

# Staff Perception on Conflict Management Strategies in Tertiary Institutions of Adamawa State, Nigeria

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**Abstract** Wherever there are people there is bound to be conflict due to their differences in all aspects in life. It is a well known fact that no two individuals are the same even identical twins. In a work situation people of different educational, professional, cultural and psychological background are employed to work hand in hand for the achievement of the organizations objective. As a result of these differences, conflict due occurs and conflict management becomes paramount. This paper therefore dwells on the perception of staff on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in Adamawa state tertiary institutions. The findings indicate that educational managers in these institutions make use of integrating, competing, compromising, smoothing and avoiding as conflict management techniques among their subjects. However, in managing these conflicts, the educational managers gives consideration to the level of trust among conflicting parties, the time and situation of the conflict as indicated by the mean score of 3.7 to 4.1. The paper recommends that educational managers should be careful in selecting the conflict management strategies for settling disputes among their staff.

**Keywords:** *perception, conflict, management, strategies*

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## 1. Introduction

Education is the bedrock of the development of any society. This is because it is a channel through which individuals acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, aptitudes and competencies for effective contribution to the development of themselves and the entire society. Schools from kindergarten to tertiary levels were therefore established to cater for these needs and other essential functions of the society. To achieve these, people were employed to carry out the educational activities of such schools and interaction amongst them becomes paramount.

In Adamawa State tertiary institutions, staff members (both Academic and non-Academic) are employed; they in turn come together and interact in a given manner in order to achieve set goals and equally to satisfy individual needs and desires. These staff members obviously demonstrate varying degrees of abilities, competencies and aptitudes as they are from different social backgrounds which make them differ from one another which tend to affect their perceptions on conflict management. Given the differences in the educational level, cultural background and moral standing among the staff in the Adamawa State tertiary institutions (as in other human organizations), conflicts do often occur in the course of their day to day interactions. Conflict is an inevitable element in any human association, be it formal or informal. Conflict is a natural disagreement resulting from individuals or groups

that differ in attitudes, belief, values and needs. It can also originate from past rivalries and personality differences [12].

Managers in Adamawa State tertiary institutions are faced with variety of conflicts either between the superordinates/subordinates or subordinates/subordinates among the Administrative, Academic and non-Academic Staff or vice-versa. These conflicts can be functional or dysfunctional as asserted by Gordon cited in Akpotu, Onoyase and Onoyase ([1]:113) "conflict may have positive and negative outcomes, that is, functional and dysfunctional outcomes. Functional conflicts may lead to a search for new approaches that may resolve disagreements on long standing problems. On the other hand, conflict may also be dysfunctional for organizations resulting in reduced productivity, lower morale, overwhelming dissatisfaction, increased tension and stress". Even though some conflicts may be functional for these institutions, conflict management is paramount where dysfunctional conflicts among the staff occur. Managers in these institutions are therefore faced with the responsibilities of the reduction and minimization of conflicts among their staff for the proper achievement of the institutions goals and objectives. This is because conflicts when left unmanaged may hamper productivity and leads to teamwork breakdown. Hence, several conflict handling methods needs to be employed by these managers for effective conflict management in their institutions.

## 1.1. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the Perceptions of staff on conflict management in Adamawa State tertiary institutions in order to establish an avenue for these institutions to have a better understanding of their staff in terms of work relationship and conflict management issues. The specific objective of the study is to determine the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff of Adamawa State tertiary institutions on conflict management strategies and approaches used by educational administrators in these institutions and where there is need for improvement for attainment of goals.

## 1.2. Research Questions

The following research question was addressed in the study.

What are the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff of Adamawa State tertiary institutions on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions?

## 1.3. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses guided the study. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

There is no significant difference in the perceptions of Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic Staff of Adamawa State tertiary on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions.

## 1.4. Staff Perceptions on Conflict Management

A perception is all about how individuals view, receive and react to information and situations in and around his environment. Staff perceptions in any organization or educational institution are paramount especially with regards to how they interact among themselves either in a formal or an informal way. These staff differs in all sort of ways since no two individuals are the same, their views or ideologies on even the formal way of achieving their institutional goals may serve as a means of creating conflict which in turn demands conflict management. Staff perceptions are affected by so many factors either within the institutions or otherwise as Murdock [20] asserts that individual's perceptions are affected by certain principles such as:

- **Attributions:** these are explanations or reasons given for people's words or actions. They can be internal attributions which has to do with the person's character or external attributions which has to do with outer circumstances or situations, Forinstance, conflicts.
- **Interpretations:** people perceive through three things, selecting, organizing and interpreting. People respond to information that is important, structure them in different ways and assign meaning to the information.
- **Personality:** how an individual sees others is affected by his dominant personality traits. This to an extent affects his perceptions in terms of human interaction and conflict management.

