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Conflict Escalation Processes and the Importance of Win/Win Conflict Resolution Outcome

Anthony Wakwe Lawrence
Chairman, Department of Management, Community Inter-Relations and
Conciliation Initiative (CIRCI), Port Harcourt, Nigeria
Damiete Onyema Lawrence
Ph.D. Student, Department of Management,
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract:
Conflict is part of life and occurs as result of many reasons including the fact that we differ from each other. We have different preferences, values/principles and we compete for resources, power etc. Effective management of conflicts strengthens relationships, generates better understanding among the parties and develops sustainable peace. The various conflict styles play their roles but problem solving is critical to a good win/win outcome. Effective strategy can make conflict resolution achieve more with the parties getting their needs/interests met resulting in a cumulative outcome greater than 100% as against the basic level of 100% cumulative zero-sum outcome.

Keywords: Win/win, win/lose, zero-sum, problem-solving, basic-level, conflict-escalation, conflict-management

1. Introduction

Individuals, groups and organizations are operating in turbulent societal environments where they are searching for continuous improvement in peaceful coexistence, that is living together in harmony with others and experiencing better quality of wellbeing and competitiveness (Dodd,2003). In doing this, they continually improve their capacities towards effective assimilation, communication, as well as other key skills of managing conflicts.

Every country is bedeviled with series of conflicts emanating from ethno-political, religious, terrorism and land related conflicts. Conflict is an indication that there are disagreements in a relationship and since people differ from one another, conflicts will always occur. The implication of that truth means that everyone must have a rudimentary knowledge of skills to manage emerging conflicts and prevent their escalation into crisis.

Sentimentality of humans contributes greatly to conflicts escalation and non-resolutions especially our emotional dispositions including anger, resentment, humiliation, jealousy, betrayal and how to forgive when offended among others. Some scholars and mediators have adapted the western practice in resolving conflicts, while others prefer traditional means of resolution, stating that conflicts in countries are rooted on cultural cleavages and as such dynamic culturally-oriented strategies could be required to manage them (Oduma-Aboh et al. 2018). That notwithstanding, key conflict management skills include how we manage conflict escalators like: threats, destructive criticisms, rumors, insults, commanding or manipulative tendencies from the other party. Other key skills include effective communication skills including appropriate assertiveness and active listening skills, negotiation especially skills required to be able to separate the problem from the person and seeking common grounds, understanding when to introduce a third party facilitated mediation. Bernburg et al. (2019) denoted conflict to being a positive occurrence if managed productively, this is supported by Veenema et al. (2019), who stated that, conflict promotes team building skills, critical thinking, new conceptions and alternative resolutions. Conflict management is a crucial leadership skill needed for the success of any team, group or unit; thus, leadership style has a role to play in conflict resolution and overall team dynamics, such as: servant leader, transformational leader and laissez-faire leader. The outcome of a conflict resolution effort may result in a sustainable improvement in a relationship if it brings about a win/win and the parties better understand the issues and themselves through effective dialogue and communication. This paper will mainly address the processes of conflict escalation and the benefits of a win/win conflict resolution outcome.

2. What Is Conflict?

Esquivel and Kleiner (1997) elucidated conflict to be a disagreement regarding interest or ideas.
Conflict comes from unacceptable difference between what is reality and what is desired - in needs, in values and in expectations within an individual or a group and with others.

So long as people differ from one another, there will always be disagreements no matter the relationship, inter and intra community relationships, intra and inter-national relationships, parent/child, teacher/students. Boss/subordinates, friends, enemies etc.

Conflict and violence are not synonymous, though sometimes they are used inter changeably. However, conflict can be violent or non-violent. It can be destructive/painful or constructive/useful.Conflict can easily become violent when structural violence (economic exploitation, racism, sexism, oppression, hunger and poverty) exist with great impunity.

In a healthy society, groups or small units, all parts work together to maintain stability; a state called dynamic equilibrium (Parsons, 1961). Supported by Spencer (1989), that various parts of society (social institutions) must work together to keep society functioning, social institutions like patterns of beliefs and behaviours that will focus on meeting social needs, such as optimal government, education, family, healthcare, religion and the economy. If not met, or demands are not satisfactory, friction within the society or individuals can escalate in conflict.

