

# COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT MANAGER'S PERSONALITY IN SCHOOL SECURITY AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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## **Abstract**

Many Nigerian schools -higher or lower levels of school- have been experiencing organizational conflicts and insecurity that in most cases hinder them from achieving the purpose for which they were established. To help in handling events of conflicts and the resultant insecurity in Nigerian schools, this paper presents strategies on school crisis management by giving an elaborate discourse on properties of effective communication and conflict managers' personality- in relation to school crisis.

**Key terms:** conflict, crisis, security, persuasion, inclusive, personality, manager, resolution

## **Introduction**

Conflict is an inevitable friction in an organization. Horowitz & Borden (1995) define conflict as disagreement over social issues, beliefs and ideologies. Conflict has also been described as disagreement on the procedure of distributing power and resources in an organization. Basically, conflict is what occurs when two or more parties have divergent interests over distribution of resources and/or issues touching on their development. It is what can come up in an event of staff and student's interactions, it can emanate from school administrative cadre, among students, or sometimes it can come up between school and its hosting community.

As in many developing countries, Nigerian higher institutions witness series of organizational conflicts. Many of the conflicts lead to anarchy on campuses; some disorganize timing of school activities, destruct life and properties and in most cases, render school environments completely insecure for serious academic activities. In addition to these, many known school conflicts have resulted in protracted disharmony in school staff interpersonal relationship, increased indiscipline among students, disarmed school authorities, clogged channel of progressive communication and rendered institutions of learning ungovernable (Agbonna, 2009; Alabi 2002; Oguntuase 1999; Olugbile, 2005).

No doubt, organizational conflict and its resultant insecurity are obstructions to school development. However, conflicts do not just occur. They are organizational incidents that always have antecedents. School conflicts often manifest from compressed tension. They are products of unmanaged competition and uncompromising interests among contending school groups. Conflicted relationships in schools are also consequences of stereotyping, cognitive discrepancies, breakdown in communication and illogical involvement or appointment of persons of controversial personality in school-based power distribution, decision making and conflict management (Peretomode, 1991; Olugbile, 2005).

Because of mismanagement of conflict and weak school-based security mechanisms, many mild school conflicts have turned violent and some become unresolved in Nigerian higher institutions. Among many unresolved conflicts in Nigerian higher education is the crisis of unsettled industrial agreement between the Federal Government and the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian University's (ASUU). The crisis started as a nine - month national strike on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001 and eventually degenerated to a more complex conflict of the sacked 44 Unilorin lecturers. This crisis lingers till date. Another example is that of Lagos State Polytechnic's workers versus the Chairman of the institution's governing Council. The conflict arose over the circumstances that surrounded a media publication on the institution's 16<sup>th</sup> Convocation Ceremony held on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007 and for several months rendered the institution almost ungovernable. Another is that of the CETEP CITY University, a private university, that had a conflict of difficulty in paying # 400 million loan granted it by CrownRise Finance Institution and which latter degenerated and led to the close down of the institution in 2007.

There was also the violent conflict of inadequate water supply that started by 6.30 AM, on March, 15; 2004 on University of Ilorin main campus and by 8.00 AM of the same day had spread to within Ilorin metropolis with record of serious destruction of innocent people's property. Another case is that of the University of Lagos Hostel Privatization crisis that resulted in 16-hour violence which ended in the setting ablaze of the official quarters of the University's Vice -Chancellor, Prof. Oye Ibidapo - Obe and Prof. Dele Olowokudejo, Deen Student Affairs. (Olugbile, 2005; Unilorin, 2004; Olugbile, 2006; Edukugho, 2006; Olugbile, 2007).

