# An Exploratory Study into the Causes of Conflict and the Effect of Conflict Management Style on Outcome in a Competitive Workplace

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**Abstract**

*This study was conducted to explore the causes of conflict among coworkers in a competitive workplace. Data were collected from a local campus of an International Private Schooling System using participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The data analysis identified five major causes of conflict. The impact of conflict management style and approach on outcome were also explored. Finally, the usefulness of research findings has been discussed.*

**Keywords:** Conflict Management, Human Resource Management, Secondary Schools, Teacher

## Introduction

The study of organizational behavior offers that conflict is a vital element where human interaction is concerned; it is unavoidable because every individual employee has his/her own personal likes and dislikes. Conflicts among colleagues usually occur when there is an instance of disagreement on certain opinions or behaviors. Although the nature of conflict is not in itself so harmful, however, if not handled appropriately the effects can range from short term to long term dysfunction. Conversely, if handled with utmost care, the result of a conflict situation can have long term functional benefits for all parties concerned.

Conflict, as yet, appears to have no generally accepted definition which one can pinpoint to in order to substantiate exactly what conflict is. Although, there is no literature to support a hard and fast definition of conflict, however there are two approaches which have emerged which enable one to shed more light on the subject in order to better understand it.

One such approach implies conflict to take on a more of an aggressive face, and applies in those situations whereby individuals deliberately act in a competing way in order to prevent each other from achieving their desired goals. This appears to be a more popular way to

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understand conflict, particularly in the cases of industrial relations and intragroup conflict situations. (Schmidt and Kochan, 1972)

The second approach looks at conflict from a more of a broader view, and in effect generalizes how conflict occurs and how it is managed. Pondy (1967) offers that in his definition of conflict, individuals who are involved in a conflict situation must have some sort of preconceived notion as to which mode of conflict handling will be adopted. This definition by far allows a branched out look at conflict handling which includes means other than simply competitiveness to function.

In either case, both the approaches are correct in their own way because they are both diverse in nature. Conflict is in essence a situation which occurs naturally in every organization where diverse ideas, attitudes, skills and experiences are combined to work together. Therefore, to find a one off definition for conflict would be unfair and restrictive.

## Problem Statement and Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the major causes for conflict occurrence among coworkers, the styles adopted for conflict management as well as the outcomes of conflict management styles in each instance. More specifically this research is an effort to answer the following questions:

i).   What are the various causes of conflict?
ii).  What measures are taken by actors involved in a conflict situation to manage the conflict?
iii). What are the structural approaches offered to manage conflict situations?
iv).  What are the outcomes of the applied conflict management styles?

## Literature Review

How individual employees, groups and organizations at large attempt to manage conflict situations has a direct consequence on their performance and/or effectiveness. In other words, ideas; attitudes; beliefs; rules and regulations all have an impact on the way actors within an organizational framework perceive conflict management. (Tjosvold, 1998)

Thomas (1992) says that when brought under scrutiny, managers spend a fairly substantial portion of their time managing conflict situations. What this tells us is that, instances for conflicts to occur are natural within every organizational setup, and it is a part of every manager's job to be able to effectively manage all such instances. Whether they are always successful at managing every conflict situation is yet another issue for scrutiny. In a nutshell, although every manager

makes a positive attempt at managing various conflict situations, however it must always be kept in mind that the leadership style adopted by a manager will have an influence on the way he/she will approach the conflict situation.

Researchers have underlined the fact that the most constructive way to handle any conflict situation at work is largely dependent upon the prevailing circumstances of the conflict itself (Axelrod, 1984; Hocker and Wilmot, 1991; Rahim, 1992). In other words, the style of conflict management is contingent upon the situation of conflict and the source of conflict. Thus the above mentioned researchers have construed the 'contingency perspective'. This idea is suggestive of the view that, the party responsible for managing a conflict situation must have a good foresight and understanding of human psychology in order to determine the best style of conflict management needed for the particular situation. The term contingency itself makes the idea very vivid indeed; it requires one to realize fully that many conflict situations occur without warning, and thus in such circumstances a proactive approach may not be possible but rather a reactive approach is inevitable.

