

**Special
Edition**



GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN EDUCATION

SPECIAL EDITION IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR ADEYEMI IBUKUNOLUWA IDOWU

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE	PAGE
FOREWORD	iii
PREFACE	vi
LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS	viii
CHAPTER ONE	
Guidance and Counselling: An Overview	
• Prof. Adeyemi I. Idowu	1-18
CHAPTER TWO	
Adolescence and Adolescent Problems in Schools	
• Prof. Alfred A. Adegoke	19-31
CHAPTER THREE	
The need for Guidance and Counselling in the Nigerian Educational System	
• Prof. Sunday H. Umoh	32-43
CHAPTER FOUR	
Developing effective Study Habits among students in Schools	
• Dr. (Mrs.) Falilat A. Okesina & Dr. (Mrs.) Mulikat L. A. Mustapha	44-55
CHAPTER FIVE	
The School Guidance Programme	
• Prof. Bolaji S. Adana	56-71
CHAPTER SIX	
Organization and Administration of School Guidance Programme	
• Dr. (Mrs.) Aminat A. Odebode & Mr. L. O. Adegboyega	72-86
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Relationship between the Counsellor and other School Guidance Personnel	
• Dr. Emmanuel A. Adeoye	87-100
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Appraisal of Students: Tests and Non-test Devices	
• Dr. (Mrs.) Omolara F. Akinpelu	101-123
CHAPTER NINE	
Continuous Assessment Procedures in Schools	
• Prof. Sunday H. Umoh & Mrs. Mariam B. Alwajud-Adewusi	124-136

CHAPTER TEN

- Learning Disabilities and Learning Problems in Schools 137-154
- Dr. (Mrs.) Mary O. Esere

CHAPTER ELEVEN

- Managing Handicapped Students in Schools 155-179
- Dr. (Mrs.) Omolara F. Akinpelu

CHAPTER TWELVE

- Career Guidance and Students' Choice of Subjects 180-198
- Prof. Joshua A. Omotosho

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

- Elementary School Counselling 199-214
- Prof. (Mrs.) Irene A. Durosaro

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

- Modifying Maladaptive Behaviour in Schools 215-233
- Prof. John B. Asonibare

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

- Drug Abuse Counselling in Schools
- Dr. (Mrs.) Foluke N. Bolu-Steve & Mrs. Adenike Adeboye 234-248

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

- Marital and Family Counselling 249-268
- Dr. Abdulrazaq O. Oniye

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

- Group Counselling in Schools 269-282
- Dr. Samuel K. Ajiboye & Mr. David O. Adebayo

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

- Placement and Follow-up Programmes in Schools 283-296
- Prof. Joshua A. Omotosho

CHAPTER NINETEEN

- Counselling Practicum in Schools 297-305
- Prof. (Mrs.) Mary G. Fajonyomi

CHAPTER TWENTY

- Professionalization of Counselling in Nigeria 306-323
- Prof. Lasiele A. Yahaya

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

- Managing the Aged and Disabled Persons 324-335
- Dr. Agubosi L. Akunna & Dr. Ajokpaniovo Micheal

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

- Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Workplace 330-349
- Dr. Alfred O. Awoyemi and Mr. Kabiru Adegunju

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

- Counselling in Out-Of- School Settings 350-359
- Dr. Shuaib A. Muhammed & Dr. Oyalakin K. Ogungbade

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN WORKPLACE

By
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Introduction

It is generally believed that conflict is synonymous with negativity. Also, its inevitability as a result of human differential background is the more reason organizations need to bring people together and work cooperatively for the success of the organization. Disputes between employees are inevitable neither but if left unresolved; they can disrupt the organization productivity, sap morale and even cause some good employees to quit.

Understanding the reasons behind workplace conflicts can help Human Resources Professionals tackle problems before-or after-a conflict turns into a face-off between departments that refuse to work together or a screaming match between colleagues. A good place to start is by realizing that, even though people may shy away from it, conflict is actually normal and healthy. In fact, many believe it is a vital ingredient to organizational success. Experts have found that the most effective teams are those in which members feel safe enough to disagree with one another; a culture where dissent is allowed, or even encouraged, can spur innovation, diversity of thought and better decision-making. Experts tried to figure out which conflicts are healthy and which ones are harmful. Unhealthy conflict is when it becomes personal and emotional whereby your judgment gets clouded. By contrast, good conflict can lead to higher levels of trust. If people see that it is good and okay to challenge the boss, they can question the status quo, which is better for the organization.

