

Cultural & Psycho-Social Perspective of Conflict Management

(A Book of Readings)

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Chapter 5

CONFLICT RESOLUTION THROUGH KNOWLEDGE: THE LIBRARY PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

In every human interaction either at the level of individuals, organizations, national, regional or international, there are usually competitive interests and varying perspectives to every issue at stake. It is dogged pursuance of antagonistic, incompatible and antithetical goals that inevitably result in conflict. The phenomenon is multi-faceted and widespread in society, having destructive tendencies if consensus is not achieved. Obachi (2008) contended that forging diverse relationships and attempts at continuously perfecting same have the propensity to always precipitate conflict.

Conflict resolution is the process of defusing antagonism and reaching agreement between conflicting parties especially through some form of negotiation. It can also be conceptualized as a study and practice of solving interpersonal, intergroup and inter-national, conflicts. Ifidon and Ahiazu (2005) noted that the potential for conflict is an everyday occurrence which exists virtually everywhere. According to them, interpersonal conflict is caused by personality clashes and failure to communicate effectively as well as distrust between parties with differing perspectives.

The most common cause of intergroup conflict is scarce resources (Bornstein, 2003). When scarce resources are allocated, conflict is invited. Incompatible goals also have the propensity to create conflict. Inter organizational conflict may be due to the need for competitiveness. The survival of the fittest syndrome and the endeavour to capture a larger share of the market are the basis for conflict.

Conflicts generally are perceived negatively. However, benefits can accrue from such circumstances. Hence, conflict could be functional and dysfunctional in nature. Healthy disagreement is considered functional while dysfunctional conflict involves destructive tendencies. Olagunju (2007) identifies positive and desirable functions of conflicts as effecting necessary change and generating new ideas.

The statusquo is unarguably challenged during conflicts culminating to several alternatives that were hitherto hidden and never considered or anticipated. Tradition is a clog in the wheel of progress. Positive conflicts are symptomatic of ingredients for advancement. Organizations and societies desiring change must of a necessity make adjustments to accommodate diversity and embrace platforms to identifying and resolving seemingly contradictions within its system.

Another positive consequence of conflict lies in its inherent ability to generate new ideas. The phenomenon operates as a catalyst to compel stakeholders and interested parties to discover unique and new methodologies of engagement leading to creativity and innovation. Expansion of frontiers in virtually every facet of human endeavour is traceable to conflict hence it is usually said that necessity is the mother of invention. Conflict could be of tremendous advantage if properly managed whereas the negative aspects may prove catastrophic if not thoroughly understood and resolved.

Olagunju (2007) also highlighted other positive functions of conflict as:

- test existing and novel ideas and the boundaries between the possible and the impossible
- reveal and exorcise fears
- test group cohesion

- build teams
- reveal different needs and interests among individuals and groups
- explore personalities
- enable people to learn about each other
- enable people to express strong feelings
- enable people to discover the way other people think
- reveal or discuss fears about each other and about personal failure
- create mutual dependence

There is therefore, the absolute need for concerted efforts and interventions aimed at overcoming the root causes of destructive conflicts and to properly position our perspectives of conflict generally. Religious and ethnic conflicts have repeatedly taken place in Nigeria with its concomitant consequences in human, material and physical destructions as well as traumatic effects. Such violent conflicts include: Odua Peoples' Congress/Hausa, Ife/Modakeke, Ijaw/Urhobo/Itsekiri, Umuleri/Aguleri, several indigene/settler conflicts and the many religious conflicts, numerous chieftaincy tussles, frequent land disputes as well as the popular Niger Delta crisis.

Okebukola (2005) contended that empirical studies have shown that conflicts cannot be resolved by force. That they can only be truly resolved when there is respect for human rights and social justice. He opines further that conflicts can be better managed when the elite, the educated, is consciously exposed to elements of early warnings of conflict and peace-binding dynamics. Ignorance and poor communication are usually at the root of any conflict. Understanding the intricacies of the issues by all interested parties and their knowledge base would be vital in the resolution of conflict.

Knowledge is critical in defining the society and individuals. Perspectives, perceptions and attitudes are largely shaped by the degree of knowledge. Knowledge of other cultures, diversities and shared values has the tendency of resolving conflicts and providing sufficient common grounds on which to build and sustain relationships.

Okwilagwe (2001) noted that knowledge reflected through literary works shapes the attitudes of the readers on a number of personal, national and world issues. Writers have the full force for national reconstruction and social re-engineering. It follows therefore that knowledge defines the individual's own position in relation to the other members of the society and helps the individual adapt successfully to his/her environment. Conflict resolution in a particular society would be regulated by the action and inaction as well as behavioural dispositions of people in a given geo-polity. Behaviour change is however mediated by the nature and level of prevailing knowledge.

