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# Analysis of Conflict Management And Resolution In Nigerian Public Service

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## Abstract

The paper analyzed conflict management and Resolution in Nigerian Public Service. The objectives of this paper are to identify the causes of conflict in Nigerian public service, and to evaluate the best methods of reducing or preventing it. The study employed Human Relations theory of Mary Parker Follett as it relates to conflict in human organization. Data were collected through secondary sources while historical and descriptive methods were used in its analysis. The paper found that there are conflict issues caused by the specific behaviors of those identified as problem people such as non-conformists, passive and unresponsive people. Such public servants think independently, solve problem creatively, and often cause problem in the process. Among others, the study recommends that in the event of any conflict, effort should be made to settle it by compromise, collaboration, negotiation or integration.

**Keywords**: Conflict; Conflict Management; Resolution; Conflict
           Models and Public Service

## Introduction

Social scientists have agreed that conflict is normal, common and inevitable in human relations. It can be functional (constructive) and it can be dysfunctional (destructive). Ideas about conflict management and resolution underwent an interesting revolution during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, scientific management experts such as Fredrick W. Taylor believed that all conflicts ultimately threatened management's

authority and thus have to be avoided or quickly resolved. Later human relations theorists recognized the inevitability of conflict and advised managers or administrators to learn to live with it. According to Mary Parker Follett, conflicts in organization are inevitable. Conflict is the difference of appearance, opinion and of interests as such, conflict is neither good nor bad, but provides opportunities for good or bad results. If resolved with the best method, it can result to efficiency in the public service. She asserts that managers or administrators in the public service should learn to use conflict in a constructive (functional) manner.

Tjosvold (1993:11), notes that "change begets conflict, conflict begets change as this paper is presented to the Nigeria Public Service to do better with the following sobering global perspective:

> *Learning to manage conflict is a crucial investment in improving how we, our families and our organizations adapt and take advantage of change. Managing conflict well does not insulate us from change, nor does it mean that we will always come out on top or get all that we want. However, effective conflict management helps us keep in touch with new development and creates solutions appropriate for new threats and opportunities (Tjosvold, 1993:11).*

From 1970s, behavioural scientists as well as management experts began to realize that conflict had both positive and negative outcomes, depending on its nature and intensity. This perspective of conflict management and resolution in Nigerian public service is the major focus of this paper.

The objectives of this paper are to:

i.     Identify the major causes of conflict in Nigeria public service.

ii.    Know what are the conflict management strategies for conflict resolution in Nigerian public service.

iii.   Evaluate some of the major drawbacks of conflict in public service in general.

## Causes of Conflict in Nigeria Public Service

It is difficult to state the precise causes of conflict largely because, conflict differ from each other in terms of the combination of factors that give rise to them, and also because conflict is a social phenomena involving human beings and are not given to rigid scientific explanations (Oche, 2001:81). According to Kreitner, Kinicki and Buelens, (2002:362-363), and Baron (1986:378-379):conflict in Nigerian Public Service can be seen to revolve around the following issues,

- Incompatible personalities or value system.

- Overlapping or unclear job boundaries.

- Competition for limited resources.

- Interdepartmental/intergroup competition.

- Inadequate communication.

- Interdependent tasks (e.g. one person cannot complete his or her assignment until others have completed their work).

- Organizational complexity (conflict tends to increase as the number of hierarchical layers and specialized tasks increase).

- Unreasonable or unclear policies, standards, rules or programme

- Unreasonable deadline or extreme time pressure.

- Collective decision making (the greater the number of people participating in a decision, the greater the potential for conflict).

- Decision by consensus.

- Unmet expectation (workers who have unrealistic expectations about job assignments, pay or promotion are more prone to conflict).

- Unresolved or suppressed conflicts.

Infact, Baron (1986) asserts that "careful analysis shows that many organizational conflicts arise from hurt feelings, bruised egos, faulty perceptions, and long standing grudges rather their opposing group interest". Therefore, proactive people carefully read these early warnings and take appropriate action.