As a result, conflict can be aproduct of factors including the following:

- Disagreement on how to utilise scarce resources at stake (money, land, objects & franchises),
- Territories at stake - physical territories (community, home, office etc.) and
- Psychological territories (area of responsibility, personal privacy, status, identity etc.),
- Poor communication between two individuals or groups,
- Principles at stake (moral values, political ideologies, religious beliefs, personal reputation etc.),
- Relationships involved (threat to relationship or potential one, power juggling, personality clashes),
- Prejudice and violation of expectation e.g. trust, violence, abuses etc.

Conflict generating circumstances abound and people always experience conflict.
Conflict is a natural part of life and when it is well managed, the win/win outcome results in better and more sustainable relationships. According to Adomi and Anie (2005), many try to avoid conflict at all costs, others tend to blame others or something else for causing it, and these responses do not resolve conflict, rather it becomes suppressed, avoided resulting in a feeling of loss, deprivation and the need to later revenge.

How we manage conflicts depends on our level of acquisition of conflict management skills and who we are in conflict with, which is crucial during intervention. Regardless of our conflict management skills, if both conflicting parties do not consciously work towards an understanding, similar conflicts will continually reoccur(Source).Georg Simmel's (1858-1918), explanation that, conflicts varied depending on the emotional involvement of the parties, the degree of solidarity within the opposing groups, and the clarity and limited nature of the goals.

If the conflict is with a boss or a law enforcement official that can discipline the individual, he or shewill likely apply avoidance as a way to de-escalate the conflict. That is, we accept to be wrong and apologize even when we are right. Conversely, if we are more powerful and can discipline the other party, we tend to apply threat and intimidation even when we know that the fault is ours (Lawrence, 2018). This in turn can result to a backlash of repressed feelings or bitterness, leading to an abrupt escalation of violence, when the weaker individual or group gets an opportunity to express sincerity or becomes reckless of the recurrent unspoken distress. Lawrence (2017) corroborates this stance and explains that, both approaches stated above do not resolve conflict; they only make the conflict to subside and the loser over time may choose to fight back and confront the situation. At that point the conflict has moved into a confrontational mode and a fight ensues. This is visible most times in a society where most of the decisions are made by the majority of the population, or a societal institution can be perceived to be what the dominant group of that society displays. Wars and conquests are some of the basis of cultural and ethnic conflicts(Irving, 2007). Keeping the minority shut, till they find a way to fight for their values and beliefs or breakout is of common occurrence.

Clearly education plays key role in managing conflicts and its escalation, education broadens people's perspectives and builds their capacity in managing conflicts and education helps both parties to be on the same plane of understanding and resolution. Also supported byMax Weber, different individuals react to conflicts differently based on their educational upbringing, gender and race (Giddens, 1971).

Based on the foregoing, the best approach to resolving conflicts, involves one understanding the psychological stability of the conflicting parties, and then both parties or either one of them initiating problem solving dialogue for the parties to understand themselves, the consequences of continuing the conflicts and seeking collaborative efforts towards a win/win outcome.

3. Issues to Consider in Managing Conflicts

Different sources of conflict give different textures to conflict. We shall group them into four principal sources namely:

- Class 1 - Conflicts as a result of different preferences and different expectations
- Class 2 - Conflicts of core values and principles
- Class 3 - Conflicts for resource and power control
- Class 4 - Religious conflicts

Our humble estimation is that all conflicts have the potential to easily escalate into crisis if not well managed and Class 1 conflicts are more easily resolved than Class 4 conflicts. The reason is simple; parties in Class 4 conflicts are driven not necessarily by transient earthly rewards. They often find it difficult to dialogue because religious instructions are not often flexible and adherents to such religions would find it difficult to accept a compromise position that is contrary to the stipulations of their religion. This is because most religious instructions are rigid and any deviation is seen as sin. The implication of this is that any manager or mediator of conflict must understand the type of conflict he is handling. Fanatical terrorists with religious inclinations are very difficult to convince to accept dialogue towards conflict resolution except the request for dialogue is accompanied with an established knowledge that refusal attracts consequences that are undesirable to them.

Often fanatical terrorists are not willing to come to terms with the fact that human beings are equal and free. Fundamental human rights provide that everyone's right ends where the other's starts. The implication is that while you can practice your religion you cannot demand that another human being must practice or must stop practicing his own religion so that you will find it easier to practice yours. If every religious person understands that just the way he is free to practice his religion is the same way the other person is free to practice his, then there will be less violent conflict.

