



**CONFLICT MANAGEMENT THROUGH CONFLICT STIMULATION: EVIDENCE  
FROM SELECTED BUSINESS CONCERNS IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*There seem to be a gradual erosion in the traditional but wide-held submission that all conflicts are dysfunctional. Today, some management experts and organization theorists have come to imbibe the idea that conflict management can be made possible through the auspices of conflict stimulation. This paper therefore, sought to empirically investigate whether conflict stimulation techniques could be adopted for managing conflicts in organizations, as evidenced from selected business concerns in South East Nigeria. The study adopted a cross sectional design, while the questionnaire served as the chief instrument for data collection. The statistical analysis showed that an inference could be made to say that a significant positive relationship exist between outsiders intervention, and conflict management, and structured communication and conflict management. However, the relationship between the use of devil's advocate and conflict management was negative. On the strength of these findings, it is recommended that managers should in a bid to manage conflicts, explore all internal mechanisms (including restructuring the tasks, units/department), followed by the invitation/introduction of an "external person". The use of a devil's advocate technique may not necessarily produce the intended gains, therefore, should be sparingly employed.*

## 1. Introduction and Statement of Problems

South East Nigeria is predominantly occupied by the Igbo ethnic nationality. Prior to the Nigerian independence of 1960, the Igbos like many other groups that make up the Nigerian State, were largely an agrarian people. However, the civil war in Nigeria (1967 -70) significantly altered the socio-economic cum<sup>j</sup> political life of the average Igboman/woman. The loss of the war (not minding the slogan of no victor, no vanquished) manifested in the brutalization of the Igbo race out of the political scheme of things, as well as in the loss of economic powers. Determined to survive however, the average Igboman resorted to self-help, and other individualistic economic ventures (resulting in the emergence of small, medium businesses and sometimes conglomerates spanning different, diverse economic/business actions and spheres).

These businesses served and still serve a lot of purposes apart from performing the traditional business function of production and distribution of goods and services. A gloss over the list show that some of the business organizations of the 1980s and 1990s have become part of economic history, others are struggling to survive due to a variety of conflict situations and conditions (in addition to other forms of mismanagement and maladministration. That some of these business outfits have become extinct translates to the loss of revenue to government, loss of income/profits to their owners, increasing unemployment as well as rising spate of crimes and criminality.

Unarguably, conflicts have become part of organization life. This in part accounts for why efforts have been put in place to either suppress, resolve, and manage conflicts. Both formal, informal and sometimes unorthodox mechanisms are known to have been deployed in a bid to providing solutions to these conflicts between individuals, amongst individuals and groups, and between organizations and communities. (The last form of conflict is occasioned largely by social responsibilities concerns). Whereas, the formal approaches entailed third party interventions (mediation and arbitration for instance), informal mechanism sometimes, involved the employment and use of diabolic manipulations by contending forces and persons in the conflict.

It should be noted that conflicts are not peculiar to organizations in South East Nigeria. Documented evidence show that attempts at conflict resolution dates back to post Smithian thesis on the wealth of nations, which invariably led to employees being perceived as assets rather than costs. - a position that was accentuated by European colonization of Africa, Asia and Latin American countries. Colonization and the accompanying economic endeavours demanded that companies were established, people from different cultures and

background recruited, with the potency for conflicts. It is also on record that way back in 1924, workers demonstrated for the first time for better treatment that resulted in closure for work for days in an electrical company in the United States of America (Johnson, 2013).

From historical experience and by convention therefore, organizations are known to have deployed various strategies and tactics to contain, reduce, resolve and manage conflicts, generally to reduce the dysfunctional debilitating consequences of organization conflicts. An approach to conflict management and resolution that is of interest to the study is conflict stimulation. In the opinion of Anugwom (2007), conflict stimulation is a technique that considers the use of conflicts to resolve conflicts... with the hope that certain opposing behaviours will rear its head up for resolution. Stimulating conflicts then is considered an approach with intention to develop up-front initiatives with capacity to mitigate potentially negative consequences of conflict. Conflict stimulation is also defined as constructive use of creating or increasing conflicts, while in another domain, conflict stimulation is perceived as using conflicts to make employees more motivated.

Apart from motivation of employees, conflicts stimulation are known to have engineered desired changes, improved group and organizational effectiveness, contributed to improved learning, however, with the possibility of decreasing joint performance. In a bid to achieve these desired goals, different conflicts stimulation techniques have been deployed. These techniques some of which have been adopted by some of the organizations under study, include but not limited to "structured communication", re-structuring the organization, outsider intervention, appointing a devils advocate, encouraging competition, (ORafor and Udu ( 2007), Anugwom (2007), Evert et al! (1994).