- **Culture:** People's perceptions are affected by the culture in which they are born or raised. People's race, religion and nationality affect how they relate to others.
- **Gender:** biological differences in men and women lead to differences in their perceptions on relationships. Forinstance women are said to be more emotional than men and this alone can bring differences in their perceptions. In a work situation, many factors leads towards individuals differences in behavior which comes from personal attitudes that has to do with perceptions, cognition and motivation [14].

## 1.5. Strategies and Approaches Used in Managing Conflict in an Organization

Conflicts are found in all human communities. As Nader and Todd cited in Ross and Mawr [22] writes, "in all human societies, there are persons who have problems of debt, of theft, of infidelity, of employment, of consumption, and of personal injury. Many of these people seek to do something about their problems and in so doing resort to remedy agents that the society has previously developed to deal with them". The ability to cope with conflict emerges as an essential skill in our daily lives as interpersonal conflicts are inevitable in our interactions with others [15].

Tjosvold in De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Nauta ([7]:665) upheld that "The effectiveness of individual employees, teams and the entire organization depends on how they manage interpersonal conflict at work". Conflict management is therefore what people who experience conflict intends to do as well as what they actually do. Conflict Management implies that conflict is an "on" and "off" phenomenon. Some conflict are enduring and the best way is to manage the level and manifestation of conflict in order to sustain a good work relationships free from negative behaviors and violence [9].

Aina [2] maintains that two approaches can be adopted in managing conflicts, which are the conflict stimulation technique and the conflict resolution technique. In conflict stimulation technique, conflicts are meant to be encouraged as needed. Here the manager can assign two employees with well known differing opinions on issues to carry out a task together and after the task is completed, an experienced worker can reconcile the opposing opinions later. This can be done since competition and conflict brings out the best in people. The management can also stimulate competition or healthy conflict by organizing monthly, quarterly or yearly contest for its workers to find out the best of them in his place of assignment. Conflict resolution on the other hand, is designed to settle it. Some of the procedures for tackling undesirable conflicts are: forcing, smoothing, majority rule, compromise, consensus, confrontation and integration as identified by Aina [2].

Conflict is inevitable and often good when it helps to raise and address problems, energize work to be on the appropriate issues, helps people learn how to recognize and benefit from their differences and help people to be real when it motivates them to participate effectively. Conflict is however bad when it hampers productivity,

lowers morale, causes more and continued conflict and causes inappropriate behavior (McNamara: 2009). Hence, the need for conflict management for better working relationship and productivity. Boyd, Maguire and Sanders [4] gave five strategies for conflict resolution as Integrating, Compromising, Competing, Smoothing and Avoiding.

**Integrating:** It has to do with high concern for self and others. The style is associated with problem solving. The use of the style involves openness, exchanging information, looking for alternatives and examination of differences to reach an effective solution acceptable to both parties [21]. Fallon ([8]:4) upheld that this style "...can lead to creative solutions and maintenance of good working relationships. It is epitomized by openness, exchange of information and attempts to generate a "win-win" solution where the needs of both parties can be met". In integrating, conflict is resolved by collaboration. The conflict solver incorporates both parties' goals to the extent that no party feels that he/she has given up anything. This is referred to as win/win solution.

**Compromising:** deals with intermediate concern for self and others. Manolescu and Deocanu (nd) asserts that parties involved in the conflicts are aware of the risk of escalating a conflict and hence takes in to account both their and the other party's need in resolving the conflict. Each party is required to give up a little. In other words, no party feels that they have won entirely but a solution which minimizes individuals' losses is desired. Here a win/win situation is not possible but negotiation is employed to lead to a position of a small gain and limited loss. Vokic and Santor (nd) upheld that this style involves both parties to give up something to reach a mutually accepted decision which hinders them from achieving all their needs. There is no win/no lose outcome here a middle ground in solving conflict is achieved. It is a "give something" "take something" situation.