Conflicts will always occur but a well managed conflict will not degenerate to violence. Since violence will not erupt without conflict as antecedents, one can assume that many of the school violence and insecurity illustrated above degenerated because their antecedents (causes) were not properly managed or that the conflicting parties did not explore the power of communication and conflict manager's personality in resolving the crises. It is on this background that this paper examines the place and constructive application of school communication and conflict manager's personality in school conflict and insecurity management. It presents a systematic analysis of what, how, and when to communicate in school conflict situations and what to consider in selecting resource persons as conflict negotiators in crisis situations.

### **Objectives of Communication in School Security and Conflict Management**

The core objectives of any communication effort in conflict or crisis management are to make positive information or idea common, to share progressive opinions, to positively impart on the attitude of stakeholders towards the organization and to transmit objective and not subjective decisions. Peretomode (1991 p.226) posits that "if communication is hampered in the administration of any organization, the entire organization suffers; when it is accurate, thorough and timely, the organization can move effectively toward goal achievement."

The need for constructive communication in school conflict management can not be over emphasized, in fact, it is central to the success of any school security and conflict resolution. Constructive communication process puts into consideration *who says what, to whom and by what means*. The need to put this into consideration in handling school crisis is elaborated in the Yale Communication Model (YCM). This model presents some key variables needed in making the process of conflict

communication constructive, problem solving and result oriented. A critical appraisal of the variables is done in the later stage of this work with the aim of identifying strategies that can enrich security and crisis management particularly in Nigerian higher institutions.

**Table 1: The Yale Model of Communication in Conflict Resolution**

<b>Communicator</b>	<b>Message</b>	<b>Audience</b>
Credibility	Argument	General
Personality		
Expertise	rational Vs emotional	
Knowledge/prior belief		
Trustworthiness	positive Vs negative	Demographic character
Attractiveness	Message style	age
Familiarity	delivery	gender
Likeability	Language	
Socioeconomic status		
Similarity		
Power	Presentation	
Personality/Characteristic		
Resource control	implicit Vs explicit conclusion	self-esteem
Desire for compliance	one-sided Vs two-sided argument	active participation
Surveillance	Amount of material	
	Length/ use of repetition	
	Extremity of position	

**Adopted from Horowitz & Bordens, 1995**

Apart from the fact that the above Yale Communication Model presents a wholelistic view of what should be injected into the process of communication in any situation of crisis management, it laid emphasis on the need to make communication in school security and conflict management persuasive this is because persuasiveness is the basic ingredient of conflict management communication and it is from it that other properties of constructive communication in conflict resolution stem.

Some of the variables in the model can find relevance in the design of a persuasive and result -oriented communication processes in school conflict management. Some of the variables identified in the model are adopted in the subsequent discussion.

### **Properties of Constructive Communication in School Conflict and Security Management**

A communication process that would yield result in school security and conflict management must be *inclusive and not exclusive*. It should be a collective process that involves all the stakeholders in the conflicting situation. Researches confirmed that one-side decision making and information dissemination in conflict management situation toughen rather than ameliorating the conflict (Priut & Rubin 1986, Horowitz & Bordens 1995). Inclusive communication yields problem solving or integrative solutions rather than contention. When communicating the causes, situations and resolution efforts in crisis management, most especially when the crisis involves students against school authority or staff unions against the school authority, an integrative or problem solving rather than contending approach should be employed. A process of communication in conflict situations is said to be contending if a conflicting group communicates only its on concerns rather than the interest of all the conflicting parties (Pruit & Robins 1986). During student riot and staff strike actions, school authority, security agents and chattered conflict managers could make progress at managing the conflict if they can maintain balance in what they communicate to the public. Communicating a one-sided information or interest often provoke deadlier offensive from the group the information does not favour (Horowitz & Bordens, 1995). To back up the use of inclusive communication approach, Peretomode (1991) advises that conflict management communicators should establish proper communication climate by establishing mutual thrust between themselves and the message receivers (students, parents, teachers) and also by maintaining credibility and feedback. With this, the aspirations of all the conflicting sides could be reconciled and blended to produce a solution that integrates the needs of all.