Meaning and Concept of Conflict

There are actually a lot of ways to define conflict due to how it is used in many areas. Hence, to keep it simple for the layman, conflict pertains to the opposing ideas and actions of different entities, thus resulting in an antagonistic state. Conflict is an inevitable part of life. Each of us possesses our own opinions, ideas and sets of beliefs. We have our own ways of looking at things and we act according to what we think is proper. Hence, we often find ourselves in conflict in different

scenarios; may it involve other individuals, groups of people, or a struggle within our own selves. Consequently, conflict influences our actions and decisions in one way or the other. Conflict is generally believed to be a disagreement between two or more people who have differences in goals or methods for dealing with a normal, natural or necessary situation. Otite (2001) explained conflict as a conscious act involving personal or group contact and communication. Arising from the different light shed by several well-known scholars in the field of conflict, it is noted that some of the noticeable social spheres in which conflicts are endemic are the industrial organizations, factories and bureaucratic set ups. Class and workers - employers' conflicts are well known perennial events which labour unions and employers associations have encountered. With reference to organizations, workplace conflict is the disagreement between employees, departments, managers, groups of people within the business entity. Disagreement may arise due to differences in points of view or ideology. Daphne, (2018) opined that, regardless of the type or level of conflict in an organization, a number of major functional and dysfunctional consequences can arise such as;

- i. Change
- ii. Goal congruence
- iii. Innovation
- iv. Sub-optimization
- v. Waste of time and resources.

It is a good thing to realize that conflict is a normal and healthy phenomenon. To many, conflict is a vital ingredient to organizational success. Tamara (2015) observed that the most effective teams are those in which members feel safe enough to disagree with one another. A culture where dissent is allowed, or even encouraged, can spur innovation, diversity of thought and better decision-making. Conflict portrays the way you have been doing things is not the way it is going to be ever. The challenge of peace practitioners is in figuring out which conflicts are healthy and which ones are harmful.

Conflicting Priorities: Some conflicts are over resources such as budgets, others excerpt from incompatible goals or reactions to structural change in the company. Many fights over resources can be avoided when people perceive that they are operating in an environment of plenty in the other words, where everyone has what they need to operate effectively. The key is creating the perception of abundance. Thinking creatively is one way to do this. For instance, if two departments are fighting over a small training budget, human resources might offer to conduct in-house training so both can benefit.

Conflicting Perspectives: In an increasingly global and diverse workplace, sometimes the heat of the problem is that people differ from each other in age, gender, ethnicity or personality type. For example, Marcia (2014) stated that an organizational psychiatrist witnessed how diverse perspectives colour people's perceptions, she asked leaders at a global company to participate in an activity in which they were blindfolded and asked to describe the puzzle pieces in their hands. She observed as people gave descriptions so different that they could not figure out while they were holding the same piece.

Conflicting Assumptions: One of the biggest drives of conflict is when people misinterpret others' intentions. The introvert who stays quiet during an entire meeting and brings up an issue at the end is not trying to sabotage a co-worker but that behaviour simply aligns with his personality type. A change in seating arrangements in the office is not a personal, just a reorganization that may not have been thought through.

Conflicting Tolerance: It is generally believe that employees have differing levels of comfort with accommodating conflict. Too often, discomfort causes conflicts to be avoided entirely and that is not too good for organization success. Conflict avoidance can lead to real blow-ups where persons cannot hold it in any longer.

Characteristics of Conflict

- *Conflict is a Process:* Conflict occurs in layers. First layer is always misunderstanding. The other layers are differences of values, differences of viewpoint, differences of interest, and interpersonal differences. It is also called a process because it begins with one party perceiving the other to oppose or negatively affect its interests and ends with competing, collaborating, compromising or avoiding.
- *Conflict is Inevitable:* Conflict exists everywhere. No two persons are the same. Hence they may have individual differences. And the differences may be because of values or otherwise, lead to conflict. Although inevitable, conflict can be minimized, diverted and/or resolved. Conflict develops because we are dealing with people's lives, jobs, children, pride, self-concept, ego and sense of mission. Conflict is inevitable and often good, for example, good teams always go through a form, storm, norm and perform period.
- *Conflict is a Normal Part of Life:* Individuals, groups, and organizations have unlimited needs and different values but limited resources. Thus, this incompatibility is bound to lead to conflicts. The conflict is not a problem, but if it is poorly managed then it becomes a problem.