**Competing:** deals with high concern for self and low concern for others. This allows for win/lose situation to develop and produce a management of the conflict. This strategy is highly risky since it can easily go wrong but yet sometimes it is necessary. This strategy can be used in an emergency which requires an immediate solution. According to Vokic and Santor (nd) the party in this type of conflict tries to impose his need on the other. One party here tries to maximize his gain at the expense of his opponents needs. It is a power oriented mode where one uses power to achieve his aim or his ability to argue, his rank, economic sanctions or forcing behavior to defend his position which he thinks is correct. Johns cited in Manolescu and Deaconu (nd) sees this strategy as "a direct opposition to accommodation and tends to maximize the weight of the own interest or point of view and minimize cooperation". If the parties have equal forces, no decision can be made.

**Smoothing:** signifies low concern for self and high concern for others. This is a stage of realizing that the point of conflict is not that important after all and deciding to give in to the other party. Rahim [21] maintains that here the differences are played down and commonalities are emphasized to satisfy the other party. The obliging person downplayed his concern in order to please the other person. The style can be applied when the party is not familiar with the issues associated with the conflict or the

issue is more important to the other party and he decided to give up the issue with the hope of benefiting from the other party when the need arises. Supping and Jing [24] asserts that the person accommodates when his position is indefensible, when the issue is unimportant to him, when he is about to lose, to gain favor or when preserving the peace or to allow others to learn from experience. Vokic and Santor (nd) are of the view that one party in a conflict is willing to place his/her opponents' interest above his own by accommodating or accepting his opponents wishes. It is a means of yielding to another person's point of view and a self sacrifice style to satisfy the needs of others. It is a lose/win outcome.

**Avoiding:** deals with low concern for self and others. Rahim ([21]:220) upheld that this style "can be used when the potential dysfunctional effect of confronting the other party outweighs the benefit of the resolution of conflict". This mode can be used when the manager is confronted with issues of low importance, to reduce tensions, to buy sometime or when in a position of lower power. Vokic and Santor (nd) asserts that this is a lose/lose outcome because both parties desist from communicating their needs so no one's need is met. The outcome may likely be an unresolved conflict because it is associated with the desire to withdraw from a conflict situation or suppress the conflict. This is also a situation whereby one can act as if the conflict were not there. This is a legitimate conflict resolution for the fact that some problems simply disappear after a while, even though this is not often recommended as some problems continued to reappear.

Thomas in De Dreu *et al* [7] asserts that managers spent 20% of their time managing conflict. The implication of this on the institutions goals and objective ranges from the waste of precious time that would have been used in the development activities of the organizations. This is a fact because the time used by these managers in the management of conflict among their staff would have been used for preparing lecture notes, lecturing, research, marking of scripts and other beneficial ventures for the institutions.

Whatever method a manager applies for conflict management, the approach to adopt in resolving differences is paramount. Lydney [17] maintains that "successfully handling workplace conflict starts with recognizing, analyzing and de-escalating situations when they arise". This is because conflict management is a product of both personality and situation. "The manager must also ascertain the level of trust between the conflicting parties while selecting a conflict management approach" ([3]: 10). Hence, Conflict if not managed effectively, the result will be damaging. Triandis and Singelis [26] report that "when an individual is presented with a scenario where one option is to maintain harmony and another to 'tell it as it is'; the 'correct' response depends on where and with whom the interaction occurs". Staff perception is necessary if conflict arise because if conflict is not managed appropriately, "Conflicting goals can quickly turn in to personal dislike, teamwork breakdown, talent wastage as people disengage from their work" ([12]:1).

Reynecke in Slabbert (2004) stipulates that "organizations generally display an inability to manage conflicts constructively-such organizations would primarily be centered in the traditional mindset of conflict. Conflict

within the framework of such organizations would in essence be regarded as threat and would impact on interpersonal relations and decision making, which have a significant impact on the manner in which the organization functions". Similarly, Graham [10] maintains that managing workplace conflict differentiates between a good and a great manager. This is because managing employees is a challenge due to individual differences in personalities, worldviews and so on. Hence, the manager should be able to determine the problem that needs action fast and that which do not and the conflict management style appropriate for each conflict among the employees.

The managers' style of conflict management is influenced by the position of the other party to conflict that is it depends on whether the party is superior, subordinate or peer [16]. Munduate, Luque and Baron ([19]:150) are of the view that "managers tends to be more integrating with superiors than with peers and have a greater tendency towards compromise with peers than with superiors, they do, however, tend to use a dominating style with subordinate and peers". The sources of conflict can be either internal or external (e.g. workload, union disputes). Whatever the sources of a conflict, managers should understand the management styles of those they manage. This is because use of inappropriate conflict management style can lead to high stress and high turnover rates (Hirschman and Mckenzie cited in [6]). Lydney [17] is of the opinion that for managers to keep conflicts to a minimum and head off conflicts before they start, they should "make it a policy to recognize the opinion of others, look for strengths in their point of view and thank them for participating".