A good deal of literature exist to account for organization conflicts - its meaning, nature, causes, consequences, remedies and or management. However, within the Nigerian clime, especially as it pertains to business organizations in South East Nigeria, it is still to be investigated empirically as to the efficacy or otherwise of the technique of conflict stimulation visa-visa conflict management, hence, this study.

## **2 Objective of the Study**

In broad terms, this study seek to examine whether conflict stimulation contributes to the overall goal of conflict management in organizations in South East Nigeria. Specifically, we shall:

- i) evaluate the impact of outsider intervention as a conflict stimulation technique.
- ii) Examine the impact of introducing a devils advocate on conflict management.

iii) Assess the extent of relationship between structured communication and conflict management.

### **3 Research Hypothesis**

The following hypotheses stated in their alternative forms were raised to guide this study. Hoj:

There is significant relationship between outsider intervention and conflict management.

The introduction of devils advocate bear significantly on conflict management. : There is significant relationship between structured communication and conflict management.

### **4 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

Conflict is a fact of organization life. The history of conflict is as old as the origin of creation, therefore, the concept is not lacking in relations to theoretical and empirical expositions. To Robbins (2005), conflict is a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first party cares about. Anugwom (2007) is of the view that conflict is based on the incompatibility of goals arising from opposing behaviours. Therefore, conflict can be viewed as behaviour intended to obstruct the achievement of some other persons, goal(s). Anaele (2014) sees conflict as open clash between two opposing groups or individuals We hasten to say that certain conflicts do not manifest in open clash(es). Achiri (2014) sees conflicts as having potential impacts that can threaten or harm an organization, therefore, a need for conflict management. Other elements identified by the author as being common to most definitions of conflict are element of surprise, threat to the organization, short-time decision as well as the process of transformation i.e. a realization that the old order can no longer be guaranteed or maintained. Put differently, a good number of conflicts do occur leaving management with little or no time to proffer solutions, conflict do spring surprises with the possibility that change is imminent.

A more expansive position will accommodate the causes of conflict into conflict definitional space. Accordingly, conflict is viewed as disagreement between two or more individuals occasioned by such factors as limited resources, differences in religion, goals, background and orientation, interdependent nature of work activities, power and "authority relationships, dynamics of environment, and organizational ambiguities amongst others.

Over the years, there have been arguments for and against the role of conflict in organizations. To some, all conflicts are bad and must be dispensed with as quickly as possible. To others, that which cannot be cured, must be endured. In support of the second position, Nweke (2015) agrees with Bersteins' (2011) who is of the view that groups or organizations devoid of conflict are likely to suffer from apathy, stagnation, groupthink, and other debilitating diseases. Therefore, rather than wish conflicts away, we should devise and develop appropriate mechanisms to deal with conflicts. Eilher way, approaches to conflict management have been developed. These include:

i) Conflict reduction through the auspices of Productivity Bargaining, Collective Bargaining, proper communication channels, and expansion of resources for instance. ii) Conflict resolution using such techniques as mediation, fact finding, compromise. setting super-ordinate goals etc, and iii) Conflict stimulation - an idea and practice suggestive amongst others that not all conflicts are bad, some conflicts may have some regenerative effects on organizations and its activities, therefore, the need to intentionally introduce or stimulate conflicts.

Advocates of conflict stimulation opine that absence of conflict is atavistic and is characteristic of undertakings and units that are not ready to find new ways of doing things -they accept things the way they are and seem to ignore events, behaviour and or information that can spark off better performance. Conflict stimulation then is said to have resulted in the identification of future leaders and representatives, better approaches to job performance, as well as pooling out of the "woods", a hitherto, stagnant work unit, group and or "processes (Okafor and Udu, 2007)

Verma (1998), submitted that there are conditions that necessitate the stimulation of conflicts in organizations. Synthesized, these conditions include but not limited to where the manager is surrounded by "Yes people", team members are afraid or reluctant to admit ignorance and emphasis is placed so much on reaching compromise to the detriment of cherished values and long term objectives. Other conditions include where there is excessive concern by decision makers not to hurt the feelings of others, there is concern for maintaining peace and co-operation in project execution, the price notwithstanding, where turnover is unusually high, reward./compensation are reflective of organizational politics rather than performance.

Conventionally, identified conflict stimulation techniques according to Okafor and Udu, (2007), Fanny (2014) include:

Bringing in outsiders - which seeks to "shake up" a stagnant unit or organization by bringing in managers whose values, orientation and life styles differ significantly from the normal practices of the organization. Appointing a devils advocate which implies designating a critic to intentionally and purposely argue against the opinion and position of majority of the staff. Restructuring the organization which will entail realigning work groups, destroying and creating new informal groups and relationships, altering rules, increasing or decreasing interdependence etc.

