

# Readings

in Peace & Conflict  
Studies



**Edited by:**

Kayode Soremekun, Ph.D

Sheriff Folarin, Ph.D

Daniel Gberevbie, Ph.D

Duruji Moses, Ph.D

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Department of Political Science & International  
Relations,  
Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria.

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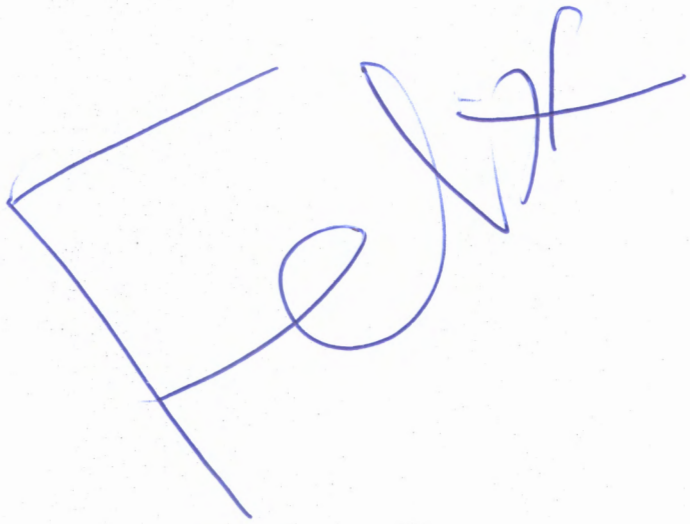
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## **Chapter Seven: Conflict Handling Techniques**

By

Felix C. Chidozie

### **Introduction**

The knowledge of peace and conflict is arguably the prime value in contemporary societies today but the most elusive (Francis, 2006). This irony is further reflected and indeed, reinforced by the pervasive nature of conflict in every strata of human society. By this it is implied that conflict is a multi- dimensional social phenomenon which is an integral feature of human existence (McCandless, 2007), and a natural part of our daily lives (Bar-Tal, 2000; Faleti, 2006). This understanding is critical to the study of conflict since it can address the general misconceptions common in related literatures. These general misconceptions have remained the dominant issues in the study of conflict over the decades.

Accordingly, a major issue in conflict analysis is that conflict emanates from social relationships. The immediate implication of this is that conflict, as a human organism, has an origin, possibly a life cycle and can eventually 'die' or be transformed if effectively managed. In other words, in the event that conflict is subjected to a well tested and scientific technique, it can have a positive outcome in the given situation. It bears mention therefore, that since individuals, communities, institutions and countries operate within social context, conflict becomes an inevitable part of their social contract; what is not inevitable is violent conflict (Anifowose, 1982; Ojiji, 2006).

A corollary to the above is that "conflict may not be regarded only in a negative light of dysfunctional or disjunctive process, and a breakdown of communication", but should also be perceived in a positive light (Otitte, 1999). In essence, the general perception of conflict in its negative connotation informs many of the erroneous approach to its management, as shall be elaborately elucidated in the course of this paper. It will suffice at this point to emphasise that contrary to the generally held misconception of conflict as unproductive, it is indeed, "an essential creative element in human relationships, a means to change, opportunities for personal development, and a guarantee that the aspirations of societies will be attained" (Burton, 1979:137-138).

In addition, conflict is often described in absolute terms in general literature on conflict, when in reality, it is relative, if it is understood that it can change depending on the circumstances and the social reality where it is measured. For example, to what extent can it be established that a woman who consistently suffers physical violence in marriage is in deeper conflict than another who consistently suffers psychological violence? It is in this sense, and legitimately so, that the dialectical analysis of conflict makes for an interesting study, given that the value or meaning associated with conflict situation will only make logical sense in comparison with other social realities.

In all appearances, there are no universally adopted procedures for dealing with conflicts (Ojiji, 2006). But, since conflicts cannot be avoided, the question therefore, is what strategies are employed in the management of conflict when they occur. In essence, how do people respond to conflicts when they occur? Are there individual and/or cultural differences in the way people deal with conflict situations?

