

The Role of Conflict Management in Improving Relationships at Work: The Moderating Effect of Communication

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Abstract

Conflicts in organisations occur when interests and activities of individuals or groups within an organization confront each other and prevent attainment of one party's objectives. When conflicts are not well managed, employees become aggrieved and tend to behave in a way that does not promote good relationships among employees for the attainment of organisational goals. By means of providing empirical justification for these assertions, the study sought to establish the relationships that exist among conflict management, communication and relationships at work. Employing the cross-sectional survey approach, 132 employees were sampled from two major manufacturing companies in Ghana namely, Interplast Company Limited and Duraplast Company Limited. The study variables (Conflict management, communication and relationships at work) were measured using scales from the fourteen dimensions of the Organisational Climate Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Furnham and Godstein (2007). The Karl Pearson's Product moment correlation analysis was used to establish the relationships among the study variables whereas the hierarchical regression analysis was used to find the causal and moderating effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The results confirmed that there exist a significant positive relationship between conflict management and communication at the workplace ($r = .469$, $p < .01$). The findings of the study supported the assertion that there is a significant positive relationship between communication and relationships at work ($r = .369$, $p < .01$). The study also revealed that there is significant positive relationship between conflict management and relationships at work ($r = .582$, $p < .01$). Finally, the findings supports the assertion that communication will moderate the relationship between conflict management and relationships at work. Management within the manufacturing companies must acknowledge the fact that when conflict are properly managed using appropriate communication channels, there is always trust between them and employees which further helps to save time on misunderstanding and improve upon relationships at work. The findings of this study will provide guidelines for policy, best practice and strategies for managing conflicts and improving relationships among employees. Additionally, the findings will provide feedback which will be necessary for improvement and development of employees in the manufacturing and other sectors of the economy.

Keywords: conflicts, conflict management, communication, relationships at work, manufacturing sector

INTRODUCTION

Comprehension of conflict management among employees at workplace is one of the essential though neglected areas within organizations. Lazarus (1991) is of the view that, despite thousands of years of work by scholars on the role of conflict among co-workers in organizations, the scientific study of conflict within academia is a relatively recent phenomenon. Conflict is regarded as the presence of discord that occurs when the goals, interests or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible and frustrate each other's

attempting to achieve objectives (Kazimoto, 2013). Thus conflict is unavoidable part of organizational life since the purpose of diverse stakeholders such as managers and staffs are often unharmonious. Undoubtedly, within every human relation where there is competition of jobs, resources, power, recognition and security conflict is always present (Adomi & Anie, 2005).

Conflict arises through the communication of a variety of issues including differences of opinion, procedural problems, and disagreements over approaches to work oriented tasks (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000). Independent of the source, conflict has a value in promoting organizational change and conflict management is vital to the efficiency and effectiveness of every organization (Putnam, 1988; Putnam & Poole, 1987).

According to Chen and Starosta (1997) increased cultural diversity in different settings calls for abilities to adapt to the unfamiliar environment to learn to work and live productively with people from different cultural backgrounds. Hence, in order to improve employees' relationship in the face of conflict, communication surfaces as an essential tool to use for employees to understand these differences. Song, Dryer, and Thieme (2006) are of the view that, organizational conflict munches up to 20 percent of employee time. Similarly, conflict significantly affects employee morale, increase turnover and litigation, which affects the prosperity of a company, either constructively or destructively (Lang, 2009). Most importantly, when there are difficulties in communication once conflict occurs between employees at work, it turns to break personal and professional relationships, and reduces effectiveness, because it produces tension and distracts team members from performing the task (Wall & Callister, 1995). Likewise, Parker (1976) affirms that if conflicts occur and are not managed properly through communication, it will lead to delays of work, disinterest and lack of action and in extreme cases it might lead to complete breakdown of the group.

Copious studies in conflict management have focused on management of conflicts in societies (Kazimoto, 2013; Chen & Starosta, 1997; Parker, 1976; Lazarus 1991; Nutt (1998) other than organisation centered conflicts (Friedman, *et. al.*, 2000; Song, *et. al.* 2006). For most of these studies, very little credence was given to the role other variables such as communication play in managing conflicts as a means of establishing healthy relationships among employees at work. It is therefore imperative to explore the buffering role of communication in conflict management as a means enhancing employee relationship at the workplace in order to provide empirical basis for the aforementioned assertions and to provide a framework for managing conflicts and improving relationships among employees in organisations.