**Theoretical Framework**

In this paper, human relations theory as expounded by Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) was used. The importance of human relations in public service and in the work relationship cannot be over-emphasized. The skills that are necessary for good relations with others are the most skills anyone can learn in life.

According to Mary Parker Follett, conflicts in organization (like the Nigeria public service) is inevitable. She advocated humane administration which seeks to integrate the differences in organizations, reconcile individuals and social groups, harmonize them and enable them to contribute to organization's growth.

Follett suggested three ways of handling organizational conflict; they are ***Domination, Compromise and Integration***(cited in Nwizu, 1999:192). She considers integration as the best method of resolving conflict because it goes to the root of the problem and puts an end to the conflict permanently. If conflict in Nigerian public service is resolved through compromise, the conflict may come up again in another form. Follett states that compromise does not create, but only deals with the existing problem, whereas integration creates something new, leads to invention and to the emergence of new values.

For anyone working in an organization like Nigeria public service, ought to know that human relations involves an understanding of how people work together in groups, satisfying both individual needs and group objectives. If Nigerian public service is to succeed, the relationships among the workers in the service must be monitored, maintained and harmonized.

This paper would use historical research method. This simply implies that the study would be based on the data, facts, information and even opinions that were gathered through secondary source. The paper will be enriched through textual materials including journals and seminar papers. Simple analytical and descriptive historical methods were used in its analysis.

**Conceptual Clarifications**

For better understanding of this study, it is important to clarify some concepts as follows:

**Management:** There is no generally accepted definition of "management" as an activity, although the classic definition is still held to that of Henri Fayol (1916) who states, "to manage is to forecast and plan, to organize, to command, to coordinate and to control". According to Jones and George (2003:5) management is the planning, organizing, leading, and controlling of human and other resources to achieve organizational goals effectively and efficiently". An organization's resources include assets such as people and their skills and knowledge; machinery, raw materials, computers and information technology, and financial capital. The above definition concurs with that given by Ogunna (1999:3) who opines that management is "the utilization of public resources (men, money and materials) to achieve set objective". Managing is an organizational process initially best directed by analyzing the managerial functions-the five essential managerial functions are: planning, organizing, staffing, directing, leading and controlling (Koontz and O'Donnell, 1984).

**Public Service:** Public service according to the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 272 is defined as "service of the Federation or a state in any capacity including service as staff of the National Assembly or a State Assembly, member or staff of judiciary or of any commission or authority established by the Nigerian Constitution 1979 or by the National or a State Assembly, staff of a statutory corporation or educational institutions established or financed principally by the government of the federation or a state, staff of a company or enterprise in which government or its agency owns a controlling share or interest, members or officers of the Armed Forces of the Federation or the Nigerian Police Force, customs, immigration staff and staff of a local government.

Simply put, public service refers to the arm of government whose primary responsibility is the implementation of government policies and programmes in accordance with the established rules and procedures. It includes not just the civil service but also political appointees, Ministers, Commissioners, judicial officers, local government employees, as well as the Police Force, employees of public corporations, parastatals, banks and armed forces. The general term that embraces the officials of the civil service and other government departments and units is ***public servants.*** In this

sense, civil service is a part of public service as a result public service is wide in scope than the civil service (Onyenwigwe, 2008:61).

**Conflict:**

Conflict has many definitions. "Conflict according to Thomas (1977:56), involves direct confrontations between groups or individuals, usually arising in situations where each side perceives that the other is about to frustrate or has already frustrated its major interests".

There are three fundamentals implications in the above definition as outlined below:

a.      Opposing interests between and among persons and groups

b.      Recognition of such opposition; and

c.      The belief by each side that the other is out to destroy its interests.

Rahim (1990), defines conflict as "the opposition arising from disagreements due to incompatible objectives, thoughts or emotions within or among individuals, teams, departments or organization".