What are the factors or forces that condition such differences? The intention is therefore, to identify the spectrum of options that are available to parties in conflict as they try to grasp and cope with the situation (Ojiji, 2006). These are the questions and issues that will be addressed in this chapter.

The discussion in the chapter is divided into four sections. Following the introduction is a brief conceptualisation of conflict with a view to further deepening the theoretical base of the subject of conflict. The third section addresses the strategies for handling conflict, while the final section will have the concluding remarks.

### **Brief Conceptualisation of Conflict**

Conflict is a fluid and infinitely elastic concept which can be twisted into different shapes and has become an issue over which scholars find themselves in sharp disagreement. Divided opinions on the nature, causes and impact of conflict are reflected in the fact that there is no single widely accepted definition on which scholars agree, though it is also possible to explain this as being a result of the multi-disciplinary nature of conflict research (Faleti, 2006). Indeed, conflict is a universal feature of human society, taking its origins in economic differentiation, social change, cultural formation, psychological development and political organisation- all of which are inherently conflictual.

Conflict arise from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and, or groups in defined social and physical environments (Chaudhry et al., 2011; Hans et al., 2012). Changes in the social environment, such as contestable access to new political positions,

or perceptions of new resources arising from development in the physical environment, are fertile grounds for generation of conflicts involving individuals and groups who are interested in using these new resources to achieve their goals (Otite, 1999). Thus, it can be deduced that struggle over power and resources, always in short supply, by individuals and, or groups constitute the major causes of conflict in social relationships.

Perhaps, this explains why one of the most quoted traditional definitions of conflict regards it as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralise, injure, or eliminate their rivals” (Coser, 1956:8). Furthermore, conflict emerges whenever one party perceives that one or more goals or purposes or means of achieving a goal or preference is being threatened or hindered by the activities of one or more parties. In this sense, conflict may be misconstrued to denote totally negative outcome, hence, Coser (1956) had argued that social conflict is not only negative in the sense of tearing apart; social conflict may contribute to the maintenance of group boundaries and prevent the withdrawal of members from a group. This notion of misconception of conflict mostly as destructive was poignantly addressed by Stephen Faleti, as follows:

Conflict is mostly depicted as if it is totally negative. This is not always the case. Depending on how it is handled, it can either be constructive (positive) or destructive (negative). It is as common to come across suggestions that conflict can be used constructively to explore different solutions to a problem and stimulate creativity by recognising and sensitively exposing conflicts as a way of bringing emotive and non-rational arguments into the open while deconstructing long-standing tension (International Alert, 1996: 3-4, cited in Faleti, 2006:36).



According to Swanstrom and Weissmann (2005), perception should be included as a central concept when discussing conflict, since the conflicts and the opponent's intentions are often defined according to subjective perceptions. They argued that there could be an abundance of space for agreement in a conflict, but if the parties perceive the conflict as impossible to resolve or see the opponents as untrustworthy this might not help in resolving the conflict. Ojiji (2006) corroborates this view by his statement that "it is only when an action is perceived as blocking the opportunity for the attainment of a goal by another that conflict can occur" (Ojiji, 2006:119).

Similarly, Kriesberg, (1973), defines conflict as a relationship between two or more parties who believe they have incompatible goals (cited in Albert, 2001:120). Basic to this definition is that the parties to a conflict will have to believe or perceive their goals to be irreconcilable. Thus, the element of perception is also synonymous with belief, which locates the root cause of conflict to deeply held convictions and values. Hoivik & Meijer (1994), in their statement that "incompatible behaviour between parties whose interests are or appear to be incompatible" agrees with the above notion (cited in Albert, 2001: 120).

Arising from the views of conflict by different scholars advanced above, conflict could be broadly seen as a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values or goals. Conflicts within social relationships are inevitable; however the results of conflict are not predetermined. Conflict might escalate and lead to non-productive results, or conflict can be beneficially resolved leading to individual and group satisfaction. Therefore, learning to handle or deal with conflict is integral to maintaining healthy and robust relationships.

