



CONFLICTS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES: A TOOL FOR INDUSTRIAL HARMONY

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Abstract

The non-existence of conflict may suggest tyranny, stagnation and uniformity; while its presence can be symptomatic of democracy, growth, self-actualization and diversity. Sequel to this assertion, this study therefore examines conflict management strategies as a tool for industrial harmony. The specific objective of this research is to investigate different strategies that can be explored by organizations in achieving industrial harmony. A sample size of 296 respondents was adopted from the working population of one thousand, one hundred and forty eight (1,148) employees. The data were generated through the use of structured questionnaire. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Findings from the study revealed that collective bargaining strategy has a moderately significant relationship with industrial harmony ($r=0.418$, $P<0.05$). Also, confrontation strategy ($r=0.127$, $P>0.05$) and avoidance strategy ($r=0.131$, $P>0.05$) has no significant relationship with industrial harmony. The study concluded that for industrial harmony to be achieved, organizations need to consider collective bargaining strategy as a tool, as well as other integrative conflict management strategies such as; accommodation, reconciliation, and negotiation. It was recommended that organizations should adopt a participatory style of management rather than an autocratic style. Also, avenue for dialogue, taking part in decision making process, workshop and seminars that centered on organizational conflict management should be organized for the staff, in order to achieve the stated goals of the business.

Key words:

Conflict management,
Collective bargaining,
Industrial harmony,
Smoothing and
Negotiation.

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1. Introduction

There is a notion as to what a conflict symbolizes and it is interpreted as wicked, avoidable, destructive, irrational and injurious. However, when it is perceived in a system, it should be avoided and managers should do everything for its elimination. The issue of conflict has become a major challenge to management because of its ubiquity and pervasive nature. Conflicts mostly arise as a result of employees competing for scarce resources. Ford (2007), opined that conflict remains an inevitable situation in everyday life either between individuals, groups, societies or organizations at large. It is logical therefore to say that, the manner in which conflict is controlled determines whether it is going to be beneficial or damaging in nature. There is no gainsaying to the fact that the ethnic, social and organizational conflicts have affected Nigeria as a nation, be it in the past or at present. Some of this conflict includes; the labor unions such as Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress (TUC) versus Government, Muslim society against Christians groups, mostly in the Northern part of Nigeria. Other tribal groups conflict are the one in Taraba State (Tivs and Jukuns), Osun State (Modakeke and Ife), Anambra State (Aguleri and Umuleri) and Plateau State in Jos area (Hausa / Fulani) to mention but a few. Which means that the study of conflict, be it at a macro or micro level, calls for special attention in Nigeria at this present moment with the related interventions and diplomatic resolutions.

In practice, conflict is said to be the presence of disagreement between different individuals with varied opinions, goals and values that affects the general interest of the organization at large. It is also a process whereby people within the system work against each other's interest (Alebiosu & Akintayo, 2007). There are different perspectives to the issue of conflict in an organization. To some, it is perceived as a destructive state that has to be circumvented if possible at all cost. While others see it as a platform that compels administrators to be on their toes, and also, as an avenue for personal development and more often times people use it to their advantages. Fox (2001) postulated that conflict occurs when parties in an organization have a negative perception towards one another and they no longer trust themselves. Based on this contention, it can be presumed that conflict will always exist be it between groups, administrative members or among organizations in the same line of business. However, organizational conflicts from business point of view, has to do with a disagreement that occurs when the values, aims, and interests of different people or groups are not compatible with one another. Hence, the need to frustrate each other in order for the set goals not to be achieved. Lewis, French & Steane, (1997) observed

that organizational conflict is inevitable because it is a product of mismatch of people's values and it arises from divergent behaviors. Therefore, the necessity for new strategies to workplace conflict management has become the central focus of public employment guiding principle (Gibbons, 2007).

Moving from perception to reality, management of conflict is not the same as resolution of conflict. Management of conflict in an organization entails providing a platform through which the aggrieved members in the system come together through a collective bargaining approach in order to reduce the dysfunctions of conflict so as to improve learning and efficiency in an organization (Rahim, 2002). Furthermore, labour management relations are a strong indicator of the industrial relations system. It is therefore vital to state that if there are any grievances or disputes between labour and management, this will not only have an adverse effect on the industrial relations system, but the whole system of the entire society at large.

Previous studies on the subject of organizational conflict have explained why conflict cannot be totally ruled out or eradicated in the work environment and possible ways to manage it. However, constant changes in the work system vis-à-vis demands of both employees and employers call for a periodic study of conflict situation and its management strategies in the contemporary workplace. Hence, this study examines conflict management strategies as a tool for achieving industrial harmony. The specific objective of this study is to investigate the different strategies that can be explored by different organizations in achieving industrial harmony.