Libraries are repositories of knowledge. They are organized collection of published books and periodicals in different formats, other reading and audio-visual materials and services of staff to provide and interpret such materials as required to meet the informational, research, educational and recreational needs of the users. (UNESCO, 1994). They are a collection of records of human culture and experience in different languages and formats. Libraries may be categorized according to their objectives, contents and patterns of service. The various types include public, academic, special and school.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION: OLD AND NEW APPROACHES

The term conflict resolution refers specifically to strategies of diffusion developed during the second half of the 20th century as alternatives to traditional litigation models of settling disputes. This is based on the idea that it is better to expose and resolve conflict before it damages peoples' relationships or escalates into violence. Methods of conflict resolution that were originally developed for purposes of business management gradually became adopted in the fields of international relations, legal settings, and during the 1980s, educational setting (Net Industries, 2008). The only true solution to a conflict is one that attempts to satisfy the inherent needs of all the parties involved.

Net Industries (2008) identified the following as approaches to resolving conflicts in social, business, institutional, legal and interpersonal relationships:

- Adjudication and arbitration, with a judge of higher authority acting as the arbitrator. In this approach, the arbitrator listens to

each presentation by each side, and then determines an option based on existing legislation, precedents, and considerations of fairness.

- Counselling, overseen by a counselor, therapist or manager. When counselling is used to achieve conflict resolution, the counsellor first achieves rapport, then assesses the real problems and applies intervention strategies.
- Negotiation, conducted by a lawyer or agents or by the parties themselves. The process of negotiation involves presenting the position, arguing the position, and disputing the position; it ends with agreement or final breakdown of the negotiation.
- Problem solving carried out by an individual or delegated official of an organization. In this approach, the problem solver identifies the problem, communicates, decides on an alternative, takes action, follows up to ensure completion, and evaluates the effectiveness of the action.
- Mediation conducted by a mediator or selected third-party facilitator. In mediated conflict resolution, the mediator or facilitator achieves rapport with the disputants, gathers facts and isolates issues, helps create alternatives, guides the negotiation and decision making, clarifies an agreement or plan, provides for legal review and carries out follow-ups, reviews and revisions.

Olagunju (2007) recommended mediation as the best approach to conflict resolution. He contended that mediation provides a forum in which an impartial person, the mediator facilitates communication between parties to promote reconciliation, settlement or understanding. It is canvassed here; that rather than having two parties on opposing sides, with a third party to determine who is wrong or right, mediation involves a neutral person working with the parties towards a common goal, that is a satisfactory agreement that settles the conflict holistically. It follows that the mediator harnesses the power of knowledge to help a party understand itself, its needs, motives and situation as well as those of the other party.

Negotiation is seen as the most diverse approach to conflict resolution. Most conflict resolution programmes employ some form of negotiation as the primary method of communication between parties (Oyeshola,

2005). Negotiation can be distributive, where each party attempts to win as many concessions to his or her own self interest as possible (win-lose). It is also believed that the face-to-face conversation involved in direct negotiation may actually influence people to act in the interest of the group, including the opposing party. Face-to-face negotiation tends to be integrative in its consequences. Lawyers often serve as designated negotiators. Negotiation has traditionally been viewed as a zero-sum game, that is, achieving one position at the expense of another, though many negotiators have pointed out that it is possible to achieve mutual gain through such constructive settlement of disputes.

The success of a given instance of conflict resolution depends on the attitudes, and of any interviewing parties. The elementary skills that have been identified as promoting conflict resolution overlap to a high degree with those that reflect social competence in children and adolescents. According to Net Industries (2008), these include:

- awareness of others
- awareness of the distinctions between self and others
- awareness of one's own feelings the thoughts as well as the ability to express them
- ability to respond to the feelings and thoughts of others.

Conflict resolution provides a platform to ease the emotional state of the disputants, change their ways of interactions, and finding solution to problems. It provides for a change of heart and mindset.

Oyehsola (2005) recognized the vital role of communication, both verbal and non-verbal in the whole processes. He noted that in conflict resolution, gestures, facial expression and the tone of voice go a long way to create a picture of understanding, soothing of nerves, pleading, anxiety, warning and satisfaction.

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN SUSTAINABLE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Libraries imbue in their users the ability to locate, manage and use information effectively for a wide range of purposes. This important skill allows people to engage in various decision-making, problem solving

and research. It also enables them to take responsibility for their own continuous learning in areas of personal or professional interest (Nkiko, 2005).