Conflict Management in Organisations

Conflict is a form of social interaction and social situation, where interest and activities of individuals or

groups within an organization usually confront each other and prevent attainment of one party's objectives (Spaho, 2013). According to Nutt (1998), conflict is expressed in terms of disagreements among stakeholders about levels of risk, future conditions, core problems, alternative ways of dealing with problems and criteria for assessing these alternatives. Choudrie, (2005) is of the view that when people from diverse backgrounds and experiences work together, conflicts are bound to arise. He found that conflicts are not productive for organizations and therefore conflict resolution is sought to ensure peace and understanding. Studies in intra group conflict show that two major types of conflict impact on organization effectiveness (Ayoko, 2007). Choudrie (2005) states that, there are two forms of conflict that exist within work psychology literature and these are affective and substantive conflict (Guetzkow and Gyr, 1954).

According to DeChurch and Marks (2001) Substantive conflict involves differences of opinion among group members about the content of the tasks being performed. Thus, this type of conflict occurs when group members disagree on the recognition and solution to a task problem, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions (Jehn, 1995; Rahim, 2002). This type of conflict has been found to have positive effect on outcomes especially because it permits members to bring a variety of perspectives on a task (Ayoko, 2007). This, in turn, provides the opportunity to ask questions, challenge assumptions and to encourage innovative thinking and creativity (Amason & Schweiger, 1994). Affective conflict on the other hand deals with interpersonal relationships or incompatibilities not directly related to achieving group's function (Priem & Price, 1991). Thus relationship between individuals and is of personal in nature.

However, Jones, Gorge and Hill (2000) posit that there are four main forms of conflicts that exists within organizations. These are interpersonal conflict, which has to do with conflict between individual members of an organization and occurs as a result of differences in their goals or values. The second form of conflict described by these authors is intra-group conflict which is the conflict that occurs within groups, team or department. The third conflict opined by these authors is the inter-group conflict. This form of conflict arises between groups, team or department. The fourth type of conflict is known as inter-organizational conflict and occurs across organizations.

Ware and Barnes (1992) however noted that interdepartmental conflict (also known as inter-group conflict) frequently becomes interpersonal conflict

unless the representatives can rise above the special interests of the groups they represent. Being aware of the types of conflict is necessary to establish a creative environment, which will foster open communication and integration of team members' input (Esquivel & Kleiner, 1997). Notwithstanding opinions given by the above mentioned authors, Robinson (1987) likewise identified other forms of organizational conflicts which he calls structurally derived conflict. These are mutual task dependence, one-way task dependence and high horizontal differentiation.

Mutual task dependence refers to the extent to which divisions in an organization rely on or support each other by providing assistance, information, compliance and other coordinative activities to perform and achieve their goals meritoriously. Mutual dependence enhances the strength of inter-unit dealings. As such when there is misunderstanding among units who depend on each other then it creates conflicts of interest.

The second source of structural conflict explained by Robinson (1987) is one-way task dependence which is when one division within an organization solely depends on another unit to perform its task. In this situation, the unit that provide the assistance holds more power and increase the possibility of organizational conflict. High horizontal differentiation as source of conflict occurs when units in the organization are highly differentiated which makes the tasks each does and the sub-environments each deals with to be dissimilar; this in turn will lead to significant internal differences between the units.

In the past, management theorist used the term conflict avoidance. However, today the phrase is increasingly replaced by conflict management. In recent times effective managers use conflict effectively for personal development, to address organizational problems, to increase critical vigilance and self-appraisal and further examine conflict values when making decisions. Conflict management recognize that even though conflict come along with its own negative implications, it also bring about great benefits. As a result, managers in the twenty first century do not seek to avoid conflict rather manage conflict in the organization. Conflict is exacerbated today by changes in technology, global shifting of power, political unrest and financial uncertain. To some managers this inevitable disharmony is lamentable and should be avoided at cost. To others conflict represents exciting responsibility for the future of every organization (Robinson, 1987).