Also, communication in school security and conflict management *needs to be persuasive and not imposed*. Persuasive communication in school crisis management will apply rational and/or emotional arguments to convince the opposing group to change their attitude or behaviour in favour of peace, while an imposed communication leaves the opposing group with no alternative other than the ideal or the way out presented by the communicator. Persuasive communication when employed in school crisis management could mean that the communicator is ready to compromise a little of its stance to allow peace. Imposed communication does not encourage power restoration, rather, it signal to the opposing group that its power must be reduced. However, Fagenson & Cooper (1987) argues that promoting the feeling of power

reduction escalates conflict and aggression. Horowitz & Bordens (1995) support that the side whose power is reduced usually feels that it is under siege of the other group. School authority, despite being the custodian of the administrative power, may mismanage school conflict if it uses its power to communicate sanctions through any medium to the opposing student or staff group. No doubt sanctions can threaten or suppress the bargaining strength of the weaker group but it, in most cases, can not eradicate the group's conflicting intention (Leventher, 1970). Persuasive communication does not mean complete absence of instilling some fear into the mind of the rival group rather it means lacing the fear with some hope / assurance that the opposing group's interest would be taking care of. In fact, researches confirm that in persuasive communication, with small element of fear, conflicting attitude or behavior are changed better than communication with high level of fear. Communication that imposed alternatives on the rival group is often with high level of fear than the one that communicate alternatives persuasively (Hovland, et al. 1953). Thus to persuade school conflicting groups to work for peace, the communicator may have to argue against its own best interest i.e. to logically present its persuasion for peace as what is in the interest of all -this is what persuasive communication is all about.

In addition to this, school conflict communication should be a *devoid of propaganda and cognitive discrepancy*. Cognitive discrepancy is a condition that occurs when each conflicting group develops totally opposite explanation for the causes and situation of the conflict. Messages of the situation of conflict when developed on propaganda and cognitive discrepancy tends to breed rumor, it distort third party's understanding of the conflict and may hamper its involvement in the resolution of the conflict. Literature establishes the fact that third party in the situation of conflict tend to sympathize with the victims of lies rather than with the lying group (Bray 1999). Communicators in school crisis management needs not conceal the truth. Their messages for peace, their assurance of restoring power and their promise of cooperation towards developing the school should be sincerely communicated. Conflict-resolution communication that is full of propaganda and cognitive discrepancy stem from the communicator's weak sense of credibility and trustworthiness. It often means that the communicator has skeleton in his cupboard. A credible communicator tends to communicate fact that can win audience for peace rather than communicating negative

and inflammatory messages before, during or after negotiations. Before negotiation, the communicator can intensify a controversy, making it harder to get people to work together or even talk. Thus, the nature of what are contained as conflict situation reports and how these are presented can go along way to determine how effective conflict resolution efforts can be.

