



The Impact of Conflict Management on the Performance of Employees of Small and Medium Size Enterprises in the Buea Municipality: Case Study of Micro Finance Institutions

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Abstract: Conflict management is a reality of our time. There is growing recognition of the importance of conflict management in an organization. A recent survey indicated that, managers spend a considerable portion of their time dealing with conflict and that conflict management becomes increasingly important to their effectiveness. This study investigates the effect of conflict management on the performance of micro finance Institutions in the Buea Municipality. It adopts a descriptive research design. A total of one hundred (100) respondents were selected for the study using simple random sampling technique. Questionnaires were used to collect primary data. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics. Hypothesis was tested using multi-linear regression, percentages and analysis of variance of both dependent and independent variables. The findings reveal that conflict management has not increase employee's performance in micro finance institutions in Buea municipality. It was recommended that, micro finance institutions should embark on seminars in order to orientate employees on conflict management and enforce strict disciplinary rules on workers. There should be efficient and effective communication between and among all categories of employees in micro finance institutions. This will reduce conflicting situations in the organization. Micro Finance Institutions should established management Policies ("resolution Guidelines") that clearly outline the senior management's view of business development priorities and the terms and conditions that should be adhered to, in order for conflict to be dissolved.

Key words: Conflict management, performance, employees, small and medium size enterprises.

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1990s, El Salvador was still over supplied with weapons from a 12year civil war that was fought in the Dominican Republic. Given the fact that the business of weapons such as guns was successful at that time, some businessmen whose trucks were being held up by armed gangshad to change their line of business to "goods for guns scheme" since their main business was affected by the war. In their endeavour, the president supported them. This example gives merely a flavour of what is happening in different part of the world to prevent or resolve conflict without the use of violence (Burton et al, 1987:11-19).

According to Fisher (1997:15), bullying at workplaces represents a big problem for many employees in which research studies document serious negative consequences from bullying for the victims, as well as their colleagues and the enterprise as a whole. Research indicates that, about five percent of employees perceived themselves as being bullied at the workplace in Europe. Bullying and badly managed conflicts lower the productivity in workplaces, impairs the quality of the

psychological work environment and represents a problem seen from ethical perspective.

According to Harris (1997: 23), several crisis have been occurring with one prominent being the crisis which erupted few years back in Cameroon following industrial or strike actions by lawyers and teachers against the imposition of the French language in English courts and schools. It has its roots in the country's fragmented colonial history. It started with Germany in the 19th century, and ultimately ended up with Britain and France until independence in the early 1960s. Today's protesters are now going as far as pushing a separatist agenda, demanding their own breakaway county Amazonia, made of the present English speaking regions of Cameroon. This conflict or struggle has greatly affected the economic activities in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. For instance, there is drop in market share, profit level of organizations just to name a few.

To Sandole (1993:11-12), there is growing recognition of the importance of conflict management in an organization. A recent survey indicated that, managers spend a considerable portion of their time dealing with conflict and that conflict management becomes increasingly important to their effectiveness. They argue that despite this fact, peace forms one of the fundamental factors to enhanced productivity with resultant benefits to both labor and management as well as for the economic development of the country. It will not be out of place therefore, to consider conflict as an inevitable and desirable factor in the work place. Conflict could be viewed as a situation of competition in which the parties are aware of their comparability of potential future position in which each party wishes to occupy a position that is incompatible with the wishes of the other. Conflict can arise because of the employee quest to maximize profit while workers representatives are out to ensure continuous improved condition of living for their member. Conflict can also arise as a result of failure to honor agreed items on collective bargaining.

Azamosa (2004:65-68), emphasizes that if those workers rights and employee prerogatives are trampled upon, it could also cause conflict. These include pay, condition of service, and fringe benefits among others. He equally observed that conflicts involve the total range of behaviours and attitudes that is in opposition between owners/managers on the one hand and working people on the other. It is a state of disagreement over issues of substance or emotional antagonism and may arise due to anger, mistrust or personality clashes. His writing on the effects of strikes and lockouts examined resultant effects of industrial conflict at three levels namely psychological, political and economic. In all, every party to industrial action is affected. The needs for an effective conflict management to ameliorate the problems emanating from conflict and assist organization in their struggle for the attainment of corporate objective cannot be over emphasized.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There has been a growing interest in conflict management in recent years. Firstly, research has stimulated interest in strategies and approaches in handling conflict which in the past may have involved litigation through the courts, Secondly, there is increased legalization of the workplace, particularly in the areas of occupational health and safety, discrimination, and harassment. Thirdly, there has been high interest in the need for organizations to move to high performance work systems. Duke, (1999:12)