This definition exposes three bases of conflict in the Nigeria public service:

i.      **Goal conflict:** A situation in which desired objectives and preferred outcomes appear to be incompatible among individuals.

ii.     **Cognitive conflict:** A situation in which ideas or thoughts are perceived as incompatible

iii.    **Affective conflict:** A situation in which feelings or emotions are incompatible, that is, people become angry with one another.

Another interesting definition of conflict is that given by: Robert and Angelo (2002:361). According to them conflict is "a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party". The word perceives in this definition reminds us that sources of conflict and issues can be real or imagined. The resulting conflict is the same. In this sense, conflict can escalate (strengthen) or de-escalate (weaken) overtime. The conflict-process unfolds in a context, and whether conflict, escalated or not, the disputants or third parties can attempt to manage it in some manner (Wall and Callister 1995:544). Consequently, employees and employers in Nigeria Public Service need to understand the dynamics of conflict and know how to handle it (both as disputants and as third parties).

**Conflict Resolution:** Conflict resolution refers to the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict. It is discernible from the word resolution that conflict resolution simply refers to putting an end to a conflict. It aims at putting away identifiable areas of incompatibilities between or among conflicting parties. (Borokini and Edu, 2013:51).

Conflict resolution concerns itself with addressing those conditions that ignited the conflict, create a friendly environment and foster positive attitudes, allay distrust through reconciliation, initiative, and building the institution and processes through which the parties can interact.
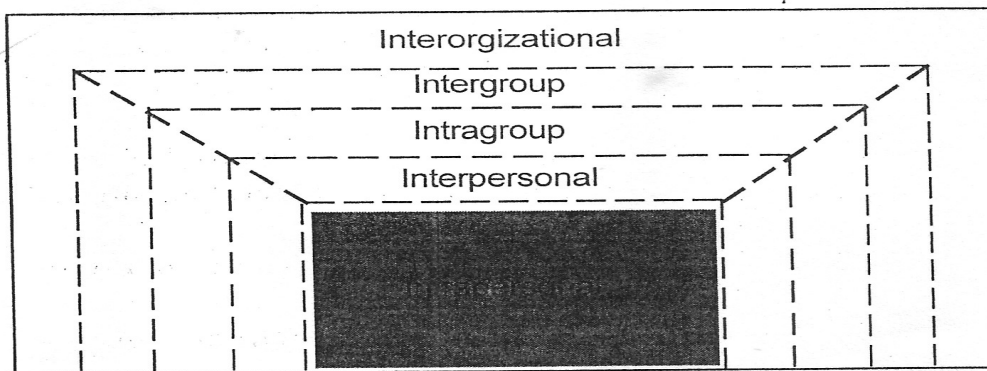
**Levels of Conflict in Nigerian Public Service**

In Nigerian Public Service there are many causes of dissatisfaction at work: low wages, delay in payment of salaries, poor physical working environment, absence of job satisfaction, denial of promotion or training opportunities, speeding up work flows, and so on. These issues have generated conflicts at different levels in the Nigerian public service particularly in government agencies, corporations and parastatals.

Against this background, there are four levels of conflict commonly found in Nigerian public service. They are:

i.    **Interpersonal conflict:** This is conflict between individual members in the public service because of differences in their goals or values. It involves two or more individuals who believe that their preferred goals, attitudes or behaviours are in opposition or incompatible.

ii.   **Intragroup conflict:** Intragroup conflict is conflict that arises within a group, team, or department. This conflict involves clashes among members of a group team or department. This usually affects the group's processes and effectiveness.

iii.  **Intergroup conflict:** Intergroup conflict is conflict between groups, teams or departments. This is the conflict or clashes among groups or departments. It is common in union-management relations. In this case, the conflict can be intense, long-lasting and costly to both the groups involved, to the institution and sometimes to the government itself.

iv.     **Interorganizational conflict:** This is a conflict that arises across organizations, ministries, p

v.      arastatals and institutions. Sometimes interogranizational conflict arises when the top management staffs in one organization feel that another organization is not behaving ethically and is threatening the well-being of certain interest groups or stakeholders. (For details see Jones and George, 2003:550-551; Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman 1995:429).