## Strategies for Handling Conflict

Conflict handling skills are critically important if individuals and, or groups are to function effectively within social relationships. With the increasing impact of socio-cultural globalisation in contemporary international system, coupled with the pervasive and ubiquitous character of contemporary conflict, there has been an increased focus on the development of workable conflict handling styles (Alli, 2006).

Accordingly, conflict handling style refers to “the responses that people make to address the situation that is considered detrimental to the attainment of a desired goal” (Ojiji, 2006: 120). By implication, people react to conflict in certain pre-conceived manner, in a bid to achieve set out goals and objectives and these responses are often conditioned by spectrum of choices available to individuals. Rashid (2012) however, makes a distinction between conflict management and conflict handling. According to him, conflict management is “the capability to handle conflict efficiently”, while “conflict handling refers to the methods used by any one or mutually groups to deal with conflict” (Rashid, 2012: 97).

Therefore, conflict handling approaches will mean the different techniques of conflict, probing the means by which individuals handled conflict. It is applied to explain any act taken by an opponent or an intermediary to resolve a conflict. In general terms, people respond to conflict in either of two ways- cooperation and competition. Some scholars have referred to this dichotomy in varying interpretations or conceptions. Deutsch (1949), for instance conceptualised it as cooperation-competition paradigm, while Ojiji (2006) and Hans et al (2012) captured it as cooperativeness and assertiveness. Cooperation here depicts behaving in a manner that satisfies the desires of all parties

to the conflict or seeking and mobilising all forces that will ensure productive outcome in conflict situation. In the context of conflict therefore, "cooperation will manifest in a number of corresponding methods of dealing with conflicts such as accommodation, avoidance, collaboration and compromise" (Ojiji, 2006: 120).

On the other hand, competitiveness or assertiveness denotes the attempt to satisfy one's own needs and desires at the expense of the other persons in particular relationships. Related to conflict, "assertiveness manifests in defending one's right in a given situation and pushing a position favourable to oneself or one's group. The specific conflict resolution methods that imply assertiveness are domination, arbitration and threats to the other party" (Ojiji, 2006: 120). However, doubts have been raised over the ability of the dichotomy to reflect the complexity of an individual's perceptions of conflict behaviour and a new two-dimensional grid for classifying the styles was developed (Brewer et al, 2002).

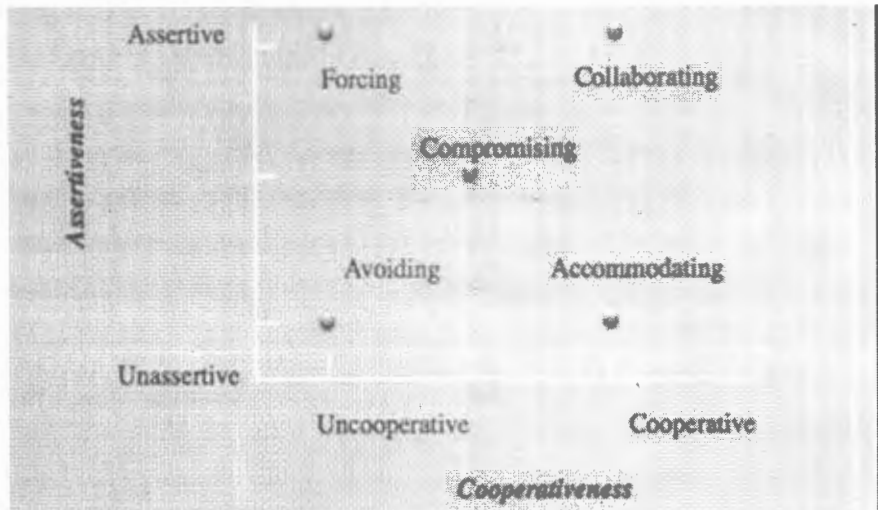
While numerous researchers proposed revisions of the above framework, Rahim and Bonoma (1979) conceptualisation of conflict response dichotomy has been one of the most popular. They differentiated the styles of resolving interpersonal conflict on two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. The first dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy their own concerns, while the second dimension explains the degree to which an individual tries to satisfy the needs or concerns of others. Combining the two dimensions results in five specific styles of conflict management, known as integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979).