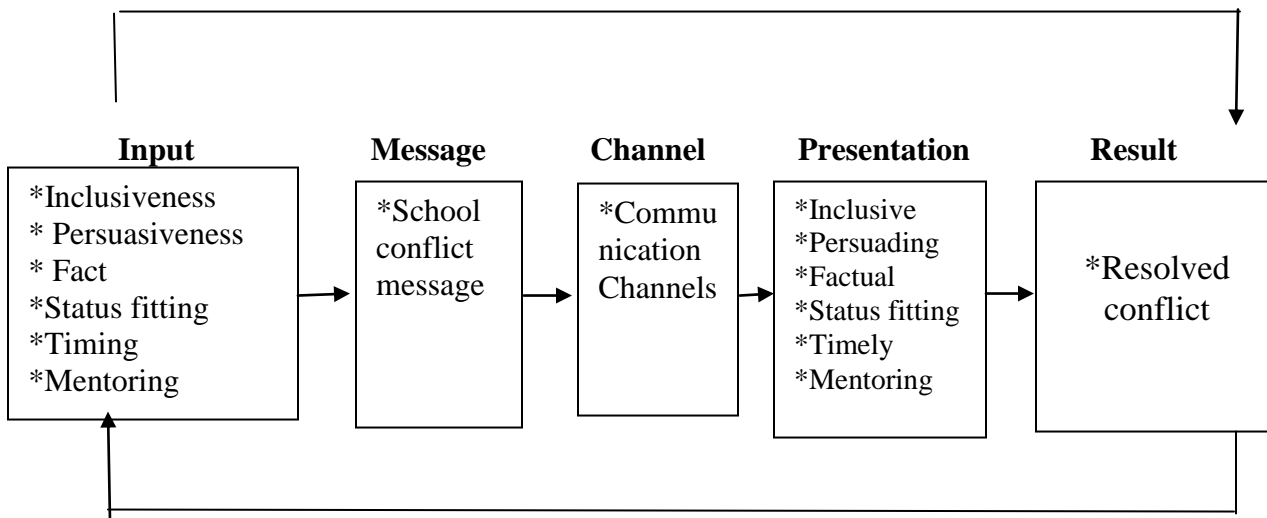
In addition, communication in conflict resolution needs to be packaged to fit the demographic character and socioeconomic status of the audience. People perceive ideas of peace and conflict in relation to their social wealth, age and gender (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). Horowitz & Bordens confirm this when they write that:

For less educated, uninformed audience a one- side message works best. In a one sided you present only your side of the issue and draw conclusions for the audience. For a well-educated, well- informed audience a two-sided message works best. The more educated audience probably is already aware of the other side of the argument .If you attempt to persuade them with a one sided argument they may question your motive (p. 275)

A conflict involving higher institution administrators and academic personnel will require constructive two- sided messages of appeal and caution while a conflict involving student's bodies and school authority will require that the peace communicator fashion his messages to fit the thinking and social learning capability of adolescents or young agile adults.

Lastly, messages of resolution and peace in school conflict management *need to be timely delivered*. This is necessary to give a clear stance of the conflict management team and the progress made so far in resolving the conflict. Delivering the message early can help third party peace negotiators to project where to direct their intervention. Such timely communication, most especially when it is positive and reveals that the stronger of the conflicting parties will work for peace and for the interest of all, alleviate fear and hinder the spread of rumor or fear of victimization, it reduces tension in conflict situation. Also, in school crisis situation, school authorities can work on communicating, quickly enough, their effort to return peace into the school and to meet the demand of the opposing group where necessary. Delivering the message first and earlier than that of the opposing group could make the first communicator's message have more impact than that that the opposing group would latter.

**Figure 1: Model of Process of Communication in School Conflict Management**



**Agbonna & Yusuf, 2009**

As shown on the figure above, the indispensable properties of school conflict messages are contained in first block and marked as input. The packaged message requires appropriate communication channels chosen based on the nature of the message to be communicated to the warring parties. The presumed output of such message is a resolved conflict. Thus, it can be theorized that school conflict can be resolved if school conflict management is inclusive, persuasive, factual, and status-fitting.

### **Conflict Manager's Personality in School Conflict and Security Management**

Personality is the pattern of characteristic thought, feelings and behaviors that distinguishes one person from another and that persist over time and conditions. It is a social mirror that reflects human social stance, disposition to situations or experiences, and inclinations. Personality also reflects volume of human social learning, power of social influence, and sometimes, social wealth and level of education. In most cases personality is a build-up of human record of credibility and expertise (Roediger, Capaldi, Paris, Polivy & Herman, 1995). The personality of the school crisis manager can determine how influential his negotiating power for peace can be. Negotiating for peace is the major function of school conflict manager most especially when the conflict



manager is an outsider in the circle of the situation of conflict or a third party- some one that is not directly responsible for the conflict or affected by the circumstances of the conflict.