The Role of Communication in Conflict Management

Some researches have reported on the significant role that communication plays in conflict and conflict management (Putnam 2006; Aula & Siira 2007). Thus Ariani and Chashmi (2011) contend that quality of communication within an organization increases employees involvement with ongoing issues, gets informed about the contents of their jobs leading to less ambiguity and job interference among them, which in turn reduces conflict. Similarly, Atkinson and Butcher (2003) postulate that, communication is essential to building trust within an organization resulting in reduced conflicts and increased positive organizational climate (Aubert & Kelsey, 2003). As indicated by Nordin, Sivapalan, Bhattacharyya, Hashim, Ahmad, Abdullah, (2014) in their quantitative research in gas and oil company, the results of the study revealed that good communication climate associate positively to conflict management and conclude that the importance of organizational communication however cannot be overlooked in conflict resolution.

Also, drawing from survey and ethnographic data in two teacher-school board negotiations, the study reveals that through conflict management bargaining serves a communication function of signaling potential problems, clarifying misunderstandings, and exchanging information which helps to resolve conflict within work groups (Putnam, 1994). Likewise, Moemeka (1998) indicates that communication can help organizations reduce the incidence of unnecessary and avoidable conflict and save time and energy for improved performance.

There are different types of communication that flow within an organization. However, Baker (2000) is of the view that the key distinctions with respect to organizational communication involve: levels; formal versus informal; direction (vertical, horizontal, diagonal) and internal versus external focus. Communication occurs at several levels and is divided into interpersonal communication, Group level communication, Organizational level communication, Inter-organizational level communication and Mass communication (Canary, 2011).

However for this study our focus will be on direction of communication. This involves vertical communication (upward and downward communication), horizontal and diagonal communication. According to Tariszka-Semegine (2011) vertical communication is concerned with communication between employees at different hierarchical levels in the organization. It focuses on downward and upward communication between

managers and employees. Horizontal communication is concerned with communication between employees at the same level in the organization. It focuses on communication between peers, people, at equal or very nearly equal levels in the organization. Cheney (2011) explains downward communication as the type of communication that flows from upper management down to the employees at lower ranks. Lunenburg (2010) is of the view that downward communication generally is effective when upper levels of management are highly motivated to make it work.

Upward Communication is the flow of information from subordinates to superiors in an organization that move from a lower level to a higher level (Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 2005). Information from subordinates to their superiors through upward hierarchy normally consists of ideas, suggestions, reports, complaints and criticisms. Although upward communication is initiated by those at the lower levels of the organization, it can be successful only if those at the higher levels are willing to allow the communication to be effective.

Horizontal Communication refers to the exchange of information between people operating at the same or similar levels (Tubbs & Moss, 2008). This is communication that flows across the organization (from peer to peer to peer). Horizontal communication often focuses on employee satisfaction and employee morale. This form of communication usually encourage parities involve to can talk and share openly and freely about their feelings, the system and discuss problems with others who can identify with them (Greenberg & Baron, 2008). In addition, this is also the channel at which most social interaction takes place within the formal organization. It is through the horizontal channels that individuals are likely to increase their knowledge, communication skills and socialization skills. This further helps to establish long-lasting interpersonal relationships that can assist you in becoming a better employee with a better chance of survival in the organization (Sostek, 2006).

Diagonal communication refers to communication between managers and workers located in different functional divisions (Wilson, 1992). Thus information flow is not affected by hierarchical level. Therefore communication can flow at various levels diagonally. Someone who is a senior in one department may deal directly with a junior in another department. This type of communication relies heavily on cooperation among members involved (Cheney 2011).

Relationships at Work

Work is fundamental to the human condition and determines what we do for much of our waking lives and it preoccupies much of what we think about (Abbott, 2006). It allows us to engage with other people and it helps us to define our sense of identity. Further provides us with access to the material necessities of life, as well as to the advantages and achievements of civilization. Therefore good relationships at work are vital to the workplace, whether at the time of recruitment, during an employees' tenure or at the time of separation (Leat, 2008).