The good thing however is that most conflicts are not religious in nature and even when they have religious coloration, religion only heightens other underlying differences and is not the major reason for the conflict. Most major conflicts are of classes 2 and 3 and because they are equally emotive, often they easily escalate into crisis or wars if not well managed. Mediators and the parties must understand what they are dealing with to devise interventions that would make inroad and eventually result in win/win resolutions.

Also, conflicts in general have their causative root factors and often conflict management capacity building starting at the primary education level for all and giving special attention to the leaders can proactively curb future violent conflicts Thus making sure from an early age, informal mental lectures and exercises are carried out, engaging and educating all age brackets on how to think and the generic thinking process concept, and looking through a subjective and an objective front. With this, the emotive fuel towards conflicts will definitely be lesser and any intended practices to fuel conflicts will be spotted early before it gains bearing.

4. Conflict Escalation and Management

A fire incident involving a house can be easily controlled at the early stages with firefighting equipment. So too are cancer cases. Many natural phenomena follow same path. Early detection and interventions are more likely to solve the problem or save a bad situation from getting worse. Political, community, ethnic, sectional and religious conflicts are other examples. At the early stages, they are more easily managed and resolved. However, if these conflicts are allowed to fester and escalate, they get to crisis stage and consume either or both parties. When people lose during conflicts, their ego and pride are deflated and they become motivated to seek revenge or keep the conflict alive in other forms.

Conflicts often escalate because of by-standers who have other motives. They encourage the continuation of conflicts but will be the first group to decamp when their Principal losses out in the conflict. With proper conflict resolution education on all fronts and spheres of living, everyone actively conscious in a conflict will be aware of by-standers and their motives, which will help themcut off ambiguity and focus on fair resolutions, asking questions like:

- Must a conflict be win/lose?
- Can't we go for a win/win?

Parties in conflict must sit down face to face and have an open-minded heart to heart talk, if they want a win/win outcome. They should ask each other, what they really want and how they can achieve mutual benefits through proper communication. According to Akinfeleye (1980), communication is the mere process or art of making things of common knowledge, which includes a sender, a code, a channel, a receiver and a feedback. Communication is crucial. It has been termed a complex phenomenon, so must be used adequately to throw light on the conflicting issues.

Those who are angry do not understand the value of negotiation and dialogue, until the anger begins to subside. Though it is not easy, we must show restraints and apply wisdom always. If this is not done the conflict will escalate into crisis and seeking peaceful resolution becomes more difficult. That means that continuing the prosecution of the conflict becomes a much more inevitable option until one person loses physically, financially, psychologically or otherwise in a significant manner, because ego will continually feed the group of individuals.

People with abundant common sense seem to be few considering the regrettable actions many people take on daily basis. Some say when the gods want to kill a person they first make the person mad. It might not be correct that gods have that much potency but the saying has a lot of meaning. In the height of anger, hatred, loss of pride etc. we become too emotional to think rationally and the judgments we make at such times may be impaired. Everybody can be affected and everybody has his moments of 'madness'.
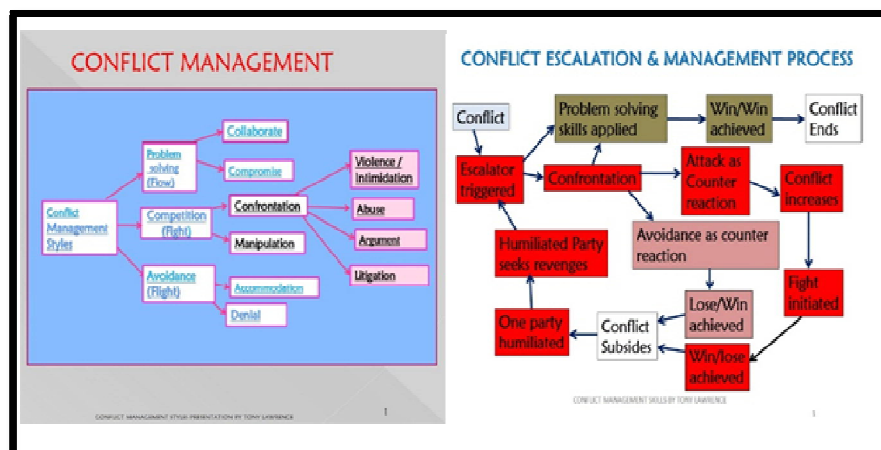

Figure 1

The figures above, explain the major styles of conflicts (problem solving, competition and avoidance) and how problem-solving style is the most appropriate towards achieving a win/win outcome that can guarantee sustainable conflict resolution outcome.