Alternatively, scholars such as (Blake and Mouton, 1970, 1981; Fisher and Ury, 1981; Pneuman and Breuhl, 1982) are of the understanding that waiting for a conflict situation to arise in order to determine the best conflict management style may not be the best approach. They believe that a problem solving approach trumps the contingency perspective, in the sense that it creates a bigger sense of unity and camaraderie among the conflicting parties. These scholars offer the 'one-best-way perspective' towards managing any conflict situation. The purpose of this particular approach is that, it encourages team work, creativity and a general feeling of tolerance, upon having collectively managed a conflict situation. In essence, the 'one-best-way perspective' marks the distinct outlines for teams to make unanimous efforts towards 'fizzling-down' a conflict situation. By means of sharing ideas and 'talking-it-out', team members can think more rationally and in the long run feel more at ease upon knowing that they contributed in a positive way.

Some scholars have a more deliberate approach to suggesting the most appropriate means to conflict management. Thomas (1992) has applied both the above perspectives into two time horizons. He offers the 'time perspective' and states that the 'one-best- way perspective' is largely a long term organization solution to conflict management and has benefits which are meant to last a longer period of time. Conversely, he also implies that the 'contingency perspective' is best fit for solving short term conflict situations and helps answer the problems of that particular moment in time in which conflict has occurred.

Despite there being a vast variety of conflict management strategies, the research and findings along with theories all point toward the Dual Concern Theory devised by Rubin, Pruitt and Kim (1994). This particular theory takes its lead from the Cooperation and Competition theory which was developed by Deutch (1973). The Dual Concern Theory implies that conflict management is a product of two possible scenarios:

i).   A high or low concern for self
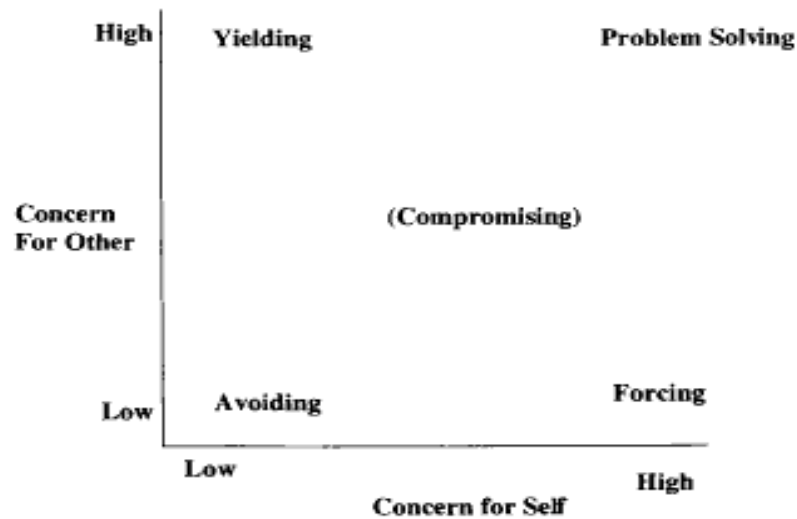ii).  A high or low concern for other



Figure 1: Theoretical representation of the five conflict management strategies as a function of concern for self and concern for other. (Adopted from De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Naute, 2001)

The figurative representation of the Dual Concern Theory above shows the following ideas:

- A high concern for other and low concern for self means that the resulting style will be yielding. This style involves compromising to a very large extent and accepting differences in the form of one-sided concessions, unreserved promises and the contributing of support.
- A low concern of other and high concern of self means that the resulting style will be forcing. This style involves a competing attitude which will include intimidation and bluffs, convincing opinions, and positional commitments.

- A low concern for both other and self means that the resulting style will be avoiding. This style involves minimizing the significance of the grievances, and attempts to stifle opinions about the issues.
- A high concern for both other and self means that the resulting style will be problem solving. This style involves a collaborative attitude and will be leaning toward a concurrence that is pleasing for both own and others' goals and aspirations as much as possible. (De Dreu, et al., 2001)

Studies have also shown, however, that in more complex conflict situations, a one off approach of conflict management may not prove to be very effective. In fact, chances of there being a more of a negative reaction to the conflict management style are even higher. If the conflicting parties already have very strong negative feelings towards each other, then the expected outcome of the problem solving approach may not be achieved. Furthermore, the investment of time and effort in such case of conflict management will result in greater losses. (Hocker and Wilmot, 1991)

Alternatively, when applying the contingency theory, if for instance the situation calls for the competing or forcing style of conflict management then chances are that relationships may be negatively affected in the long run. Also, overall costs of implementing this style will be ultimately greater than the benefits which were possibly expected. (Rubin et al, 1994) It is, therefore, an understanding that by alternating between the two approaches or by creating a hybrid of the two approaches, such negative effects can be reduced substantially. (Walten; Cutcher-Gershenfeld; Mckenzie, 1994)

As noted above, a contingency perspective offers a feasible solution for conflict situations which may arise at any given moment. Further, literature reveals that conflict management styles cannot be predetermined and any party responsible for resolving conflict situations should not expect a single style to work every time a conflict may arise.