The use of "structured communication - that entails using ambiguous sometimes threatening messages. This may also involve giving different but sometimes conflicting pieces of information to different individuals on the same matter/issue. Encouraging competition between and amongst individuals, units and departments. The idea of "who" gets "what" may demand that employees adopt "hows" that were originally not intended - - all to the advantage of the organization.

Meanwhile, this work is hinged largely on conflict theory but with a focus on the interactionist view point. Conflict theory states that, an organization or society functions so that each individual participant and each group struggle to maximize their benefits, which inevitably contributes to social change. The theory was founded by Karl Max (1818 - 1883), and later developed by other scholars so that today, variants of conflict theory exists to include World System Theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, Comparative Theory of Revolutions of Skocpol, Structural Theory of Conflict as well Frustration Aggression Theory.

Structural theory of conflict for instance, while submitting that incompatible interests based on competition for scarce resources is responsible for social conflict, goes further to claim that conflict is built into the ways in which the societies are structured and organized (Obikeze, 2009). Structural conflict theory is of the view that conflicts occur because of the exploitative and unjust human societies, domination of one class by another etc, so that societal economic and political problems of injustice, poverty, disease etc account largely for conflict. On the other hand, Frustration Aggression variant theory of conflict is of the view that conflicts are by-products of frustration arising from situations where legitimate desires of an individual or group are denied. In the main, the thesis of conflict theory is that the ownership of the means and modes of production orchestrated by capitalism bifurcates the

world into two groups with divergent and opposing interests. To the extent that one "class" amplifies and accentuates its interests and desires as against the intents and interests of the other group / "class", conflicts are bound to occur.

Similarly, while there are variants of conflict theory, it is also documented that there has been transitions in conflict thought. Accordingly, authors (Robbins, 2005, Ajah 2007) for instance submitted that these transitions led to three ideas/thought about conflict to include the traditional view of conflict - now perceived to be idealistic with a proposition that all conflicts are bad and efforts should be made to suppress them as soon as they manifest. The second phase in the transition emerged from the 1940s termed human relations view of conflicts is a much more realistic approach to conflict management. Human<sup>1</sup>\*relations approach subscribes to the idea that that which cannot be cured must be endured. According to this view point, conflict is a reality, cannot be wished away, therefore, efforts should be made towards resolving conflicts by putting in place appropriate mechanisms. Currently, and in line with the interactionist viewpoint, it is argued that not all conflicts are bad. This positivist conception of conflict suggests that certain conflicts can confer benefits to organizations in ways not intended. Therefore, managers are encouraged to intentionally "introduce conflict".

We are anchoring on these positions due to the fact that not only do they identify sources and causes of conflict, but also for the fact that outsiders intervention, introducing a devils advocate, the use of "structured communication", and organizational restructuring (approaches to conflict stimulation) are in alignment with the interactionist viewpoint regarding conflict(s).

## **5. Methodology**

For the purpose of this study, organizations that were selected are those that have been registered with their respective states' Ministry of Commerce and Industry and must have existed for ten years or more. The units of analysis were owners of organizations, directors, heads of departments/units. The choice of respondents is predicated on assumption that they make strategic decisions and are in a position to stimulate conflicts

The sample size was determined with the formular for unknown population which resulted in sample size of 361. Among the 361 questionnaires distributed, 350 were returned and analyzed while 11 copies were not returned. Purposive sampling technique was used by the researcher to ensure that the questionnaire instrument was administered with discretion to the target respondents. The reliability of measuring instrument using cronbach alpha

statistical tool and each of the construct that was tested, yielded cronbach coefficient of at least 0.71. Cross sectional design being a non experimental design was used by the researcher in which the measurement of the dependent and independent variables were taken at approximately the same time and the researcher did not have control of the independent variables in the survey.

The independent variables used in the study were Outsider Intervention, Devil's Advocate, Structured Communication while the dependent variable was Conflict Management. All the items used for measuring the dependent and independent variables were metric and the measurement was based on 5 point scale ranging from Very high to Very low. Four items were used for measuring each of the construct used in the study.