According to Rahim and Bonoma (1979) integrating is characterised by both high concern for self and for others, while an avoiding style is associated with both low concern for self and for others. An obliging style involves low concern for self and high concern for others; conversely, a dominating style is characterised by high concern for self and low concern for others. Compromising is associated with intermediate concern for both self and others. Although they have also argued that individuals select among three or four conflict styles, they submitted that evidence from confirmatory factor analyses prove that the five factor model has a better fit with data than models of two, three, and four style orientations (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979).

For Rahim (2002), the strategies for handling conflict include integrating, which entails cooperation and problem solving wherein both groups share knowledge and rummage around for ways to persuade each other; compromising which involves splitting problems down the central point to determine conflict; obliging style which connotes that an individual cares about the desires of others by rebuffing his or her own wants; avoiding style which involves an individual restraining or moving back from conflict, and dominating style which involves a person forcing problems to fulfil his or her wants which congregate at the cost of another (Rahim, 2002: 216). Having examined the issues and concepts, we now turn our attention to detailed discourse on specific conflict management strategies and styles.

## Conflict Management Strategies and Styles

*Figure 1: Conflict management framework.*



**Source:** Whetten, D. A. & Cameron, K. S., 2007. *Developing Management Skills* (7th Ed.), Prentice-Hall, cited in Hans and Al Bariki, (2012).

### a) Avoidance

Conflict avoidance is characterised by denial of the existence of conflict, equivocation, changing and avoiding topics, being non-committal, and joking rather than dealing with the conflict at hand. It is a way of not addressing the conflict, or a “tactical way of postponing the conflict for a better time, if at all such a time will come” (Ojiji, 2006: 121). It is important to observe that a person who adopts the avoidance strategy, deliberately plays down on the significance of the issues involved and painstakingly diverts attention away from the issue. The person pretends

not to be interested but secretly harbours his grievances or hurts resulting from the conflict. Such a person is not committed to either satisfying his/her own needs or the needs of other parties to the conflict. Avoidance strategy in conflict management is a critical situation, in which a person is unassertive and uncooperative at the same time, thus leading to a lose-lose situation for all parties to the conflict.

This style of handling conflict has been technically referred to as "tortoise style" (Albert, 2001) and by implication, the person who adopts this strategy is evasive, defensive and fearful of impending danger. The person perceives conflict from the negative dimension and does everything to avoid being involved in one. Part of the reasons why they avoid conflict is an innate fear of 'rocking the boat' or upsetting the status quo. From a psychological perspective, the avoidance strategy results from deep-seated psychological dispositions which are consequences of fractured child-hood experiences or unforeseen circumstances.

It is important to note, however, that conflict does not just disappear by ignoring the issues but can fester and become more damaging. Indeed, conflict avoidance is unpromising and damaging for all parties to a conflict, even though in the interim it may provide some temporary relief or gratification. This strategy of handling conflict has a potential for creating artificial satisfaction, though it eventually leads to more dangerous outcome for the conflicting parties. It suffices to add that conflicts are better addressed immediately than suspended to a later date.

#### b) Band-Aid or Bandage

Band-aid or bandage conflict management technique describes the process of creating artificial or temporary reprieve in a conflict situation. It is identified by a tendency to scratch the real issues on the surface,

hence the appellation- bandage strategy. It becomes evident when the person in a conflict attempts to patch-up the real issue or explains it away as insignificant. It is most critical in situations where the supposed offended party in a conflict deliberately embellishes the ugly situation to make it appealing to intruders or simply volunteers excuses for the party or person who has offended him or her.