It must also be clearly understood that as the level of conflict in a group intensifies, the style of conflict management needed will also have to be altered accordingly. This being due to the cause that high conflict intensity may in principle identify with high levels of interpersonal relationships and eventually trust. Therefore, managing conflict without determining the level of conflict intensity in a situation may result in failure to manage the conflict at all.

Andrews and Tjosvold (1983) suggested that when conflicting parties collectively and openly discuss their disagreements in order to coalesce with their designs and interests, the resulting effect is stronger

relationships and better decisions. By suggesting this, the researchers are in fact referring to a 'cooperative problem-solving approach'. The more open the idea sharing, the easier it is for everyone to understand and appreciate each other in the long run. On the other hand, other researchers have come to the conclusion that not every person has the capacity or know-how for such a problem solving mechanism to work. (Deutche, 1973; Thomas, Jamieson and Moore, 1978)

**Context of the Study: Competitive Work Environment**
Private secondary schools are highly prone to conflict among employees. The causes are vast, but the most obvious diagnoses include the high level of competitiveness and result oriented performance evaluations. Where such types of stress causing factors exist, conflict will arise as a by-product.

The study was conducted in one of the largest private sector schooling system in the world. The schooling system has enrolled over 80,000 students worldwide. Besides its Pakistan operations, it has strategic business units located in countries such as UK, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Oman, UAE and Bangladesh. Employing thousands of staff as school branch administrators, teachers and junior staff, the schooling system has played a vital role in employment creation in Pakistan specifically.

The Peshawar Chapter of the School includes 4 major campuses which are further divided into 10 branches. The total number of teachers employed is over 210, and the combined number of school branch administrators is 13 which is further sub divided into school heads and deputy heads.

The data for this study was collected from one of the four major campuses working in Peshawar. The selected campus has three branches namely, Girls Branch, Boys Branch and A levels Branch, and each branch has its own headmaster/mistress as well as deputy headmaster/mistress. The campus employs a combined teaching staff of 80 persons.

The selected campus was an ideal setup for this research, since it houses three distinct branches with similar organizational structures. Also, because the purpose of this research revolves around conflict management in a highly competitive organizational environment, therefore the said campus is very much suitable in terms of it being a secondary and college level education provider.
The system of education is largely based on external examination protocols, and therefore time is always of the essence with primary attention being paid to result production. This is an ideal breeding ground for high levels of stress and critical performance evaluations. The

resulting effect is often seen in the form of conflict of different types which are later analyzed and discussed in this study.

**Research Methodology and Design**
An exploratory research was conducted using case study method. Both primary and secondary data were collected. While most of the primary data were collected through participant observation technique and semi-structured interviews, secondary data were collected from official records including personal files and other documentation.

Mostly qualitative data was collected through observation and semi-structured interviews of Heads, Deputy Heads and Teachers. The purpose of the study required the gathering of detailed narrative account conflict instances occurring within the school and the manner in which the same have been managed by the actors. To gain the firsthand knowledge of the events, participant observation technique has been used wherever possible.

Interviews were conducted of three school heads and two deputy heads. The design of the interviews was informal and conversational, with open ended questions to allow for maximum information sharing and reflection of thoughts.

Observations of school heads, deputy heads and teaching staff occurred on various locations of the campus. The focus of observations included areas such as: staff rooms, branch offices, resource rooms, laboratories, classrooms, corridors and playgrounds.

**Data Analysis**
The data collected through primary (observation and interviews) and secondary (official records and documentation) sources were compiled, categorized and analyzed under following heads:
- Cause for conflict
- Type of conflict
- Style of conflict management
- Structural approach to conflict management
- Outcome of conflict management approach

Data Analysis revealed following five major causes of conflict in a competitive and is followed by detailed analysis:
  i).    Duties and Workload Allocations;
  ii).   Ridiculing coworker after being praised by the Head;
  iii).  As a result of Performance Appraisal certain teachers receive a higher salary increment as compared to their colleagues;
  iv).   Miscommunication; and

v).    Pressure to use all possible resources.