*Source:* Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman (1995:432)

**Figure 1: Diagram representing levels of conflict in organization**

**Conflict Analysis and Questioning**

Having stated the causes of conflict in Nigerian Public Service, it is deemed necessary to analyse some issues that breed conflicts generally in any organization however, with particular reference to Nigerian public service.

Anyone wishing to manage a conflict should begin by looking closely at what is really happening. When strong emotions are involved workers are often tempted to jump to conclusions before examining the interests of both sides and their own interest as well. Instead of making that common mistake, let us try to focus on these questions.

•     **Who is involved?** How many people are taking part in the conflict? How well do they understand the basic issues?

•     **What is at stake?** Do all or both sides in the dispute agree about what is really at stake? If duties and responsibilities are at stake, does everyone agree on exactly what those issues are?

- **How important is time?** Does this dispute have to be settled right away? Does one side benefit from stalling?

- **What are the tie-ins with other issues?** What relationship does this dispute have with other disputes between the individuals or groups involved? What working relationships will likely be affected by the outcome of the conflict?

The potential answers to these tempting questions will lead us to search for conflict management and resolutions in Nigerian Public Service.

**Conflict Management**

Conflict management is said to consist of interventions designed to reduce excessive conflict or in some cases, to increase insufficient conflict (Hellriegel and Slocum, 1992:580; Agulanna and Madu, 2003:139). As we have seen, conflict has many faces and is a constant challenge for top management cadres, government as well as other levels of workers who are responsible for reaching the desired goals. However, the paper will pay attention to the active management of both functional and dysfunctional conflicts and resolution in Nigerian Public Service especially Public Corporations.

According to Jones and George (2003:553) *functional conflict resolution* means that "the conflict is settled by a compromise or by collaboration between parties in conflict". They stress that *compromise* is possible when each party is concerned about its own goal accomplishment and the goal accomplishment of other party and is willing to engage in a give-and-take exchange and to make concessions until a reasonable resolution of the conflict is reached". *Collaboration* according to them is "a way of handling conflict, in which the parties to a conflict try to satisfy their goals without making any concession and instead come up with a way to resolve their differences that leave them both better off".

When the parties to a conflict are willing to cooperate with each other and through compromise or collaboration devise a solution that each finds acceptable, the public service is more likely to achieve its goals. These conflict management strategies can be used in Nigeria public service to ensure that conflict are resolved in a functional manner both at individuals and groups as whole.

## Styles of Conflict Management

Every department, ministry, parastatalsetc in Nigeria Public Service has its own style of managing their conflicts. However, the style each of them uses will have a tremendous impact on the outcome of a conflict and will determine whether it has negative or positive consequences. Lowell and Evans (2002:412) recommend the ***Thomas-Kilman Conflict Model*** as one best style in conflict management.