To further the understanding of the bandage strategy for conflict management, let us relate to a common conflict scenario. It is often the case, especially in the Third World context, for women that suffer unpleasant offences such as rape, and or domestic violence, due to some socio-cultural or religious factors, to 'bandage' the magnitude of the assault and even ironically excuse the damaging actions of their offenders. It is also common-place for those who have been robbed by armed bandits to excuse the actions of the perpetrators due to some economic reasons, arguing, for instance, that their actions were motivated by circumstances outside their immediate control (e.g. hunger). The most laughable instance where this strategy has been demonstrated is the case of those who have suffered failures in some endeavours but attribute their failure to satanic forces, thus 'soothing' the negative effects of their failure to spiritual influences. It is also worthy to mention that, the effect of adopting bandage as a strategy for conflict management is that it deludes the person who has chosen it and warps his reality. It is an unproductive technique for managing conflict.

#### c) Confrontation/Fighting

Confrontation occurs when one of the parties to a conflict takes a unilateral action towards dealing with the problem by 'forceful' means. It is demonstrated by parties to a conflict when they actually 'attack' each other either physically or emotionally. Expectedly, this style is easily

noticeable in violent situations where the stronger party imposes his will on the other by intimidation, blackmail, or in some cases fist-cuffs confrontation. There is a tendency for the conflicts of this nature to degenerate to the point where the parties start demonising each other. Indeed, this conflict management style could be regarded as the last resort, because to a considerable degree, other avenues to resolving conflicts would have been exhausted before a resort to open confrontation. More so, the parties to the conflict may have proven uncooperating, and stubbornly stuck to their individual positions, hence the physical or emotional attack. This conflict handling style leads to a lose-lose outcome for all parties, and only in few cases does it end in a win-lose outcome, especially for the stronger party.

a) Accommodation

This strategy for handling conflict, as the name implies comes from a disposition of cooperation. The person who uses this style is not assertive and competitive with the other party. Accommodation, here imply a conscious attempt to neglect one's needs and focus on satisfying those of the other party. The underlying value here is that of self-sacrifice which may be a manifestation of self esteem disorder (Ojiji, 2006). Indeed, accommodation as a strategy for handling conflict leaves one party damaged emotionally and vulnerable to similar accommodative action in the future, thus perpetuating a cycle of frustration and possibly depression. This conflict handling technique does not only negatively affect the one who accommodates the faults and offences of the other party, it equally affects the one to whom the other is condescending to. In other words, while it leaves the person who submits vulnerable, it creates an arrogant disposition to the one submitted to, thereby making the latter expectant to 'win' in other conflicts. This style of handling conflict



negates the principle of self-regeneration which is a natural consequence of constructive approach to conflict. Like the case of avoidance, it only records short-term benefit, but leaves much to be desired in the long-term. The overall consequence of accommodation is that it can lead to development of synthetic or artificial relationships which are very unhealthy for people involved with one another. It leads to a win-lose situation.

b) **Compromising**

Compromising as a conflict managing strategy involves making concessions to partially satisfy the interests of both parties to a conflict. It is a situation that incorporates the element of 'trading' part of the erstwhile positions held by conflicting parties so as to allow a relative peace to reign. Thus, in this situation, a party is partially assertive and partially cooperative. It is a win some; lose some situation which cannot fully satisfy the desires of the conflicting parties. An example is a situation where two room-mates are involved in conflict over the use of light in their room at night. One desires the light to study at night and the other desires light out so as to sleep. They may eventually agree to have the light on for certain number of hours at night and to turn it out for the remaining time. Clearly, the needs of the two parties have not been fully satisfied, but they have gained amicably from the situation. This conflict handling style has a minimal advantage, in that it can help to reduce the intensity of conflict per time.