Blyton & Turnbull, (2004) defines good relationship at work as the ability of creating conducive environment that ensures good pleasant rapport and encourage healthier acquaintances among members of organization. Employers and employees are all key players in this relationship. Achieving and sustaining this ideal state does not always occur due to some misunderstanding that might arise. Thus employees sometimes might not meet certain expectations, conflict and other factors that challenge group dynamics such as law and other compliance issues exist and managers and supervisors do not lead or address a given situation (Blyton & Turnbull, 2004). Accordingly, to build healthier relationship at work it is therefore necessary to ensure that these issues are managed rightly and pertinently.

Conflict Management, Communication and Relationships at Work

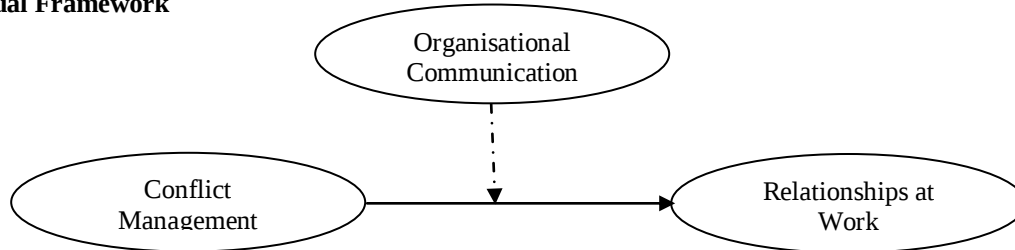
Conflicts are part of human consciousness in all aspects of life and one cannot avoid conflict, whether at home, at the office, or in society as long as we continue to interact with (Aula & Siira, 2010). Communication is found to be one of the most important tool through which organizations perform it basic functions (Goris, 2007). Thus communication relates to the presence and sharing of accurate information about a conflict and thus helps improve relationship of the parties involved in a conflict. Adejimola (2009) contends that with communication, despite conflict situations at the workplace, individuals or parties involved can still talk to exchange perceptions and clear assumptions, stereotypes, and attitudes, which have been built up by conflict groups and hence ensure peace among employees at work.

Accordingly, the exchange and sharing of information through communication process can help in a great way to resolve crises and build confidence between the parties in conflicts as well as bring understanding and enhance working relationship among workers (Spaho, 2013). Further, Godongs (2006) is of the view that in

conflict situation at work, being able to provide a platform for employees to communicate about their feelings and concerns of parties, speaking about what parties would like to change, and discussing the nature and type of the conflict, touching on the positions,

interests, needs, and fears of parties therefore come to represent a key strategy of conflict prevention and resolution which as a results ensure quality workplace relationships among employees.

Conceptual Framework



HYPOTHESES

H₁: There will be a significant positive relationship between conflict management and communication at the workplace.

H₂: There will be a significant positive relationship between communication and relationships at work.

H₃: Conflict management will have a significant positive relationship with relationships at work.

H₄: Communication will moderate the relationship between conflict management and relationships at work.

METHODOLOGY

Employing the cross-sectional survey approach, 132 employees were sampled from two major manufacturing companies in Ghana namely, Interplast Company Limited and Duraplast company Limited. This included employees from across all departments at different levels of the organisational structure so as to give representative results of the situation. The study focused on the two major plastic manufacturing companies in Ghana namely Interplast Company Limited and Duraplast Company Limited. Whereas Interplast Company Limited has an employee base of about 620, Duraplast Company Limited also has about 128 employees constituting a total population size of 748 employees for the study.

With a population of 748 employees, the sample size for the study constituted 150 employees made up of 100 employees from Interplast Company Limited and 50 employees from Duraplast Company Limited. The study employed the purposive sampling technique to select the two major plastic manufacturing companies in Ghana namely Interplast Company Limited and Duraplast Company Limited. This method was selected for the study due to the researcher's prior knowledge of the two institutions being the biggest plastic manufacturing companies in Ghana in terms of size and production capacity. Owing to the unstable nature of

employees caused by the shift system being practiced in the chosen institutions, the availability or convenience sampling technique was proposed for this study. This strategy involved making use of respondents who were the nearest and most available to respond to the questionnaire at the time of the study (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000).