Negotiating peace in school conflict situation is all about designing a working mechanism through which the attitude of the conflicting parties would be positively influenced and directed towards bringing about peace. The known conflict managers in school conflict situations are community leaders, renowned technocrat across all fields of life, professional conflict managers or consultants, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) personnel, and personnel of Student Affairs, and Guidance and Counselor Units. However, how well these managers can resolve conflict and avert school insecurity depends largely on their functional personality.

### **Functional Personality Required of School Conflict Managers**

*A school conflict manager must be credible.* Credibility is the power to inspire, in the aggrieved party, the belief in what the crisis manager is saying. When credibility is strong the trust of the party been persuaded to accept peace will increase most especially if the aggrieved party is made to believe that the negotiator has nothing to gain his effort of persuasion or does not take side in the conflict. To maintain this trust however, the manager must be sincere and must be a personality of clean record. Such manager must fit into what Horowitz & Bordens (1995) refer to as *epistemic* authority. They describe *epistemic authority* as an individual who can influence others to modify their belief and perceptions- an authority with the power of credibility can actually make others to unfreeze their counterproductive beliefs and perceptions about the other party.

*Also the school conflict manager must value peace* before he can successfully persuade the conflicting parties to work towards resolving the school crisis. Researches confirm that one tends to promote what one highly value (Kristiansen & Zama, 1988) Horowitz & Bordens (1995) define value as a conception of what is desirable, and as a guideline for human standard behaviour. A school conflict manager that values peace probably would see conflict resolution as a give-and-take exercise. Though, valuing peace does not mean to compromise school objectives or compromise the exclusive right of school authority to be the custodian of the utmost power in the administration of the school, yet, the utmost power can be judiciously applied when the holder of the power values peace and has the personality of compromising a little to be able to retain

peace, knowing fully well that there is no win- all in conflict resolution.

*The leader* of the negotiation group who may also be the school leader *should not have the personality that insulates the activities of his conflict management group.* Group insulation occurs in a situation when the leader of the negotiation group prevents the group to seek outsiders' analysis of and information on how to go about resolving the conflict. Group insulation is dangerous in conflict management it easily brings about a phenomenon called "groupthink". Horowitz & Bordens, (1995) describe group think phenomenon as a breakdown in the rational decision-making ability of members of a group. In most cases, an insulated group finds it difficult to arrive at making tangible decisions. Domineering conflict manager tends to insulate his team members in conflict resolution process, suppress the opinion of his members and eventually pushes the team to adopt his own opinion as the team's decisions .To avoid consequences of insulating a conflict management group, the conflict manager needs to liberate the thinking concerns of his team members, make consultations and produce a resolution that is factual and universal in the conflict situation.

Another important personality required of the conflict manager is expertise. Expertise is the manager's credentials, his training and knowledge of conflict resolution that he may have acquired from experience. The manager should be able to display reach experience and sound judgment of conflict situation before his intervention can be effective. These is why it is important that the conflict manager be a person that has been involved in resolving school conflict and a person that may have been personally trained in the area of human management. Some authorities have argued for the involvement of Sociologists of Education, Psychologists, and Guidance and Counselors in school crisis and human resources management (Owens 2001).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In resolving school conflict, developing a constructive communication process and influential conflict negotiator's personality are very important. No doubt, schools can not avoid experiencing one conflict or the other but a great deal of such conflict can be managed and be guided from disrupting school efforts towards attaining its manifest and latent goals if the conflicting parties are systematic in the way they communicate their grievances, situation of the conflict and their readiness to negotiate for peace and

if the negotiator mediating the resolution process is of good personality. In the light of these, it is recommended that:

1. Communication in school conflict and security management should be constructively designed and delivered towards effecting peace rather than escalating the friction among the school conflicting parties.
2. The conflict negotiator in school conflict and insecurity situations should be of personality that can convince and assure the conflicting parties of the sincerity of the conflict resolution process and that of his involvement in the resolution.

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