- **Perception:** It must be perceived by the parties to it, otherwise it does not exist. In interpersonal interaction, perception is more important than reality. What we perceive and think affects our behaviour, attitudes, and communication.
- **Opposition:** One party to the conflict must be perceiving or doing something the other party does not like or want.
- **Interdependence and Interaction:** There must be some kind of real or perceived interdependence. Without interdependence there can be no interaction. Conflict occurs only when some kind of interaction takes place.
- **Everyone is inflicted with Conflict:** Conflict may occur within an individual, between two or more individuals, groups or between organizations.
- **Conflict is not One-dimensional:** It comes into different ways in accordance with degree of seriousness and capacity. At times, it may improve even a difficult situation.

The 5 Common Myths about Workplace Conflict

Conflict is always negative and should be avoided at work: This is quiet contrary, when problems are hidden or masked, they are not solved. They fester and become bigger problems. In this regard, conflict has to be acknowledged and addressed.

Different people are almost always the cause of conflict: Psychological problem is certainly a contributing cause of conflict, failing to set realistic expectations is a big contributor. If people (staff) do not understand what the organization, their manager or their teammates expect, confusion and conflict can result.

The problem at the root of a conflict is usually obvious: In resolving any conflict, there is need to identify the source or root cause of the conflict. Getting to the source involves dialogue, conversations and some investigative work.

Conflict ensures winners and losers: The general belief is that conflict bring about a winner and a loser. The need, interest and position of either party happen to be the focus in negotiation. Focusing on interest, rather than position is more effective. This resolution of a conflict needs to be tailored to a point where both parties will eventually have a win-win situation.

Fixing the problems, Manager's responsibility: Resolution of conflict is the responsibility of the entire employee including the manager. Each and every employee has unique responsibility when conflict arises. Therefore, employee needs the freedom and authority to solve problems that relate to their work.

Types of Conflict

When you think of the different **types of conflict**, you might instantly think of the ones referred to in literature, especially in fiction. They can be applied to real life, of course. However, there are four **types of conflict** which are easily identifiable in our contemporary times:

- **Interpersonal conflict:** conflict between two individuals. This occurs typically due to how people are different from one another. We have varied personalities which usually results to incompatible choices and opinions. Apparently, it is a natural occurrence which can eventually help in personal growth or developing one's relationships with others. In addition, coming up with adjustments is necessary for managing this type of conflict.
- **Intrapersonal conflict** occurs within an individual. The experience takes place in the person's mind. Hence, it is a type of conflict that is psychological, involving the individual's thoughts, values, principles and emotions. Intrapersonal conflict may come in different scales, from the simpler mundane ones like deciding whether or not to go organic for lunch to ones that can affect major decisions such as choosing a career path. Furthermore, this type of conflict can be quite difficult to handle if one finds it hard to decipher inner struggles. It leads to restlessness and uneasiness, or can even cause depression. In such occasions, it would be best to seek a way to let go of the anxiety through communicating with other people. Eventually, when find out of the situation, one can become more empowered as a person. Thus, the experience evoked a positive change which will help one's own personal growth.
- **Intra-group conflict:** is a type of conflict that happens among individuals within a team. The incompatibilities and misunderstandings among these individuals lead to an intra-group conflict. It arises from interpersonal disagreements (e.g. team members having different personalities which may lead to tension) or differences in views and ideas (e.g. in a presentation, members of the team might find the notions presented by the one presiding to be erroneous due to their differences in opinion). Within a team, conflict can be helpful in coming up with decisions which will eventually allow them to reach their objectives as a team. However, if the degree of conflict disrupts harmony among the members, then some serious guidance from a different party will be needed for it to be settled.
- **Intergroup conflict:** takes place when a misunderstanding arises between/among different teams within an organization. For instance, the sales department of an organization may come in conflict with the customer support department. This may be due to the varied sets of goals and interests of these different groups.

In addition, competition also contributes for intergroup conflict to arise. There are other factors which may fuel this type of conflict. Some of these factors may include a rivalry in resources or the boundaries set by a group to others which establishes their own identity as a team.

Conflict may seem to be a problem to some, but this is not how conflict should be perceived. As a matter of fact, it could be an opportunity for growth and can be an effective means of opening up among groups or individuals. However, when conflict begins to draw back productivity and gives rise to more conflicts, then conflict management would be needed to come up with possible solutions.