Societies risk stagnation unless they make constant provision for the injection and absorption of new knowledge. Libraries and information centres are intellectual storehouse serving as a giant memory (Madu, 2002); while institutions function as an agency for acquiring, organizing, preserving and disseminating knowledge as fixed in any recorded format.

Mazrui (1999) noted that the distribution of real power is based not on "who owns what" but "who knows what". Gordon (1994) described information and knowledge as an understanding that steers human actions and consequently controls signals in any living organism. It is in line with the foregoing assertion that the paper articulates specific interventions through which the library being a repository of knowledge can ensure conflict resolution:

- **Libraries act as an agent of social change:** Reading materials which have the force of inspiration and capable of positive mental reconstructions of the citizens are made accessible in the libraries. These materials contain great ideas about life and conduct. They are geared to provoking thought and action. The perspectives and culture of a people can be altered by the activities of the libraries.
- **Through reading, people are able to develop emotional intelligence.** Emotional intelligence is the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships. This social competence attribute is a desideratum in conflict resolution. Libraries provide bibliotherapeutic functions which help individuals to understand how to use emotional intelligence in teams, raise their emotional intelligence level, understand how to use emotional intelligence in conflict situations, and discover emotional intelligence in an international context.

- **Libraries provide functional knowledge for conflict resolution.** There is a fundamental divide existing among scholars, research providers, policy-makers and practitioners in the field of conflict prevention resolution. It is the duty of libraries to bridge this gap. The plethora of research findings of the Universities and research Institutes on various dimensions of conflicts as found in their libraries provide basic informational and capacity requirements for effective conflict resolution. The onus rests on the libraries to ensure through consultancy services, information brokerage and current awareness services that the practitioners benefit from the avalanche of resources in this regard. The averment of Kofi Annan (1997) as seen below clearly underscores the point.

"In spite of the useful research findings of some of the Institutes, the overall contribution and potential of the research institutes remains largely underutilized by the United Nations community... the need for such bodies to pursue their research and other activities with a degree of autonomy and intellectual rigour partly explains this remote- tress ... the institutes have an obligation to make their work both relevant and accessible to the larger United Nations Country".

The need to ensure that conflict related research outcomes dotting the shelves of the libraries of conflict resolution practitioners cannot be overemphasized.

The use of ICT for inclusiveness, and empowerment of actors: Most modern libraries deploy ICT for their service deliveries. Libraries create virtual platforms that enable hitherto marginalized actors to participate more fully in peace-building processes. ICT enables information flow that not only radically subverts existing patterns of knowledge flows and power centers, but empowers organizations, groups and individuals to produce and share information between each other. This helps to bring a greater degree of cohesion, transparency and accountability to processes of conflict resolution that were hitherto unthinkable.

- **Psychological Deterrence Functions:** Libraries through audio-visual equipment play educational documentaries showing the evil consequences of war and weapons of mass destruction. This deters potential aggressors from violence and conflict as they do not wish to suffer similar great destruction. The presentation of visual consequences of war to library users helps appreciate and develop a sense of peace-building devoid of breaking down norms of human relations.
- **Crime Prevention and Security Strategy:** Libraries help to combat crime by improving the quality of life of individuals. (Nkiko, 2005). They offer stimulating activities; media and reading materials that help keep growing people off the streets. Opportunities are provided for community members to improve their skills and employability, thus expanding the alternatives to violent activities.
- **Promotion of Global Citizenship and National Unity:** The goal of any academic library is to help students understand how they can make a difference in the world they live in. Libraries provide information and knowledge which inculcate in citizens a global mindset, attributes and competencies relevant for navigating through the terrain of international relations. A global citizen is aware of the wider world and has a sense of their own roles as a world citizen, respects and values diversity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper concludes that through increased understanding of the dynamics of conflict resolution, robust self-knowledge and group cohesion are necessary ingredients to promoting peace through effective conflict resolution. Essential skills and abilities for effective conflict resolution are cultivated and nurtured through libraries. These abilities include: orientation abilities, perception abilities, emotional abilities, communication abilities, creative-thinking abilities and critical thinking abilities. Libraries are essential life-changing institutions in any society for providing requisite knowledge and creating educated, enlightened communities. Unfortunately, not everyone understands or appreciates the value of this all-important institution. It is therefore

recommended that librarians should engage in ceaseless advocacy in disseminating messages about the importance of libraries. Governments and organizations should ensure the provision of world class libraries in their respective spheres of influence. It behooves all of leadership to promote reading culture as the benefits to individuals are immeasurable.

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