Thomas and Klimann cited in Suping and Jing [24] are of the view that every individual is capable of using all the five conflict management style hence nobody can be said to have stick to using one style of dealing with conflict. However some people tend to use one mode or the other frequently and so can be said to have relied heavily on such modes. The conflict behavior individual use depends on their predispositions and the situations in which they find themselves. The social skills of these individuals may also lead them to rely upon some conflict behaviors more or less than others. Conflict management styles "vary greatly depending on the relations among the conflicting parties and the context involved" [15].

Wallenstein in Hamad [11] upheld that "conflict management typically focuses on the armed aspects of conflict: bringing the fighting to an end, limiting the spread of the conflict and thus containing it... conflict resolution is more ambitious, as it expects the parties to face jointly their incompatibility and find a way to live with or dissolve it". Hence Brewer, Mitchell and Weber ([5]:79) assert that "conflict management skills are important if individuals are to function effectively at any level within organizations". Similarly, Louis Kriesberg cited in Hopmann and Talpain [13] notes that "leadership is imperative in the polarization or escalation process (of conflict) because group members must be convinced that their grievances can be attributed to the adversary or "others". Followers must also be convinced that the change and particular course action suggested by the leadership is possible.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Population of the Study

The population was from four Adamawa State tertiary institutions in Yola-North, Yola- South, Ganye and Hong Local Government Areas located in the State. Adamawa State Polytechnic, Yola (ADSPY) is in Yola-North, College for Legal Studies Yola (CLSY) is situated in Yola-South, Adamawa State College of Agriculture, Ganye (ADSCAG) in Ganye while College of Education, Hong (COEH) is situated in Hong.

The institutions has a total of 159 Administrative Staff, 551 Academic staff and 891 non-Academic Staff with a grand total of 1601 Administrative, Academic and non-Academic staff of the institutions. The sample selected comprises of 112 Administrative Staff, 112 Academic Staff and 180 Non-Academic Staff which make up the total of 404 respondents to represent the target population in the study.

### 2.2. Instrument for Data Collection

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used to generate primary data from the field. The questionnaire is called Conflict Management strategies Questionnaire for Administrators and Staff (CMSQAS). It contained eight items. The questionnaire is structured based on the five point likert type scale which solicits for the degree of agreement of the respondent to each statement. The Likert scale ranges from Strongly Agree (5 points), Agree (4 points), Undecided (3 Point), Disagree (2 points) and Strongly Disagree with (1 point).

### 2.3. Method of Data Analysis

The statistical method used in the analysis of research questions were frequency counts and Mean. The cut-off point for the weighted mean was 3.50, hence items that weighs 3.50 and above signifies that respondents agree with the item while any item less than 3.50 indicates that respondents disagree with the item. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. The Decision Rule used is: a null hypothesis was accepted if the F calculated is less than the F critical while it is rejected if the F calculated is greater than the F critical value.

## 3. Data Analysis

Research Question: What are the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff of Adamawa State tertiary institutions on conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions?

The data on Table 1 shows the average mean score which ranges between 3.7 and 4.1 to indicate the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff perceptions on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions. Conflict management strategies such as integrating, compromising, smoothing, competing and avoiding are used at various levels to manage conflict among staff. The perceptions of the

Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff with the average mean score between 4.0 and 4.1 agree that whatever strategy used for conflict management, managers should ascertain the level of trust between

conflicting parties, the situation and time of conflict should be taken in to cognizance and differences should be resolved with caution to ensure a peaceful work environment and enhanced productivity.

**Table 1. Mean responses on the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff of Adamawa State tertiary institutions on the conflict management strategies and Approaches used in their institutions**

S/N	Questionnaire item	Administrative Staff (X1)	Academic staff (X2)	Non-Academic Staff (X3)	Average (X)	Remark
25	Integrating	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.7	Agree
26	Compromising	4.1	4.2	3.9	4.1	Agree
27	Smoothing	3.9	3.9	3.7	3.8	Agree
28	Competing	4.2	4.1	3.9	4.1	Agree
29	Avoiding	3.8	4.0	3.7	3.8	Agree
30	Level of trust between staff	4.0	4.1	3.9	4.0	Agree
31	Situation and time of conflict	4.1	4.2	4.0	4.1	Agree
32	Resolving differences with caution	4.0	4.1	3.9	4.0	Agree