Some causes of conflict in an organization come as a result of hierarchical structures, divisions of labour, narrowly defined jobs, lack of detailed rules, limited employee involvement in decision making, authority and control are no longer adequate since they foster conflict. The high-performance workplace emphasizes conflict management as a cornerstone of the effective high-performance workplace. (Ekong, 2000:31)

Due to frequent organizational conflict, performance in most organizations has taken a comparatively nosedive sequence. The frequent violence by workers for improved working conditions and other interests have led to a down toll which eventually affects organizations performance. Key indicators such as sales return on investment (ROI) and profit margins have reduced due to poor conflict management. This shows that organizational performance is enhanced through effective conflict management. (Ewton, 2007:72)

Many of the unmanaged conflicts were characterized by strikes, violence and destruction of property. This had a trickledown effect on institutional performance. This study seeks to establish the influence of conflict management on organization performance with a specific focus on microfinance institutions in the Buea municipality. A few studies have been conducted on communication as a conflict management strategy and its influence on performance. For instance, a study in Nigeria on the role of effective communication on organizational performance (Fadipe, 2010:21) recommended that, there is need for every organization to endeavour to make effective communication an essential integral part of its management strategies in order to increase organizations performance through reduced organizational conflict. Successful conflict resolution occurs by listening to and providing opportunities to meet the needs of all parties and to adequately address interests of parties in conflicts so that, each party is satisfied with the outcome.

With the strategies of negotiation, third party intervention and communication have been used to manage conflicts in Nigeria and Canada, the studies carried out in microfinances in the Buea municipality, did not address the influence of conflict management on organizational performance in these institutions. This study aimed at filling the gap that existed in the literature by establishing the impact of conflict management on performance of microfinance institutions in the Buea municipality.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Based on the statement of the problem above, a research question was formulated to guide the study. The research question is to assess the extent to which conflict management has affected the performance of employees of Micro Finance Institutions in the Buea municipality. The specific objective of this study is to critically assess the extent to which conflict management has affected the performance of employees of Micro Finance Institutions in the Buea municipality.

HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

H₀: μ , Conflict management does not significantly affect the performance of employees of Micro Finance Institutions in the Buea municipality.

H₁: μ , Conflict management significantly affects the performance of employees of Micro Finance Institutions in the Buea municipality.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Robinson et al (1983:7) advocates that managing conflict toward constructive action is the best approach in resolving conflict in organization. When conflict arises, we need to be able to manage them properly, so that it becomes a positive force, rather than a negative force, which would threaten the individual or group.

Parker (2012:16), argued that if conflicts arise and are not managed properly, 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. Unmanaged conflict may result in withdrawal of individuals and unwillingness on their part to participate in other groups or assist with various group action programs in the organization.

Avoidance of the situation that causes the conflict is an example of an interpersonal approach. Another way of coping with conflict is through smoothing, emphasizing the areas of agreement and common goals and deemphasizing disagreements. A third way is forcing, pushing one's own view on others; this, of course, will cause overt or covert resistance. (Robert & Jane, 1969:87)

Knippen et al, (1999:14) argued that the best way to handle conflicts objectively is to follow six process that involves describing the conflict situation to the other person, asking the other person how he sees the conflict situation, responding the way the other person sees the situation, jointly deciding how to resolve the conflict, making commitment to resolve the conflicts, and promising to be committed in future to continue resolving conflicts, which might arise. Another way of coping with organizational conflicts is to make structural changes. This means modifying and integrating the objectives of groups with different viewpoints. Moreover, the organization's structure may have to be changed and authority-responsibility relationships clarified. New ways of coordinating activities

may have to be found. Tasks and work locations can also be rearranged.

Albert, (2011:65), sees conflict as behavior intended to obstruct the achievement of some other person's goals. According to this author, conflict is based on the incompatibility of goals and arises from opposing behavior. It can be viewed at the individual, group or organizational level. Conflicts exist whenever an action by one party is perceived as preventing or interfering with the goals, needs, or actions of another party. Conflict can arise over a multiple of organizational experiences, such as incompatible goals, differences in the interpretation of facts, negative feelings, differences of values and philosophies, or disputes over shared resources. As defined above, conflict tends to be associated with negative features and situations which give rise to inefficiency, ineffectiveness or dysfunctional consequences. But in some cases, it can actually stimulate creative problem solving and improving the situation for all parties involved. In this article, we simply view organizational conflict as competition by the individuals and groups for organizational resources and organizational rewards. Since industrial relations basically aims at the relationship among various actors in the workplace, it then becomes necessary to examine the causes and effects of conflict and to provide insights into how such relationship could be adequately performed.