## The Thomas-Kilman Conflict Models

According to this Thomas Kilman conflict model, there are five styles conflict management. Each has a different level of assertiveness and cooperation.
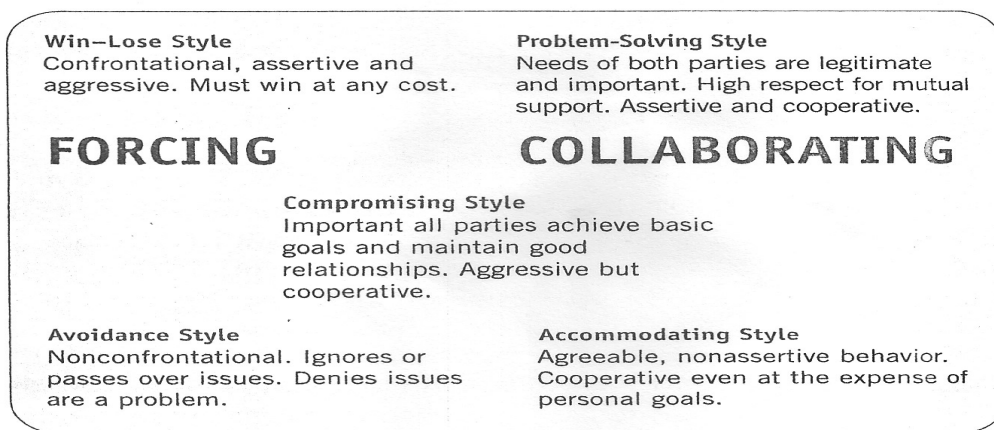


**Source:** Lowell Lamberton H. and Leslie Minor-Evans (2002:412) Human Relations Strategies for Success; 2nd Edition. New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill**Figure II**

Let us explain in briefs the various ways of managing conflict in Nigerian Public Service using the Thomas Kilman model as stated in figure II above. Both Robbins (1989), Lowell and Evans (2002) and Hellriegel et al (1995) adopted their recommended styles of conflict management from Thomas Kilman (1976). The approaches are:

**Avoidance:** This approach involves unassertive and uncooperative behaviours. Public servants in Nigeria employ this style to go away from conflict, ignore disagreement or remain neutral.

In short, avoidance means withdrawal from conflict or suppression of conflict. By avoiding conflict, workers hope that it will go away or resolve itself without any action being taken.

**Competition (forcing):** Competition is involved when one person tries to achieve his goals or advance his interest regardless of the impact on the other parties to the

conflict. The competition or forcing style is a ***win-lose*** approach in interpersonal conflict. It is a power-play approach, (Agulanna and Madu, 2003:139).

Competition involves assertive and uncooperative behaviours and those who use this style try to achieve only their own goals without concern for others. The forcing person believes that one side must lose and one side must win. Management that uses this style threatens and actually uses demotion, dismissal and other punishments to gain compliance.

**Accommodation:** This approach is the willingness of one party in a conflict to place his opponent's interests above his own. Accommodation represents cooperative and unassertive behaviours. It is an unselfish act among workers in the state service and a submission to the wishes of others. It is a self-sacrificing act.

Statements that reflect accommodating styles in conflict management according to Hellriegel et al (1995) include:

- *Conflict is best managed through the suspension of my personal goals to maintain good relationship with those whom I value.*
- *If it makes other people happy, I am all for it.*

**Collaboration:** In collaboration, the parties concerned aims at solving the problem and as clarifying their differences rather than accommodating the various points of view. They consider the full gamut of alternatives, with their similarities and differences in view-point becoming more clearly focused.

In collaboration, the solution being sought is beneficial to both parties and hence, this approach is regarded as a ***win-win*** approach to resolving conflicts. Hellriegel et al (1995) assert that people who use the collaboration approach tend to have the following characteristics:

i.     They see conflict as natural, helpful and even leading to a more creative solution if handled properly;

ii.    They exhibit trust in and candour with others;

iii.   They recognize that when conflict is resolved to the satisfaction of all, commitment to the solution is likely.

**Compromise:** In compromise, there is no winner or loser. It is a style based on give-and-take. It typically involves a series of concessions and is widely adopted and used

as a mechanism for resolving conflicts in Nigeria Public Service. The differentiating factor in compromise is that each party is required to give up something and neither side seen itself as totally successful.

Hence compromise approach is regarded as *a lose-lose* style (for details see Thomas, 1977:487 and Lowell and Evans, 2003:412-414).