c) **Collaborating**

This is a conflict handling style that takes into full account the interest of both parties to a conflict with a view to finding a lasting solution to the problem. Both parties are disposed to solution seeking and so are not

avoiding the conflict in any sense, but rather tend toward cooperation and assertion. It takes the form of open and undisguised dialogue between parties to a conflict, devoid of any pretence because both parties are determined to control the process as well as the outcome. Accordingly, the outcome results in a win-win situation for both parties since the initial process would have been acceptable to all. In most instances, the outcome will be binding to both parties, since they have not been cajoled or coerced into agreement. It is instructive to note that, collaboration results into lasting solution to conflict giving that all issues and grievances would have been 'ventilated' in the process of prolonged and painstaking dialogue before resolution. Also, collaboration is an effective instrument for negotiation.

#### d) Role Playing

Role playing occurs in conflict situation where one of the parties to the conflict sticks religiously to his duty, brief or position and stubbornly refuses to bend, or yield their positions to achieve a resolution. The role player tends toward assertiveness and gives no room for cooperation. He is very competitive and perceives the world around him as such, but he is a poor team player and feels more comfortable working in isolation. The party who role-plays in a conflict is an eye-server, who is often rigid and refuses to consider dissensions and, or contingencies as part of the regular springboards of life. For example, a University Professor gives an assignment to a class and sets the deadline for submission. But in the class, a diligent student who had no prior records of truancy is unable to submit the assignment because a sudden news of the mother's death compelled him to travel, but on return to school, the Professor refuses to accommodate any excuses for extension and decides to fail the student. It is obvious from this narrative, that the professor is a role player, who is

unbending, inflexible and idealistic. The role player's penchant for tradition and convention often denies him the opportunity to learn, adapt and create solutions to conflict. It is relevant to add that, the role played generates more conflict which often leads to a zero-sum outcome.

#### e) Third Party Decision Making

This conflict handling technique takes place when a third party acting on behalf of the larger society (e.g., a court of law), hands down mandatory terms of resolving the conflict to the parties involved. This approach to handling conflict is totally assertive on the part of the third party decision maker, who often acts as a facilitator, and may or may not need cooperation on the part of the parties to the conflict. It is somewhat similar to compromise, in the sense that the parties to the conflict may have to 'trade-off' certain positions or be mandated to do so by the third party decision maker before a conflict can be resolved. Third party decision making works best for resolving community conflicts where the rule of law has not broken down as in several parts of the developing world. This approach can create a win-win situation if constructively handled with the intention of finding a middle-point position for communities or individuals involved in conflicts.

#### f) Joint Problem Solving Approach

Joint problem solving approach requires the parties to the conflict acting together (by negotiating with each other), or being helped by a third party (using mediation) to resolve the conflict on mutually agreeable terms. This approach is easier to facilitate in situations where the negative effect of further hostility is clear to all parties in the conflict. In this way, the parties approach the talking table determined to show regards to one another, by listening to each other constructively, with no regards to who

may be right or wrong and seek opportunities to find lasting solution to the conflict. Indeed, the parties perceive the outcome of the conflict as a way to contribute to rebuilding their relationship; hence efforts will be put to making honest inputs to the resolution process. This approach is arguably the most effective strategy for handling conflict (Albert, 2001), and under normal circumstances, lead to a win-win outcome for all parties.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter attempted to examine conflict handling tools noticeable among people involved in inter-personal and inter-group relationship. It observed that while conflict can be an effective channel through which inter-personal and inter-group relations can be fostered, most often than not, conflict results in a negative outcome to parties involved, thereby destroying relationships and balkanising communities. Indeed, poor knowledge of conflict handling techniques among individuals and groups is the culprit and the solution is conflict management skills.

It is therefore recommended that, conflict management which involves acquiring skills related to conflict resolution, self-awareness about conflict models, conflict communication skills, and awareness and establishing a structure for management of conflict in different environments have become critically important in societies. In essence, for people to build robust relationships in families, communities, institutions and countries, effective engagement with the knowledge of conflict handling models is inevitable.

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