The Main Sources of Conflict

Misinformation: Conflict can arise when one party or individual feels it lack information on a particular important issue or there is misinformation on an issue. In a workplace, if employees are continually experiencing changes that they were not informed about or if there are decisions been taken that the staff feels they should be involved in, this can bring about conflicts between employers and employees.

Scarce Resources: Resources are basically natural or unnatural endowment such as money, land, power, property, sex, etc. Resources are often not enough to go round. Therefore, lack of or inadequate resources often result to conflict among the people. In workplace, lack of resource needs to do their job effectively can lead to conflict if the management is not showing any conflict prevention or management strategies.

Values: These are specific ways of life to which a prime importance is attached as individual or groups, we all have our value system which we cherish and protect. Any violation of such value system could result into conflict. Such value system could be our religious belief, our ethnic affiliation, custom and traditions, ethical issues such as abortion, bribery and corruption etc. Such values are considered as non-negotiable by individuals holding them. Conflict often arises from the clash of ideas, belief and belief system. When people of one faith and the other are at the throat of one another indicates the contradicting value of the conflicting parties. In workplace, the value of employees differs within the workplace. A difference in value is seen clearly when generational gap is present. Young workers may possess different workplace values than older workers. The difference in value is not necessarily the cause of employee conflict in the workplace, but the failure to accept the differences. When employees fail to accept the differences, co-workers may insult each other's character and

experiences. When insult occurs, the conflict intensifies until the right solution is offered and accepted (Rise, 2017).

Psychological Needs: The way each and every individual characteristically behave can generate conflict. This psychological disposition of individual towards oneself or others could in fact bring about conflict. Such disposition could be genetic or environmental factor. For instance, a psychological unstable individual could cause conflict because such individual may not be able to manage his/her emotion.

Personal Relationship: This can lead to conflict in workplace environment. It is observed that some employees bring stress from their home life to workplace and this can cause conflicts among co-workers and managers. It was suggested that employees should accept and understand personal differences of other co-workers in order to avoid racism, religious bigotry and ethnicity conflicts (George, 2017).

Incompetent Management: This can create or generate conflict in the workplace. For instance, a manager who does not understand the job schedule of his subordinates, or is uninformed about the job requirements that each employee is supposed to perform can be responsible for tension and conflict in the workplace. Also employees who lose confidence in managers due to inconsistent decisions or bad planning could be a source of conflict (George, 2017).

Sources of Conflict in an Organization/Workplace

Workplace sources of conflict are those issues or factors that affect or cause goals to differ. These organization events create or produce much bigger problems for the growth of the workplace. The sources are:

- i. Goal incompatibility and differentiation
- ii. Interdependence
- iii. Uncertainty and resource scarcity
- iv. Reward system

Goal incompatibility and differentiation: Organizational sources of conflict occur when department are differentiated in their goals. For instance, the Research and Development Team at the university might be instructed to come up with the best new instructional materials for students offering computer science in secondary schools. The research team might come up with something fantastic and interesting. Then, the producer team at the educational technology decided to design the most economical means possible. They start to make adjustment to the design, saving money by using less expensive materials than what were recommended by the research and development team; conflict arises.

Departments within the organization feel like they are working at cross purposes, even though they are both operating under the assumption that their choices are best for the company.

Interdependence: Interdependence describes the extent to which employees depend on other employees to get their work done. For instance, the communication department is equipped to provide clear instruction on the product by the production department. If the details are not provided, the communication department cannot reach their goal of getting those speaking points out on time for their front line staff to deal with questions.

Uncertainty and resource scarcity: Uncertainty makes it difficult for managers to set clear directions and lack of clear direction leads to conflict. Resource scarcity could also leads to conflict in an organization. Inadequate materials and supplies for some workers and surplus of same for others is enough to be source of conflict.

Reward system: An organization reward system can be a source of conflict, particularly if the organization set up a win-lose environment for employee rewards. For instance, an organization might set a standard where only a certain percent of the employees can achieve the top ranking for raises and bonuses. This uncommon standard practice creates unhealthy competition within its employee ranks. Competitions of this nature often create conflicts.

Effects of Conflict on Productivity in Workplace

With emphasis on organizations, conflict is the disagreement between employees departments, managers or group of people within the business entity. According to Miranda (2019), as organizations strive to achieve their goals, they are often met with challenges they must overcome as a team. Challenges leave room for conflict among members, other organizations, communities and other parties involved in the organization. Disagreement may arise due to difference in points of view, ideology or unhealthy competition that may view other position or negative consequences. Therefore, the effects of conflict within an organization can be positive and negative.