*Cause for Conflict – Duties and Workload Allocations*
Teachers with a higher workload will often prefer to avoid any extra duties, thus creating conflict with their own colleagues who are performing extra duties. This also happens largely with teachers who have served the most number of years in the school, and feel that they should be given preferential treatment by not having to perform any extra duties.

The manifestation of the conflict can be observed in the form of mild arguments and disagreements among those who perform extra duties and those who do not. It can also be seen in the form of cold shouldering and alienation of certain teachers from the group.

Type of Conflict: The type of conflict in this case is task conflict, as the conflicting party does not wish to agree with the given duties and responsibilities and would rather to choose to work in the way that they feel fit to.

Style of Conflict Management: The avoiding style of conflict management is adopted here, and this is largely influenced by interventions by intermediaries (who happen to be other members of the teaching staff). The conflict is suppressed in two possible ways:
  (a) The teacher who does not wish to perform extra duties is then exempted by those colleagues who have the same duration of service or happen to be good friends with this teacher. The burden of duties is then divided further among other junior teachers.
  (b) Alternatively, one way or the other the teacher who is unwilling to perform extra duties is forced into performing them anyway by fellow colleagues. It is noted here that personal terms among colleagues play a vital role in the way in which conflicts like these are managed.

Approach to Conflict Management: In many cases the school administration has to step in and attempt to manage the conflict. Here it is noted that by emphasizing superordinate goals, the conflicting parties are made to realize that their performing of extra duties will result in higher degrees of long term benefits for themselves and the school.

Outcome: Due to the fact that there is a general lack of knowledge on how to properly manage conflict, therefore the avoiding style adopted by the intermediaries to resolve this conflict has only temporary effects.

Conflict is suppressed and more important issues are then focused upon for the time being. Conflict still remains and erupts at any given moment.

*Cause for Conflict — Ridiculing a coworker after being praised by the Head*
Occasionally, when there is a school event or after the completion of an academic term, teachers who have performed the best are given a special mention by the school head in the staff meeting. This action results in mockery and ridicule by those who have not been praised or those who do not usually prefer to participate in any school events.

Although the ridiculing takes the form of mild jokes and taunts, however if continued for a longer period of time, can result in arguments and cold shouldering.

Type of Conflict: Differences in values can be classified as the type of conflict in this case. Those who have been praised are usually the ones who view the success of the school as their own success as opposed to those who prefer not to make any extra effort in raising the standard of the school in anyway.

Style of Conflict Management: Conflicts like these often have a short lived duration, as the praising of any employee in a staff meeting only takes place after certain major events. Therefore the style of conflict management most likely to be seen here is the avoiding style. This style is adopted when a third party intervention (mostly by fellow colleagues) is brought into play to solve the problem.

Although this style is not always considered to be the most preferable in managing conflict, however in this case the result is observed to be positive as everyone learns to accept the praised individuals for their true efforts.

Approach to Conflict Management: Reducing differentiation is an approach which is offered by the organization to bring about a holistic feeling of camaraderie and acceptance. One method of applying this approach is by allowing certain leisure activities in which everyone is willing to participate and thus create a general feeling of unity within the team.

Therefore, occasionally the teachers are taken on one-day trips to outstation localities for relaxation and meaningful socialization. Alternatively, teachers are also made to participate in workshops that require them to perform a good deal of teamwork related tasks.

Outcome: School routine is extremely hectic for both administrators and teachers; therefore conflicts like these do not take the place of high priority tasks, such as: lesson planning, teaching, analyzing and evaluating students' academic performance etc.

Upon adopting the avoiding style of conflict management and later the implementation of the structural approach, the conflict is suppressed and is superseded by more important tasks at hand. However, a certain level of acceptance is visible eventually.

*Cause for Conflict – Variation in Salary Increment arising out of Annual Performance Appraisal*
Towards the middle of every academic year (which is usually in the month of January), the organization undergoes an employee performance appraisal exercise. Upon the completion of this exercise, each employee receives a certain percentage financial increment which is attached to their basic pay.