A survey of more than five hundred and fifty (550) employees of large Canadian organizations according to (Pondy, 1996:63) revealed that, employees wanted to feel involved in decisions that affect them by negotiating with managers before decisions were made. Employees equated negotiation with fairness since participation led to creation of shared values. The survey report concluded that, the components of a high-performance workforce included effective voice for employees in strategy and governance, contingent compensation, teamwork and employee involvement through negotiation in problem solving.

To Lebens, et al (2006:10), after investigating the effect of conflict on employees in government departments, parastatals and private companies in Gaborone in Botswana, established that conflict has both positive and adverse effects on those organizations. The study showed that conflict reduced employees' productivity to up to 5% in some of the businesses involved. This is so because conflict in those ventures led to lack of cooperation and waste of resources. Nevertheless the paper also found out that through improving quality decisions and organizational innovativeness, conflict slowed down productivity in some of the organization to almost 22%.

Another study by Afzal et al (2009:97), used data from a sample of about four hundred and fifty (450) individuals who were employees of different commercial banks in Pakistan. Evidence from the paper portrayed that in relationship, conflict has a significant impact on employee's performance. Their performances ranged in between 28% to 46% depending on the magnitude of the conflict. It further indicated that, due to viciousness of relationship conflict on organizational performance, top hierarchy strive to get rid of relationship conflict rather than relegating its resolution.

Olu et al (2014:88), investigated conflict management and employees performance in Power Holding Company Nigeria (PHCN). A survey research design was used in the study. One hundred (100) respondents were selected for the study using stratified sampling technique. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that effective conflict management enhance employee's performance in an organization and that organization's conflict management system influences employee performance in the organization.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

THE CONTEMPORARY BEHAVIOURAL THEORY OF CONFLICT

Also known as the Human Relations view, this theory emerged in the late 1940s. It was developed by Deutsch et al, (2000). This theory advocates acceptance of conflict and rationalizes its existence. It assumes that conflict is normal, ubiquitous, natural and inevitable in all organizations and that it may have either a positive or a negative effect, depending on how the conflict is handled. It is an inherent feature of human existence. It is useful on occasion. Performance may increase with conflict, but only up to a certain level, and then decline if conflict is allowed to increase further or is left unresolved. This approach advocates acceptance of conflict and rationalizes its existence. Because of

the potential benefits from conflict, project managers should focus on managing it effectively rather than suppressing or eliminating it. It assumes that conflict is bad, always has a negative impact, and leads to declines in performance as the level of conflict increases. Conflict must therefore always be avoided. In this view conflict is closely associated with such terms as violence, destruction and irrationality; Tidwell (1998:45). Conflict should therefore be reduce, suppress, or eliminate it. Following this theory, in organisations, the manager is responsible for freeing the project of any conflict, often using an authoritarian approach. This negative view of conflict played a role in the development of labour unions. Violent or disruptive confrontation between workers and management led people to conclude that conflict was always detrimental and should therefore be avoided, Schellenberg, (1996:90).

The attributes of this theory states that, if conflict is allowed to exist, people will develop conflict management skills and learn to co-exist. Also, conflict may lead to competition that generally increases production. Critics of this theory have advanced that it is unhealthy to allow any amount of conflict to exist in an organization and that conflict can never be termed healthy; Vayrynen (1991:73).