The study variables (Conflict management, communication and relationships at work) were measured using scales from the fourteen dimensions of the Organisational Climate Questionnaire (OCQ) developed by Furnham and Godstein (2007). Each statement from the scale was anchored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "Strongly disagree" to 7 "Strongly agree". The conflict management scale had 5 items which included "conflicts are constructively/positively resolved in this company". The scale used to measure communication had 12 items. Example of the items is "My department is kept well informed about significant issues in the company as a whole". Finally, an example of the 5 item scale used to measure relationships at work was "The needs of women and minorities employees are greatly respected here". Studies have yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranging from 0.7 to 0.88 indicating a high level of internal consistency among the variables (Furnham & Godstein, 2007).

The Karl Pearson's Product moment correlation analysis was used to establish the relationships among the study variables whereas the hierarchical regression analysis was used to find the causal and moderating effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, reliabilities and inter-correlations among the variables. All the variables employed in the study displayed high reliabilities

(conflict management displayed .72, communication, .77 and relationships at work, .83).

As hypothesized in H_1 that there will be a significant positive relationship between conflict management and communication, the Pearson's product moment correlation analysis displayed in table 1 confirmed that there exist a significant positive relationship between conflict management and communication at the

workplace ($r = .469, p < .01$). In testing for H_2 , the findings of the study supported the assertion that there is a significant positive relationship between communication and relationships at work ($r = .369, p < .01$). The study also revealed that there is significant positive relationship between conflict management and relationships at work ($r = .582, p < .01$). This result supports H_3 .

Table 1: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Conflict Management	Communication	Relationships at Work
Conflict management	4.92	.825	-.367	.713	(.72)		
Communication	5.24	.747	-.545	-.116	.467**	(.77)	
Relationships at Work	3.61	1.360	.409	-.325	.582**	.369**	(.83)

Note: N=132 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Reliabilities are in parentheses. M= Mean and SD= Standard Deviation

Finally, the moderated hierarchical regression analysis was used to test for hypotheses H_4 : which stated that communication will moderate the relationship between conflict management and relationships at work. Having controlled for gender, age and level of education, the first of three step moderated hierarchical regression analysis revealed that conflict management significantly predicts relationships at work ($\beta = .924, p < .01$). Conflict management was found to explain 39.3% of the variance in relationships at work as indicated by R^2 value in Model 1 of Table 2 ($R^2 = .393$). Model 2 of Table 2 shows that conflict management together with communication significantly predicts relationships at work ($\beta = .191, p < .01$). The combined effect of conflict management and communication explained 40.1% of the variance in relationships at work as shown by $R^2 = .401$. Finally the interaction term presented in Model 3 revealed a significant effect ($\beta = .108, p < .01$) and explained a significant incremental variance in

relationship at work ($\Delta R^2 = .009, p < .05$), thus illustrates a significant interaction between conflict management and relationships at work. This finding supports H_4 which stated that communication will moderate the relationship between conflict management and relationships at work.

To provide a better interpretation of our interaction results, the standard procedure of plotting the relationship between conflict management and relationship at work for high and low communication was followed. Mean +1 Standard deviation was used to represent high level communication and Mean -1 standard deviation was used to represent low level communication. Figure 1 shows that there is a significant positive relationship between conflict management and relationship at work and this relationship is moderated by communication. Hence H_4 is supported.

Table 2: Hierarchical Moderated Multiple Regression Analysis for Conflict Management and Relationships at Work

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Controls	Relationships at Work (β)	Relationships at Work (β)	Relationships at Work (β)
Gender	.103**	.057	.995
Age	-.024	-.024*	-.023
Educational Level	.047	.040	.043
Conflict Management (X)	.924**	.844**	.704**
Communication (Y)		.191*	.192*
Moderation (X*Y)			.108*
R^2	.393*	.401**	.410**
ΔR^2	.393**	.008**	.009*
F	20.532**	16.882**	14.465**

Note: N= 132; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.