**Qualities of an Effective Conflict Resolution Method**

A good method for resolving conflict in Nigeria Public Service which can result in better overall moral, communication, and commitments. Therefore, an effective strategy for conflict resolution include:

1. **Clarifies Interest**

- By encouraging both sides to examine the real best interests of their position.

- By aiding both sides in exploring what interests they have in common.

- By communicating each sides interests to the other without unduly exposing anyone to manipulation.

2. **Builds a Good Working Relationship**

- By giving both sides the chance to deal with their differences.

- By fostering the type of relationship both sides would have wanted if it were not for the dispute.

- By making it easier for both sides to deal with each other next time.

3. **Generates Good Options**

- By spurning both parties to brainstorm many options before evaluating them and choosing which one to use.

- By encouraging both sides to come up with creative solutions that benefit everyone.

4. **Is Seen by Both Sides as Legitimate**

- By not causing one side to give up more power than the other.

- By not being seen as going against public interest

- By instilling in both sides a sense that the solution will be fair and equitable.

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## 5. Improves Communication

- By encouraging the questioning and testing of underlying assumptions.

- By aiding the understanding and discussion of differing perceptions of reality

- By establishing effective two-way communication between decision makers.

## 6. Leads to Wise Commitment

- By enabling both sides to devise commitments that are realistic, useful, and not likely to lead to future confrontations.

- By positioning both sides with recourse if the agreement breaks down or is not honoured.**Source:** Ertel, (1991: 32).

The paper observes that conflict resolution is sometimes confused with conflict management. Both, according to Zartman (2000) and Onu (2009), are necessary to achieve a positive result (in Nigerian Public Service).

Conflict as stated earlier is an inevitable reality of social existence, and they occur even in the best human societies. They cannot be stopped but they can be reduced, managed and transformed positively by the parties in the conflict, sometimes with the help of third parties.

The paper also observes that a set of formalized rules and procedures specify clearly how group members should interact. It is the simplest and the least costly of the methods for managing intergroup conflict in Nigeria public service. This understanding of conflict affords us a great opportunity to develop certain strategies and actions for possible reduction and management of conflict in Nigeria Public Service.

**Potential Benefits of Conflict**

It is widely believed that conflict at any level described in this paper is counterproductive, and that all should make strenuous efforts to eliminate it. There are, however, some advantages according to Torrington and Hall (1987:441-442). They are:

**Clearing the Air:** Many people feel that a conflict situation is improved by gathering bad feelings "off their chests" and bring the matter into open. Sometimes combatants feel closer together as a result.

**Introducing new rules:** Public service has a number of rules that govern it. Formal rules that define unfair dismal and the rate of pay for various jobs, as well as informal

rules like modes of address. Management/union conflict is usually about a disagreement over the rules and the bargain that is struck produces a new rule: a new rate of pay, a new employment practice or whatever. It can be the only way of achieving that particular change, and it is a very authoritative source of rule-making because of the participation in its creation.

**Modifying the goals:** The goals that management set can be modified as a result of conflict with others. Ways in which their goals will be unpopular or difficult to implement may be seen for the first time and modifications made early instead often later. A greater range and diversity of views are brought to bear on a particular matter so that the capacity for innovation is enhanced.

**Understanding of respective positions:** Combatants will come to a better understanding of their position on the issue being debated because of their need to articulate it, set it forth, develop supporting arguments and then defend those arguments against criticism. This enables them to see more clearly what, why they want it and how justifiable it is. In challenging the position of the other party, they will come to a clearer understanding of where they stand, and why.

**Potential Draw Backs of Conflict**

The above advantages may not be sufficient to balance the potential drawbacks which include the following:

**Waste of time and energy:** Conflict and the ensuing negotiations take a great deal of time and energy. Conflict can become attractive when over-personalized, and individuals become obsessed with the conflict itself rather than what it is about. Negotiation takes a lot longer than simple management decree.

**Emotional stress for participants:** People vary in the type of organizational stress to which they are prone. The need to be involved in negotiation is a source of stress which some people find very taxing, while others find it stimulating.