**Hypotheses:** There is no significant difference in the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff of Adamawa State tertiary institutions on

the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics on the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic Staff of Adamawa State tertiary institutions on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions**

Respondents (Staff)	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval level for Mean		Min.	Max.
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Administrative	112	3.9875	.14577	.05154	3.8656	4.1094	3.80	4.20
Academic	112	4.0375	.16850	.05957	3.8966	4.1784	3.70	4.20
Non-Academic	180	4.0375	.16850	.05957	3.8966	4.1784	3.70	4.20
Total	404	4.0208	.15598	.03184	3.9550	4.0867	3.70	4.20

The data on Table 2 above shows the descriptive statistics on the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic Staff of Adamawa state tertiary institutions on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions. N refers to the number of respondents, Mean is the mean responses of the

staff based on the five point Likert scale. The mean shows that all the three categories of staff agree that there are various types of conflict management and approaches used in Adamawa State tertiary institutions. The table also includes the lower and upper bounds 95% confidence interval of the mean as well as the range.

**Table 3. Differences in the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic Staff of Adamawa State Tertiary Institutions on the Conflict Management strategies and approaches used in their institutions**

Sources of variance	Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean Square	F.Cal	F.Crit	Sig.
Between groups	.013	2	.007	.256	3.47	.776
Within groups	.546	21	.026			
Total	.559	23				

The results on Table 3 shows that the calculated F value of .256 is less than critical F Value of 3.47 at the degree of freedom of 2/21 at 0.05 level of significance. Therefore the hypotheses which states that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff of Adamawa State tertiary institutions on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions is upheld.

## 4. Discussion of Findings

The Research Question shows the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic Staff perception on the use of conflict management strategies and approaches in their institution as seen by the mean score ranging between 4.0 and 4.1. The hypotheses which states that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff of

Adamawa State tertiary institutions on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institution is accepted since the F calculated of .256 is less than the F critical of 3.47.

The findings also indicate that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic staff of Adamawa State tertiary institutions on the conflict management strategies and approaches used in their institutions. The average mean score ranging between 3.7 and 4.2 indicates the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic Staff on the use of various conflict management strategies and approaches in their institutions. The average mean score ranging between 3.9 and 4.1 signifies the perceptions of the Administrative, Academic and Non-Academic Staff on the approaches a manager needs to use for conflict management to be appropriate.

The findings falls in line with that of Rahim [21] which found out that integrating as a conflict management

strategy involves openness, exchanging information between the conflicting parties, examination of differences in order to reach an effective solution. Also, Manolescu and Deocanu (nd) found out that in compromising as a conflict management strategy parties involved in conflicts are aware of the risk of escalating a conflict and hence takes in to account both theirs and other party's need in resolving the conflict.

The findings also corresponds with that of Vokic and Santor (nd) which found out that in competing as a conflict management strategy, one party tries to impose his need on the other maximizing his gain at the expense of his opponent needs. In smoothing, on the other hand, one party in a conflict is willing to place his/her opponent's interest above his own thereby accommodating or accepting his opponent's wishes. Avoiding involves a lose/lose situation because both parties desist from bringing in to open their needs so no one's need is met. Here managers often act as if the conflicts were not there and hence some problems simply disappear after a while.

The study also reveals that for conflict management to be effective, the level of trust between the conflicting parties, the situation and time of conflict should be considered by the manager. The conflict should also be resolved with caution. The study by Bjornehed, [2] shows that the relationship between the conflicting parties should be considered in the application of any conflict management strategy among staff. In conflict management, information is exchanged and differences are brought to open and solved through dialogue and understanding among staff. Conflict management requires understanding between the conflicting parties, exchange of information, openness and willingness to make sacrifice for the progress of the organization. When there is peaceful co-existence, people tend to make effort in seeing that all problems are resolved amicably for the continuation of peace.

## 5. Conclusions

- Conflict management strategies and approaches used in Adamawa State Tertiary institutions include integrating, compromising, competing, smoothing and avoiding which educational managers use based on the situation, time and the level of trust between the conflicting parties.
- Educational Managers should handle conflict in an efficient and effective manner in order to ensure a peaceful work atmosphere and productivity. This can be done by selecting the appropriate conflict management strategy in resolving any contention while taking in to cognizance the time, situation and the level of trust between the conflicting parties.

## 6. Recommendation

- Educational Managers should make careful selection of the conflict management strategies in handling contentions among staff.
- The level of trust between conflicting parties, the time and situation of conflict should also be considered in managing any conflict.

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