The conflict in this case arises when certain teachers receive a higher salary increment as compared to their colleagues. The manifestation of the conflict can be observed in the form of arguments in which those teachers who have received a higher salary increment may be accused of being the administration's 'Pets'. Alternatively, those who have not received a substantial performance increment will have to face some light mockery by their colleagues, which can cause aggravation.

Type of Conflict: The performance appraisal exercise is conducted on the basis of certain guidelines which have been predefined in organizational policies; therefore the type of conflict observed here is disagreement on rules. Those employees who are not fully familiar with the organizational policies, will most likely disagree with them upon the completion of the appraisal exercise.

Style of Conflict Management: Considering the fact that conflicts arising due to disagreements on performance appraisals only occur once every academic year, therefore the duration for the conflict to last is limited. The most common style of conflict management seen here is the avoiding style, and is adopted by those who have received the higher salary increment. These employees choose to avoid commenting and participating in any discussion with their colleagues related to the appraisal exercise.

The accommodating style is also seen here, when certain teachers who have received a lower salary increment, are willing to accept the outcome of the appraisal exercise for what it is. These teachers

are willing to put aside their disagreement and make an effort to help their colleagues more.

Approach to Conflict Management: The administration has to intervene also to manage this conflict if they notice that the conflict is getting prolonged. By emphasizing superordinate goals, the administration is able to divert the attention of all the teachers by setting new targets for the academic year, which will hopefully influence the next performance appraisal.

Furthermore, the conflict is suppressed even more when the organization increases resources. This strategy is meant to facilitate the teaching process and keep everyone more focused on their job description as teachers.

Outcome: Performance appraisal exercises are a highly sensitive issue for all concerned. Whether it is a matter of receiving a higher or a lower salary increment, each teacher is affected in some way or the other. Conflict arising as a result of the appraisal exercise is limited to a certain period of time (lasting up to 2 – 3 months of the appraisal exercise).

Therefore, as a result of the conflict management style and the structural approach implemented to handle the grievances, the conflict is to a certain extent suppressed and the appraisal is accepted by all until the next performance appraisal period.

*Cause for Conflict – Miscommunication*
Where we find a large number of people with different personalities and perspectives, we are also bound to find disagreements and a certain level of misunderstandings caused by lack of proper communication. Similar is the case found in this particular organization, where in each branch we find more than 25 individuals interacting on a daily basis.

Miscommunication caused by third party interventions and gossips is the major cause for conflict here, and it can occur without warning too. Often fuel is added to the fire, when third party intervention results in further miscommunication and non-issues become causes for very heated arguments and eventually professional rivalry.

It is observed that the misunderstandings that allow for gossips to take place are at times due to personal disagreements, and happen among those colleagues who have had close personal terms with each other in the past.

Type of Conflict: The type of conflict that is observed here is barriers to effective communication. When two individuals have trouble understanding each other's point of view, the resulting situation is

conflict. Furthermore, what makes the situation worse with this type of conflict is poor judgment and hasty decision making by the conflicting individuals.

Style of Conflict Management: The competing style of conflict management is observed here, as both the conflicting parties are aggravated to the point of not willing to communicate with each other at all.

In this case, even intervention by colleagues as the intermediaries results in further fueling of the conflict. If continued for a prolonged period of time, the conflict can develop into full-fledged professional rivalry.

Approach to Conflict Management: Although such type of conflict takes place quite often in this organization, however in many instances it does not get out of hand. Therefore to keep such conflict at a minimal level, the school administration intervenes indirectly by keeping all the teachers engaged in extra duties and responsibilities as much as possible. Furthermore, the structural approach to managing this type of conflict is by reducing differentiation and improving communication and understanding.

Therefore, occasionally the teachers are taken on one-day trips to outstation localities for relaxation and meaningful socialization. Alternatively, teachers are also made to participate in workshops that require them to perform a good deal of teamwork related tasks.

Outcome: It is an understood idea that misunderstandings cannot be eliminated and conflicts can arise as a direct result. Therefore, despite the structural approach to managing this type of conflict, the style of conflict management adopted by the colleagues renders it ineffective to a certain degree. In less serious instances, more important tasks supersede the conflict momentarily.

*Cause for Conflict – Pressure for optimal utilization of resources*
Being an international schooling system, the work environment is a highly competitive and result orientated. The growing demands of the education sector and an annual increase in school fees put a rather huge amount of burden on all levels of this organization.