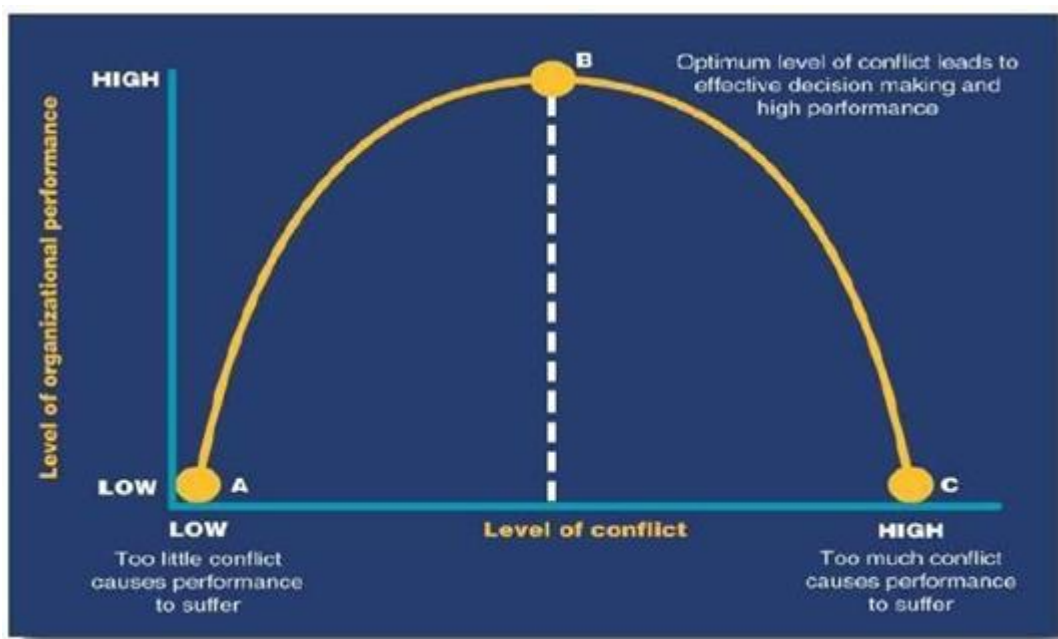


Figure: The relationship between performance and level of conflict (Jones and George,2003:12)

Relevance of the Theory to the Study

Much aggressive conflict resolution is short-term and is achieved only at a high emotional cost to both parties. Thus, this study makes use of this theory since it concerns human emotions of employees and how they make certain sacrifices for the resolution of conflict in an organization.

In addition to the above, the theory is useful in fostering understanding of how people respond during times of conflict, and by teaching the best ways to manage expectations and motivate employees, the behavioural approach to management can help company leaders handle the varied human resource problems that occur during the workday. This theory is also important to the study because it studies human behaviour and helps to eradicate behaviours that do not help in the growth of the organization.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection is a systemic way of gathering information, which is relevant to the research purpose or questions. Once a sample has been selected, the data must be collected from that sample. Secondary and primary sources were used. Secondary sources included published works from libraries, and articles on related issues. Data collection was done using mixed methods of research approach including survey by closed-ended questionnaires (Likert Scale questions). The

questionnaires were administered to the workers in micro finance institutions in Buea municipality. A total of 100 questionnaires were administered with sample population chosen randomly. Some conclusions were drawn from their analyses.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on data presentation and analysis. Data were collected, organized and analysed with the use of tables. The objective of the study was assessed upon to determine the effect of conflict management on employees’ performance of microfinance institutions in Buea Municipality. The findings are expressed below;

Table 1: Conflict management has not increased the overall productivity in microfinance institutions in Buea Municipality.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	CumulativePercent
Strongly agree	20	40.0	40.0	40.0
Agree	21	42.0	44.0	84.0
Disagree	2	4.0	6.0	90.0
Strongly disagree	3	6.0	4.0	94.0
Neutral	3	6.0	6.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Field survey 2022

From the results on the table above, 20 respondents with a percentage of 40 strongly agreed to the fact that, conflict management has not increased the overall productivity in microfinance institutions. 21 respondents with a percentage of 42 agreed to this fact. On the other hand, 2 respondents with a percentage of 4 disagreed on it. 3 respondents with 6% strongly disagreed. However, 3 respondents with percentage of 6% were neutral on this point. From the statistics it is seen that, conflict management has not increased the overall productivity in microfinance institutions.

Table 2: Due to conflict management, employee’s moral in micro finance institutions has not increased over time hence affecting performance.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	20	40.0	40.0	40.0
Agree	4	8.0	8.0	48.0
Disagree	9	18.0	18.0	66.0
Strongly Disagree	3	6.0	6.0	72.0
Neutral	14	28.0	28.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Field survey 2022

From the results on Table 2, 20 respondents with a percentage of 40 strongly agreed to the fact that, employee’s moral has not improved thereby affecting performance. 4 respondents with a percentage of 8 agreed to this fact. On the other hand, 9 respondents with a percentage of 18 disagreed on it. However, 3 respondents with percentage of 6% strongly disagree on this point. Lastly, 14 respondents of 28% were neutral. From the statistics it is seen that in microfinance institutions employee’s moral has not contributed in increasing performance.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Ho: Conflict management does not have an effect on employees’ performance in Micro Finance Institutions in the Buea municipality.

Hi: Conflict management has a significant effect on employees’ performance in Micro Finance Institutions in the Buea municipality.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.332 ^a	.110	.044	1.2938

Source: Field work, 2022

Predictors: (Constant), Conflict Management
Dependent Variable: Employee Performance

The level of significance for this study was $\alpha=0.05$ (95% confidence interval) and the degree of freedom (DF) was 4. The fisher (F) value obtained from the fisher table was +6.39, -6.39 (two- tail). (k-1) where k is the estimated number of parameters. Hence for this study DF is for denominator.