## 6. Data Analysis

The Descriptive Statistics (table) revealed high mean scores for Structured Communication, Outsider Intervention, Conflict management while the mean score for Devil's Advocate was low (below 3.0)

The strength of the model was demonstrated in the model summary table (Table 2). The  $r^2$  is the coefficient of determination being the proportion by which the independent variables account for variance in the dependent variable. Thus, table 2 reveals that the  $r^2 = 0.625$  indicating that Outsider intervention, Devil's Advocate and Structured Communication accounted for 62.5% of the variance in conflict management while the residual 37.5% of the same variance was accounted for by other unknown variables. The standard error of 0.826 is the measure of dispersion of the dependent variable estimated around its mean.

The statistical significance of the regression model was shown by the ANOVA table with F value = 192.257,  $p < 0.05$ ; it reveals that the variance explained by the regression model was not due to chance.

The test of multicollinearity was performed by computing the values for variance inflation Factor (VIF) and the degree of tolerance. VIF and tolerance values as shown in table 4 were appropriate, The regression equation therefore is as shown:  $\text{Conf.Mgt} = 0.223 + 0.757 \text{ Struct.Com} + 0.192 \text{ Out.Intv} + 0.007 \text{ Dev.Adv}$ . The standardized coefficient indicates the standard deviation increase in effectiveness of conflict management accounted for by one standard deviation increase of each of the independent variables. Thus, one standard deviation increase in effectiveness of Structured Communication strategy accounted for 0.670 standard deviation increase in effectiveness of Conflict Management, one standard deviation increase in

effectiveness of Outsider Intervention strategy accounted for 0.186 standard deviation increase in effectiveness of Conflict Management, one standard deviation increase in effectiveness of Devil's Advocate strategy accounted for 0.006 standard deviation increase (not significant) in effectiveness of Conflict Management. .

From the same table four, the relationship between Structured Communication and Conflict Management standardized Beta=0.670,  $t=16.824$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) was significant. Therefore, this hypothesis was supported

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Further, the relationship between Outsider Intervention and Conflict Management (standardized Beta = 0.186,  $t = 4.630$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) was significant, this hypothesis was also supported. Therefore, there is statistical evidence to infer that Structured Communication and Outsider Intervention significantly influence Conflict Management and in the positive direction.

Thirdly, the relationship between Devil's Advocate and Conflict Management (standardized Beta - 0.006,  $t = 0.185$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) was not significant.

## **7. Recommendations and Managerial Insight**

A conflict free organization does not and will never exist. Rather than wish conflicts away, managers are called-up to explore other approaches to conflict management such as conflict stimulation especially as it pertains to the use of outsider intervention and structured communication techniques. The potency of the use of outsider intervention as a conflict stimulation technique may derive from such beliefs/possibilities as he/she is apolitical, neutral, therefore, may not have vested interest in relation to the internal dynamics of the organization. In similar vein, the use of structured communication may have impacted positively on conflict stimulation (and by extension conflict management) arising from a multiplicity of factors including the desire to be informed, individual's need for good impression management, as well as fall out of a "divide and rule" policy of management. All possibly will act in concert to make organization members to be proactive and innovative. The findings from this study possibly would have wide-spread generalization as the variables considered are not exceptional. .The results demonstrate the possibility of link between conflict stimulation and depersonalization of future conflicts, conflict stimulation and innovation; conflict stimulation and identification of tomorrow's leaders as well as conflict stimulation and the realization of cherished values and long-term objectives of an organization. However, care and caution should be exercised in the employment and

deployment of the devil's advocate techniques as such a measure could be counter productive.

**TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Conf.Mgt	3.9343	1.34302	350
Struct.Com	3.9200	1.18945	350
Out.Intv	3.7714	1.29769	350
Dev.Adv	2.8743	1.30512	350

**TABLE 2 Model Summary<sup>b</sup>**

Model	R	R	Adjusted R	Std. Error of the	Durbin-Watson
1	.791 <sup>a</sup>	.625	.622	.82594	.404

a. Predictors: (Constant), Dev.Adv, Struct.Com, Out.Intv

b. Dependent Variable: Conf.Mgt

**TABLE 3 ANOVA<sup>3</sup>**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	393.457	3	131.152	192.257	.000 <sup>b</sup>
1 Residual	236.032	346	.682	•	
Total	629.489	349			

a. Dependent Variable: Conf.Mgt

b. Predictors: (Constant), Dev.Adv, Struct.Com, Out.Intv

TABLE 4 **Coefficients**<sup>3</sup>

Model	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	Sig.	Collinearity	
	Coefficients		Coefficients			Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.223	.172		1.295	.196		
Struct.Co 1	.757	.045	.670	16.824	.000	.682	1.465
Out.Intv	.192	.042	.186	4.630	.000	.674	1.485
Dev.Adv	.007	.035	.006	.185	.854	.924	1.083

a. Dependent Variable: Conf.Mgt

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