafránková & Emrová, 2018; Yi, 2019; Hakvoorta, et. al., 2018). Avoidance, where both sides in the conflict withdraw which leads to a lose/lose outcome in managing conflicts is the most popular technique that has been applied to conflict management (Ciuladiene & Kairiene 2017; Petska & Berge, 2009; Afful-Broni, 2012; Turay, 2001; Yusuf & Ibrahim, 2019; Ignace, 2014; Isabu, 2017). Avoidance is followed by compromise which involves negotiation and a high degree of flexibility (Yasmin & Aleya, 2017; Toku, 2014; Yi, 2019; Khurshid & Khan, 2012). It is referred to as the win/lose-win/lose position since both parties in the conflict will get some of what they want, while at the same time giving up something in the process (Burnside, 2008). The review further reveals that leaders, staff and students of educational institutions have applied religious doctrines to manage conflicts in educational institutions (Johdi & Apitree, 2012; Sumera & Sumera, 2017). Others employ scientific methods of investigation to try to find the root causes that will determine the kind of mechanism to employ (Johdi & Apitree, 2012; Bolton, 2016). Interestingly, the use of physical force has also been found to be one of the common conflict management techniques in educational institutions (Ramani & Zhimin, 2010; Fareo & Jajua, 2018; Yi, 2019).

4. Conclusion

The study found that the most popular research design in the study of conflicts in educational institutions is the descriptive research design. Most of these studies took place in second cycle institutions. Personal factors were mainly responsible for the conflicts. Twelve (12) conflict management styles namely; avoiding, integration, accommodating, obliging, competing, cooperating, collaboration, dialogue, mediation, dominating, confrontation, and compromising were the common styles that educational institutions applied to manage conflicts. The review has also shown that the Basic level is least researched when it comes to conflicts in educational institutions.

5. Recommendation

Although much has been done to expand the frontiers of knowledge on conflicts in educational institutions, in terms of methodology, there appears to be a gap. In the study of work place conflicts, it is recommended that the mixed methods approach should be adopted in the study of workplace conflicts. The Phenomenon of conflicts at the Basic education level is least researched and it is recommended that future research should focus at this level. Why and how avoidance and comprise came to be the most popular styles of managing conflicts needs to be investigated further. All the articles used for this study came about through scientific investigation. Educational institutions should also endeavour to scientifically investigate all conflicts in order to get the right management style for them.

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