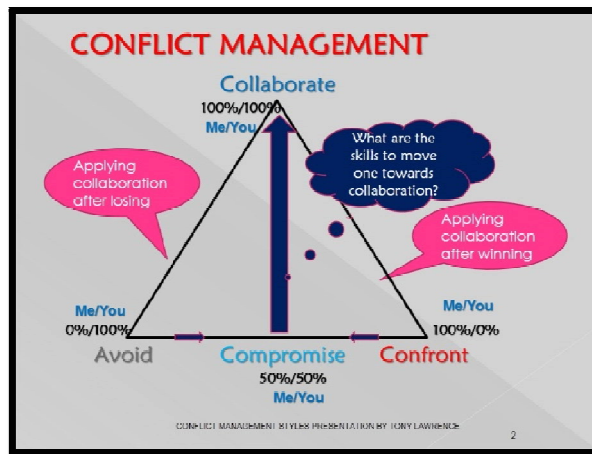## 5. Importance of Win/Win Conflict Resolution Outcomes

Figure 2

The picture above (Figure A: Triangle looking) shows that when you apply extreme avoidance (bottom left end side of the triangle) you sacrifice your interest so that the other party wins and you get zero percent of your needs or interest satisfied in the conflict.

If you confront and win in the conflict (bottom right end side of the triangle) then you satisfy 100% of your demand from the conflict since the winner takes it all.

A compromise is when you leave both ends and choose to apply a give and take approach. You may share the agreed benefits in any zero-sum arrangement where in a two-party conflict they can get 50% each way, 25% to 75% etc. The traditional concept of compromise is an improvement of a win/lose outcome as depicted by both extremes of the continuum. The implication is that the continuum is in the same dimension and therefore a zero sum. Though compromise is a form of win/win, it is at the most rudimentary level and often described as give and take. However, compromise implies that both parties must give up something to achieve a peaceful outcome.

Conceptually, a good mediator or conflict manager should not be operating at this basic level. He or she should use conflict management skills to seek a situation where all the parties get more of their needs in the conflict met by the outcome. If for example in a two-party conflict, each party gets more than 50% of his needs met then we are no longer operating at a zero sum of 100% cumulative outcome.

Referring to the figure above, a skillful person can choose to apply conflict management skills that will ensure a better and more sustainable outcome is achieved during a conflict and even after a competition has been lost and won. Such a person will be willing to push out of the restrictive one-dimensional platform at the bottom of the triangle towards a two-dimensional platform that allows for greater exploration and in so doing break away from the zero sum restrictive envelop. The picture shows that at the best of collaboration, both parties in the conflict can get all their needs met in a win/win outcome. That is, the parties getting 100% achievement for the parties.
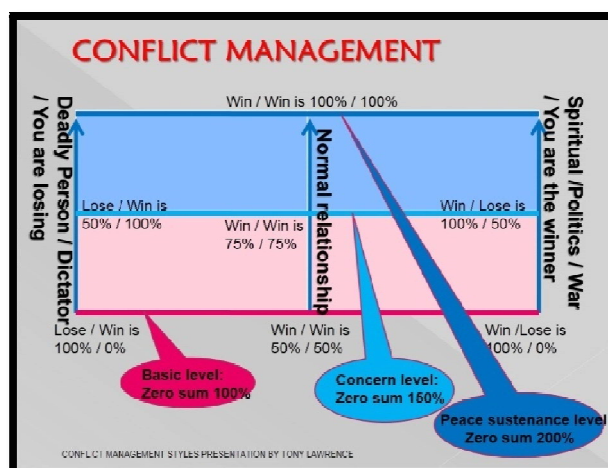

Figure 3

Picture above (Picture B: Square looking) is a more complex expression of the benefits of collaborative strategies. It shows three level strategic platforms:

The basic level is a zero-sum arrangement with a combined maximum of both meeting their expectations from the conflict. The explanation given for the triangular looking figure still applies here.