**Organizational stress:** Accommodating conflict often causes some inefficiency through the paraphernalia that can accompany it: striking, working to rule, working without enthusiasm, withdrawing co-operation, or the simple delay, caused by protracted negotiation.

**Risks:** Engaging in negotiation may be necessary as the only way to cope with a conflictual situation, but there is the risk of stirring up a hornet's nest, when conflict is brought to the surface it may be resolved or accommodated, or if the situation is handled badly it may get worse.

**Worsening communications:** The quality and amount of communication is impaired. Those involved are concerned more to confirm their own viewpoint than to convey understanding, and there are perceptual distortions like stereotyping and cognitive dissonance. The attitudes behind the communications may also become inappropriate as there are greater feelings of hostility and attempts to score off others.

**Findings**

The paper finds that there are conflict issues caused by the specific behaviours of those identified as ***problem people.*** Such people are those who for one reason or another are not living up to the expectations of the state service. Some are involved with alcohol or drug abuse. Others are simply people who do not like to do things the way other people do them.

High conformers are usually easy to work with in Nigerian public service. Such workers like to fit in, work well in teams, and are generally friendly toward policies and group norms. ***Non-conformers*** are just the opposite. Such public servants think independently, solve problem creatively, and often cause some conflict in the process. Working with and managing this type of personality conflict according to Lowell and Evans (2002:416), requires a special capacity for patience and good will.

There are ***envious people*** in Nigerian Public Service. Envy is wanting, what another person has, to the extent of feeling ill will toward the person who has it. Envious coworkers cause conflict that can be damaging to morale and productivity and can spread through department or division like a virus.

There are ***passive and unresponsive people*** in Nigerian public service. Passive people have a variety of different-reasons for their behaviour. Some workers use their absence of response as a tool of intimidation; a method of calculated aggression. Others remain quiet because they are afraid of sounding foolish. Still others keep quiet to escape responsibility. Words give a concrete reality to thoughts and feelings.

Unresponsive workers are sometimes the most difficult people to work with because on the surface they often seem agreeable and even easygoing. These personality types react to any confrontation or potential conflict by shutting down.

The use of hierarchy becomes the approach to manage intergroup conflict if the application of rule and procedures we observed earlier cannot do the job. In the findings, the paper identified that coordination is achieved by referring a problem to a common superior higher in the public service ladder.

For example, if two heads of department in the Federal Ministry of Education cannot agree on a matter, they can refer it to the permanent secretary.

## Conclusion

Conflict in any human enterprise is inevitable. Although, conflict is always present in the workplace like Nigerian Public Service, it is not always negative. Conflict can be seen from this paper perspective either as functional or dysfunctional when classified by the actors in the conflict in the public service. The paper identified four levels such as interpersonal conflict, intergroup conflict, inter-organizational conflict and intragroup conflict. Conflict in Nigerian public service usually springs from one of these sources.

The paper suggests the use of integrative method of conflict management. It also discovers how to negotiate a win-win solution to conflicts as well as applying and use the Thomas Kilman conflict model in conflict management and finally deal effectively with personality types in Nigerian Public Service that creates destructive conflict. Different strategies would be used for non-conformers and envious people as passive and non-responsive workers in the state service system.

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## Recommendations

Arising from our investigations the following recommendations are proffered.

i.      In the event of any conflict, effort should be made to handle it by compromise or collaboration or integration.

ii.     Negotiators to a conflict should analyze the ways in which parties to a conflict different from each other in order to apply the appropriate strategy for resolving it.

iii.    Anaysis of the extent to which conflict generates is necessary in order to find out if the conflict is due to a faulty or organizational structure or dysfunctional culture in Nigerian public service.

iv.     Conflict prevention is the best way to manage conflict in the Nigeria public service; problem that will generate into conflict is better solved before it becomes a conflict.

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