Some negative effects of conflict in an Organization include:

Distraction on Primary Purposes: Conflict can distract individuals and groups from their primary purposes, leaving them with less time and resources for other activities. When a conflict involves the use of "heavy contentious tactics," it can cause the individuals or groups involved in the conflict as well as individuals or groups not involved in the conflict to divert time and resources away from other needs.

Decrease in Productivity: When an organization spends much of its time dealing with conflict, members take time away from focusing on the core goals they are tasked with achieving. Conflict causes members to focus less on the project at hand and more on gossiping about conflict or venting about frustrations. As a result, organizations can lose money, donors and access to essential resources (Miranda, 2019).

Members Leave Organization: Organization members who are increasingly frustrated with the level of conflict within an organization may decide to end their membership. This is especially detrimental when members are a part of the executive board or heads of committees. Once members begin to leave, the organization has to recruit new members and appoint acting board members. In extreme cases, where several members leave or an executive board steps down, organizations risk dissolution (Mayhew, 2018).

Psychological Problem: Conflict can have both short term and long term effects on the physical and psychological health of the individuals involved in or affected by the conflict. According to Miranda (2019), conflict within an organization can cause members to become frustrated if they feel as if there is no solution in sight, or if they feel that their opinions go unrecognized by other group members. As a result, members become stressed, which adversely affects their professional and personal lives. Organization members may have sleeping problems, loss of appetite, headaches and become unapproachable. In some instances, organization members may avoid meetings to prevent themselves from experiencing stress and stress-related symptoms. The psychological consequences can also be deep trauma and diminished coping mechanisms.

Dissolution Risk: Organization members who are increasingly frustrated with the level of conflict within an organization may decide to end their membership. This is especially detrimental when members are part of the executive board or heads of committees. Once members begin to leave, the organization has to recruit new members and appoint acting board members. In extreme cases, where several members leave or an executive board steps down, organizations risk dissolution.

Violence: When conflict escalates without mediation, intense situations may arise between organization members. This may cause violence among members in an organization resulting in legal problems for members and possibly the organization.

Some positive effects of conflict in an Organization include:

Conflict Improves Future Communication: Conflict can bring group members together and help them learn more about each other. From learning each other's opinions on topics relevant to the organization's growth to understanding each member's preferred

communication style, conflict within an organization can give members the tools necessary to easily solve conflicts in the future.

Conflict promotes Unity and Cooperation: Conflict strengthens intragroup unity by providing an outlet for group members to discuss and negotiate their interests within the group. Without intragroup conflict, the health of the group typically declines. Conflict between groups produces intra-group unity and cooperation as the conflict provides the opportunity for increased intra-group cooperation while working towards the group's common goal for the conflict's outcome.

Change: Conflicts accept changes in an organization, especially in small business, where it is easy to formulate and implement new policies in the organization. In cases of extreme conflict the organization may conduct a complete overhaul of its leadership, bringing in managers with fresh ideas. Conflict contributes to social change by ensuring both interpersonal and intergroup dynamics remain fresh and reflective of current interests and realities.

Decision Making: Conflict serves to discourage premature group decision making, forcing participants in the decision-making process to explore the issues and interests at stake.

Goal Congruence: Proper review of the goals/objectives of the business to meet the needs of the conflicting parties may result into achievement of goal congruence and coherence in operations. Competition for resources is a major conflict due to different interest. Therefore, conflict may force the organization leadership to realign its objectives towards common goals in order to foster teamwork among the conflicting parties.

Strategies of Conflict Resolution

Otite (2001) observed that conflict resolution, transformation and management, the collective bargaining, corporate strategies and trade union management are broad confrontational areas of social relations engaging the attention of labour law experts and specialists in industrial relation. He stressed that, in order to promote productivity, industrial peer, stable fruitful activities in government or public and private sectors of the political economy, institutional arrangements are provided to reduce or manage conflicts ensuring between individuals occupational groups, political economic associations and unions, contesting divergent views and goals.

Conflict resolution according to Otite (2001) is essentially aimed at intervention to change or facilitate the course of a conflict. He identified other problem-solving techniques as "problem-solving workshops", interactive problem-solving", "third party consultation", or "collaborative analytical problem-solving". Thus, conflict resolution provides an opportunity to interact with the parties in dispute, with the

mind of reducing the scope, intensity and effects of conflict. Conflict resolution exercises during formal and informal meetings permits a reassessment of views and claims as a basis for finding options to crises and to divergent points of view. The problem-solving techniques organized to tackle conflicts are meant to alter the perceptions, images and attitude of the parties in conflict and widen their range of options.