Table 4: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Table

Model	Sum of Squares	Degree of freedom (DF)	Mean Square	Fisher(F)	Significance
Regression	11.815	4	2.954	2.78	0.038
Residual	47.865	45	1.064		
Total	59.680	50			

Source: Field survey 2022

The fisher (F) value calculated of +2.78 was less than the fisher value obtained from the Fisher table of +6.39 which therefore means that we do not accept the null hypothesis.

There is therefore enough evidence to support the claim that conflict management has a significant effect on employees' performance in microfinance organizations in the Buea municipality.

Table 5: Model for the Study

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1. (Constant)	A0	0.474	0.234	1.040	0.304
2. Strike action	A1	0.203	0.104	0.684	0.497
3. Employees' moral	A2	0.110	0.328	2.452	0.018
4. Communication	A3	0.135	0.137	0.888	0.379
5. Perception of employees	A4	0.236	0.125	0.803	0.426

Source: Field survey 2022

Dependent variable: Employee Performance
Independent variable: Conflict Management

Where A0, A1, A2, A3 and A4 shows the coefficient of how strike action, employees moral, communication and perception of employees affects performance.

Employees Performance = f (strike action, employees' moral, communication skill, perception of employees) Where f is the functional relationship

$$Y = f(X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4)$$

Where

Y= performance X1= Strike action

X2= Employees Moral X3= Communication skills

X4= Perceptions of employees
The explicit model is given by

$$Y = A_0 + A_1X_1 + A_2X_2 + A_3X_3 + A_4X_4$$

This is a mathematical model because it explains an exact relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables. Economic model adds the stochastic error term μ which shows an inexact relationship between the dependent variable that is:

$$Y = A_0 + A_1X_1 + A_2X_2 + A_3X_3 + A_4X_4 + \mu$$

Where A_0 = constant term μ = stochastic error term

While A_1, A_2, A_3, A_4 , are the coefficients of the above independent variables.

Table 6: Test results from SPSS

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1. (Constant)	0.494	0.474	0.234	1.040	0.304
2. Strike action	0.139	0.203	0.104	0.684	0.497
3. Employees' Moral	0.270	0.110	0.328	2.452	0.018
4. Communication	0.120	0.135	0.137	0.888	0.379
5. Perception of employees	0.190	0.236	0.125	0.803	0.426

Source: Field survey 2022

Dependent variable: Employee Performance Independent variable: Conflict Management

The multi linear regression model was adopted for this study with employees' performance as dependent variable while Strike action, employees' moral, communication and perceptions of employees were the independent variables.

From tables above, it is evident that, employees' moral affects performance the more since it has the highest coefficient of .270. The model for this study is therefore presented thus;

$$Y = A_0 + A_1X_1 + A_2X_2 + A_3X_3 + A_4X_4 \quad Y = 0.494 + 0.139X_1 + 0.270X_2 + 0.120X_3 + 0.190X_4 \quad \text{Where;}$$

- ✓ X_1 : Strike action coefficients = 0.139
- ✓ X_2 : Employees' moral = 0.270
- ✓ X_3 : Communication = 0.120
- ✓ X_4 : perception of employees = 0.190

Therefore, there is enough evidence to accept the alternate hypothesis which states that, conflict management has a significant effect on employees' performance in Micro Finance Institutions in the Buea municipality.

CONCLUSION

Conflict management is the independent variable in this study and employees' performance is the dependent variable. Findings lead to a conclusion that lack of conflict management has a negative effect on performance as seen in a fall in overall productivity of micro finance institutions in the Buea municipality. The major sources of conflict identified were lack of effective communication among employees, strike actions and poor employees moral.

Vigil-King, (2000:7) carried out a study on re-thinking industrial relations for enhanced organizational performance in which they emphasized communication to improve performance through reduced conflict, enterprise competitiveness, economic growth and overall financial growth. This aspect is lacking in the microfinance institutions in the Buea municipality, hence the reason for this research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the study confirm that, conflict management does not increase the overall productivity of micro finance institutions in the Buea Municipality. So, micro finance institutions should focus on the utilization of conflict management technique of effecting necessary changes in the process and procedure management.

Furthermore, seminars should be organized to orientate workers on conflict management and enforce strict disciplinary rules on workers.

In addition to the above, communication should be enhanced. There should be efficient and effective communication between and among all categories of employees in micro finance institutions so as to reduce conflicting situations.

Employee relationship should be updated at least annually to reflect changes in the economic outlook and the evolution of the institution's portfolio and be distributed to all human resource/marketing officers.

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