The key strength of the figure above is that with the use of collaboration, a win/lose outcome can be transformed into a win/win and a win/win means that the needs / interest of all the parties in the situation (as much as possible) have been taken care of. The more an outcome is a win/win the more the cumulative benefits get closer to satisfying all the benefits of both parties (200%).

A good professional who is not in his best or is handling a very complicated conflict with difficult parties can attempt to operate at the second level which we call the 'Concern level'.

A well-researched and well-handled mediation should seek a win/win with each party getting all they wanted from the conflict.

This figure is versatile because it explains why someone can choose to use avoidance and comply if you are asked to carry out an instruction by a soldier during war situation or by an armed robber as both types are ready to kill you if you refuse to accept acting on the instruction given. On the other hand, it explains also why some people may choose to apply confrontation by bluntly refusingto carry out an instruction that is considered to be a crime or something against one's religious principles/core values from a superior partner even when the consequence may be a sack from job. However, a person with a win/win attitude will carefully and without aggravating the situation explore how to engage the other party towards achieving a modified win/win outcome.

And it explains the need to always seek win/win outcomes in every conflict associated with social relations.

In the height of emotional conflicts, do we accept wise counsel? Probably not.

Do we seek wise counsel when our 'heads are cool'? Yes, but unfortunately the situation has deteriorated and at such times 'had I known' becomes a familiar phrase.

When arrogance, anger and intolerance color a conflict then belligerence, violence and regrets all become the expected set of reference outcomes.

Let us illustrate the ways we can transform win/lose into a win/win with a simple case of managing post-election conflicts.

- The winner would need to be magnanimous in victory and make overtures to the losers and carry them along so that the conflict will end. If not, the conflict will continue in the courts of law until it goes to the Supreme Court.
- The losers should also be able to seek dialogue with the winner so that they can recoup some of the expenses and also end the bickering and bad blood.
- Transforming our win/lose election competition outcomes to win/win by all the partieswill enhance peace and harmony in the nation and in the various states. There will be collaboration when the winners show magnanimity in victory and the losers are good sportsmen.

Let us again use another example to further illustrate how a possible win/lose outcome can be transformed into a win/win.

Two neighboring communities may be disputing ownership of a boundary land. One party wants to use the land to build a secondary school. The other party wants the land to serve as a sports complex so that their youths can play football there. While some youths in both communities want to go to war, others want to commence litigation in order to claim the land because it is strategic and big and it would be shameful and degrading if they give it up without a fight. The usual reaction to conflict of high magnitude is confrontation. The approach as suggested above by starting a war, which is a primitive one, as true ownership of the land cannot be ascertained by winning the war (might is not right) and the approach of seeking legal redress, which is a more civilized one, is still a form of confrontation that will result in a win/lose outcome.

Both options of war and litigation will be costly and cannot bring about a sustainable resolution. Using the figure above, a good mediator will be able to move them away from their respective mental positions in the conflict to rather discussing their needs and interests in relation to the issue. After both parties have understood, it would become easy to proffer the option of using the land for a school with a sports complex. That way, the needs of both communities are met and everyone moves from an approach that would have inevitably brought about a win/lose to a win/win outcome with the possibility of each party getting 100% of their needs met. This is an example of how collaboration can bring about an aggregate outcome of 200% instead of the traditional 100% zero sum outcomes.

6. Conclusion

As much as we build frameworks to avoid conflict and its escalation, we must understand that without conflicts we as individuals or groups will not grow and develop properly. Conflict brings change and if handled properly brings progress. Conflicts on their own will not bring about this desirable outcome. Rather, a win/win outcome strengthens relationships, generates better understanding among the parties and develops sustainable peace.

This paper has concentrated on presenting the possible outcomes of the various styles of conflicts and showed that problem solving is the best approach towards achieving sustainable win/win outcomes.

We used two graphical concepts to show that the basic level of conflict management results in win/lose outcome and at best just a basic win/win outcome of compromise that cannot achieve more than a cumulative zero-sum outcome of 100% of the needs and interests of all the parties involved.

However, an effective strategy can improve outcomes from the basic level of 100% cumulative zero-sum towards each party in the conflict getting a lot more of their needs and interests met with a cumulative outcome that is more than 100%.

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