Due to major limitations on time, the teachers are often under a great deal of pressure to use all possible resources to teach their students about their respective subjects. Although all possible facilities are available for the teachers and students, yet at times the school may run short of certain resources.

The conflict arises among teachers particularly when they have to share certain limited resources. As a direct consequence, the manifestation of the conflict is observed as impatience with each other and on rare occasions heated arguments can take place.

Type of Conflict: Sharing of limited resources is the type of conflict that takes place here. All the teachers are pressed for time and are also under immense pressure to ensure that their respective subjects contribute towards an outstanding academic result, therefore sharing of limited resources results in impatience.

Style of Conflict Management: Despite what has been stated above about the level of conflict that may arise due to limited resources, however at times certain teachers make an effort to positively manage the conflict at hand.  The accommodating style of conflict management is adopted by those teachers who are willing to end the tussle and allow their colleagues to gain access to the available resources instead. This way the unnecessary bickering and time wastage is avoided and the administration is intimated to organize more resources as soon as possible.

Approach to Conflict Management: Increasing resources for the sake of facilitating the teaching and learning process is an issue of no compromise for this organization. Therefore, the moment such a conflict has to arise; the administration immediately intervenes and allocates the necessary budget to meet further resource requirements.

Outcome: This type of conflict is made functional when certain teachers put the interests of their colleagues before their own. By allowing others to use the available resources until the school administration allocates further more resources, critical amount of time is saved and stronger relations are built among the colleagues.

Table 1:Summary of Causes & Types of Conflicts, Styles & Approaches to Conflict Management and Corresponding Outcomes

| S.No. | Cause of Conflict | Type of Conflict | Style of Conflict Management | Approach to Conflict Management | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Duties and workload allocations | Task Conflict | Avoidance | Emphasizing Superordinate Goals | Conflict is suppressed and more important issues are then focused upon for the time being; conflict still remains |
| 2. | Ridiculing coworker after being praised by the Head | Differences in Values | Avoidance | Reducing Differentiation | Conflict is superseded by more important tasks at hand; however, a certain level of acceptance is visible eventually |
| 3. | As a result of Performance Appraisal certain teachers receive a higher salary increment as compared to their colleagues | Disagreement on Rules | Avoidance; and sometimes Accommodation | Emphasizing Superordinate Goals | The conflict is to a certain extent suppressed and the appraisal is accepted by all until the next performance appraisal period. |
| 4. | Miscommunication | Barriers to Effective Communication | Competition | Reducing differentiation and improving communication and understanding | In more serious cases grievances persist, however in less serious instances, more important tasks supersede the conflict |
| 5. | Pressure to use all possible resources to teach | Sharing of Limited Resources | Accommodation | Increasing resources | By allowing others to use the available resources critical amount of time is saved and stronger relations are built among the colleagues. |

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study has highlighted the fact that conflict among individuals is a naturally occurring phenomenon. As yet there is no clear definition as to what conflict really is, but there is a general consensus on the theoretical ideas surrounding it. Conflict occurs when individuals feel a certain degree of frustration due to the actions of their colleagues or superiors in an organizational setup.

The data analysis revealed that every conflict situation is not necessarily bad for an organization, and if handled properly, can lead to very beneficial results in the long run.  The relevant ideas which are common among many research articles are suggestive of how conflict can be made constructive or functional by means of certain conflict management styles and combinations of the said styles. A good knowledge of causes which leads to conflict situations has resulted from the current study. The study also explored the effectiveness of various conflict management styles and approaches.

The research also found that even though there are a variety of conflicts occurring at coworker level, however there appeared to be no major long term negative effects of such conflict on the organizational performance in long run. Such findings are indicative of the fact that where high levels of competitiveness exist, conflict will also exist and will in effect have functional outcomes by means of encouraging more task orientated behavior among all employees.

In simple words, in a highly competitive environment the outcomes in each event of conflict and conflict management are positive because employees do not have time to dwell on grudges of any sort. Furthermore, where it is possible for the organization to minimize the conflict or avoid any anticipated conflict situations, it makes sure that proper resources are employed to aid conflict prevention.

Conclusively, conflict management is both an art and a science, therefore the study has added to the body of knowledge in this field by focusing on a local chapter of international secondary school setup. It is hoped that the study will be of great help and assistance to organizational managers in general and academic managers in particular.

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