Figure 1: Moderating Effect of Communication on the Relationship between Conflict Management and Relationships at Work

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The research hypotheses addressed in this study relate to the role of communication in managing conflict to ensure healthy relationships at a work. To establish relationships and effects, the hypotheses for this study the Pearson's product moment correlation and the hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses were used respectively. The analysis confirmed that there exist a significant positive relationship between conflict management and communication at the workplace. Thus as conflict management increases then the entire communication channel within an organization is at its peak. Hence disagreement among employees are recognized and settled amicably through appropriate communication channel. This is consistent with Ariani and Chashmi (2011) who contended that quality of communication within an organization increases employees involvement with ongoing issues, gets informed about the contents of their jobs leading to less ambiguity and job interference among them, which in turn reduces conflict.

The findings also revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between communication and relationships at work. Thus as employees are able to express themselves regarding disparities in the course of performing their duties, relationships at work also improve greatly and enhance performance. This is in line with Atkinson and Butcher (2003) who postulate that, communication is essential to building trust within an organization resulting in reduced conflicts and increased positive organizational climate (Aubert & Kelsey, 2003). Likewise, help organizations reduce the incidence of unnecessary and avoidable conflict and

save time and energy for improved performance Moemeka (1998).

Also the results of this study further indicated significant positive relationship between conflict management and relationships at work. That is as conflict is managed accordingly and those involved are satisfied, relationships at the workplace also become healthier. This is in line with Choudrie, (2005) who advanced that when people from diverse backgrounds and experiences work together, conflicts are bound to arise and when resolved aptly it ensure peace, understanding and healthier workplace is built. Finally, the moderated hierarchical regression analysis was used to test for hypotheses H_4 : which stated that communication will moderate the relationship between conflict management and relationships at work. Having controlled for gender, age and level of education, the first of three step of a moderated hierarchical regression analysis revealed that conflict management significantly predicts relationships at work. This means that to build good relationships at work in situations of conflict, communication is an unavoidable tool that can be used to achieve it.

Communication plays a significant role in conflict resolution and therefore very important in conflict management. This result is supported by Adejimiola (2009) who contends that with communication, despite conflict situations at the workplace, individuals or parties involved can still talk to exchange perceptions and clear assumptions, stereotypes, and attitudes, which have been built up by conflict groups and hence ensure peace among employees at work.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

As with all empirical research, this study is not without limitations as it did not completely cover every aspect that has ever been discussed about conflict management, communication and relationships at work. The findings of this study provided some unique insights into the way conflicts are managed in organisations and the buffering effect that communication has in promoting good relationships at work. However, the small sample size limited the generalizability of the study and therefore, caution was taken in that regard when interpreting results. The small sample size made it difficult to generalize the results to other companies in other industries.

Secondly, the research was confined to the plastic manufacturing sector which offers a research gap for other studies to probe into. Similar studies might produce a different result if tested in a different environment.

Another limitation is the cross-sectional survey design employed to measure the impact of conflict management on employee relationships at work within a period of time. The situation revealed in the study may be different on another occasion. Therefore, future studies could turn this research into a continuous tracking (longitudinal) study to better understand the changes in how conflict management influences relationships among employees over time.

Finally, a major limitation of the study was the inclusion of only one antecedent variable of relationships at work since studies have shown that the relationship that exists among employees is influenced by several variables which need attention in both academia and the corporate world. The use of only one dimensional independent variable limited our understanding of how important it is to acknowledge other variables that influence the relationships that exist among employees in organisation.

IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE

Management within the manufacturing companies must recognize the fact that when conflict are properly managed using appropriate communication channels, there is always trust between them and employees. This will further save time on misunderstanding and improve upon relationships at work which translate to increment in performance. Since employees instead of dwelling and spending time on how he or she is treated regarding a particular problem will have confidence in management and share to be resolved.

IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

First and foremost, the related empirical literature has highlighted the need to investigate conflict management and other outcome variables such as turnover, absenteeism, discretionary effort with respect to manufacturing companies in Ghana. Further, work could be carried out on the possible mediating role of organisational justice between conflict management and its outcome variables within the manufacturing companies in Ghana and beyond.

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