Kenneth and Ralph (2019) developed five conflict resolution strategies that people use to handle conflict, including avoiding, defeating, compromising, accommodating, and collaborating. This is based on the assumption that people choose how cooperative and how assertive to be in a conflict. It suggests that everyone has preferred ways of responding to conflict, but most people use all methods under various circumstances. It is helpful to understand the five methods in order to move a group forward.

Avoiding

Avoiding is when people just ignore or withdraw from the conflict. They choose this method when the discomfort of confrontation exceeds the potential reward of resolution of the conflict. While this might seem easy to accommodate for the facilitator, people are not really contributing anything of value to the conversation and may be withholding worthwhile ideas. When conflict is avoided, nothing is resolved.

Competing

Competing is used by people who go into a conflict planning to win. They are assertive and not cooperative. This method is characterized by the assumption that one side wins and everyone else loses. It does not allow room for diverse perspectives into a well-informed total picture. Competing might work in sports or war, but it is rarely a good strategy for group problem solving.

Accommodating

Accommodating is a strategy where one party gives in to the wishes or demands of another. They're being cooperative but not assertive. This may appear to be a gracious way to give in when one figures out s/he has been wrong about an argument. It's less helpful when one party accommodates another merely to preserve harmony or to avoid disruption. Like avoidance, it can result in unresolved issues. Too much accommodation can result in groups where the most assertive parties commandeer the process and take control of most conversations.

Collaborating

Collaborating is the method used when people are both assertive and cooperative. A group may learn to allow each participant to make a contribution with the possibility of co-creating a shared solution that everyone can support. A great way to collaborate and overcome conflict is to reach out and touch them.

Compromising

Another strategy is compromising, where participants are partially assertive and cooperative. The concept is that everyone gives up a little bit of what they want, and no one gets everything they want. The perception of the best outcome when working by compromise is that which "splits the difference." Compromise is perceived as being fair, even if no one is particularly happy with the final outcome.

Workplace Conflict Resolution Techniques

Conflict resolution is a necessary component of any workplace and there is need for those in leadership position to be skilled in conflict resolution techniques.

The following conflict resolution techniques help resolve issues in workplaces.

1. *Listen, and then speak out:* Listening to an employee's issue is the first and most important. All parties should be listening to, completely understand the nature of the conflict and then start agreeably solution.
2. *Gather the Group:* There is need to arrange a meeting with all involved parties to resolve the issue. It is a great opportunity to hear all sides and gain a full understanding of the conflict. Having a group meeting can expedite a resolution that will satisfy everyone.
3. *Third Party Intervention:* The mediator should be impartial; there shouldn't be any sort of opinion that favours one person/party over another. He should access that situation from all sides to come up with a win-win solution.
4. *Instant Approach:* The conflict should be addressed instantly or immediately it is discovered. Otherwise, the situation could escalate and degenerate and this could affect employee performance. There is need for careful consideration in order not

to address the situation too quickly as the decision will directly affects the demeanour and performance of the staff.

5. *Teamwork*: Success of any workplace project required teamwork. There is need for encouragement and motivation of the entire staff. This is one of the most effective conflict resolution techniques and it will make the employees think about the importance of working in a team.
6. *Giving of Award*: The power of encouragement and motivation can be multiplied when it is extended to recognize those who are modelling the teamwork and cooperation that is desired within any conflict (Bisk, 2017).

Conclusion

From the foregoing, conflict is a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affects something that the first party cares about. Conflicts are natural in all walks of daily life - both at workplace and home. Thus, conflict is ever present as both pleasant and frustrating. Conflict exists everywhere. No two persons are the same. Hence, they may have individual differences. And the differences may be because of values or otherwise which may lead to conflict. Although, conflict is inevitable but can be minimized or resolved. However, when conflict begins to draws back productivity and gives rise to more conflicts, then conflict resolution would be needed to prevent escalation and brings about maximum productivity.

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Selected Questions for Practice

What is conflict? Explain four types of conflict in workplace.

Identify and explain major characteristics of conflict in workplace?

Workplace sources of conflict are those issues or factors that affect or cause goals to differ.- Discuss.

Explain five major myths about workplace conflict.

Elucidate five conflict resolution techniques that can help resolve issues in workplace?

How can we manage employee's conflict and improve workplace communication environment and team productivity?