1.1. Research Hypotheses

Sequel to the broad objective of this study, the following hypotheses thereby emerge.

- i. **H₀**: Collective bargaining strategy has no significant relationship with industrial harmony.
- ii. **H₀**: Confrontation strategy has no significant relationship with industrial harmony.
- iii. **H₀**: Avoidance strategy has no significant relationship with industrial harmony.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Most often times, people describe the word conflict as fighting, whereas, fighting is said to be one aspect of conflict within an organization. This study is therefore anchored on the behavior theory and contemporary theory respectively.

2.1.1. Behaviour theory

A study by Rahim (2002), identifies the common incidence of conflict either between management, workers or groups within the organization and comes to the conclusion that the term conflict is inevitable in a business environment. The study further argues that conflict is bad and can as well be prevented. The finest strategy for conflict is either to avoid or find a lasting solution to it when it occurs.

2.1.2. Contemporary Theory

According to Jury (2003), this theory is explained as the interaction that involves both the society and its environment. He perceives conflict as a required condition of the organizational life if the organization is to be reactive to change. This school of thought is of the opinion that conflict is both purposeful and receptive to change. Therefore, the study concludes that the best approach to handling organizational conflict is not to subdue or resolve it but provide a strategy, so as to reduce its dysfunctional consequences.

2.2. Conceptual Clarifications

2.2.1. Concept of Organizational Conflict

It is often said that in an environment which involves people working and interacting together, conflict becomes inevitable and in most cases, it becomes part of transacting business (Umar, 2000). A study by Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2008), among 660 Human Resource Practitioners, indicated that almost half (44%) out of the respondents described that clashes/conflicts are managed continually at the work place. Also, the report further stated that most managers spend up to 3-4 hours of their time in a week to resolve problems as well as managing conflicts. Obasan (2011), stated causes of conflicts in an organization as follows; (i) members of a team bringing critically different values to their work (ii) attitudinal differences with divergent goals (iii) frustration that arises as a result of needs not met that aggravates conflicts (v) different perspectives that result in different clarification of the same information, (vi) inadequate resources that bring about high rate of conflict, and (vi) team members having different perception towards one another.

In order to put the reasons for conflict in an organization in a proper perspective, Grace (2012) opined that conflict can arise as a result of either operational or personal factors. These different reasons were described below:

- i. **Goal Differences:** these occur, when there is possibility of a conflict to increase substantially due to incompatible goals of different departments within an organization.

- ii. **Personality Conflicts:** personality clashes in the workplace are unavoidable because no two people can act or behave exactly alike. Therefore, one employee can be introvert and the other an extrovert in nature. There will be a conflict when the duo refuses to understand each other's inner nature.
- iii. **Roles and Expectations:** these are job descriptions that are expected to be carried out by individuals in the organization. However, subordinate conflict can occur whereby each party, especially that in an employee role is not clear and has a diverse meaning of that role (Whitlam & Cameron, 2012).
- iv. **Poor Communication:** when there is a gap in communication, it can bring about strife and misunderstanding among employees and management in the organization. When wrong information is passed across to members of staffs, this can lead to projects poorly executed and loss of revenue.
- v. **Interdependence:** it is often said that an organization cannot work in isolation, hence, the need for cooperation and synergy among members of staff to achieve organizational stated goals and objectives. Therefore, as a regulation, interdependence exists when members in a team must show concern in the procedure of work and obtain results which hang on the performance of others.
- vi. **Personal Problems:** a situation where if an employee is embattled with either marital or parental issues, outside the workplace, such an individual may take them to work. Consequently, he/she may pass the aggression on co-workers, and if they are ignorant about the cause, it may lead to conflict, whereby, affecting the performance and productivity level of the organization.

2.2.2. Conflict Management Strategy concept

There is a lot of misconception on the part of people about taking conflict resolution for conflict management. Therefore, it is imperative to distinguish these two components. Conflict resolution is an essential part of conflict management. Anderson (1990) and Burton (1998) argue that conflict management has a wide application. Moreover, the study of Burton (1998) explains conflict management as that key process that provides an avenue for the aggrieved members of the organization to properly manage the source of the dispute before it is escalated. Meanwhile, conflict resolution on the other hand specifically deals with removing the root cause of the conflict. In the same vein, management of conflicts refers to the tactics of containing dispute, together with finding a lasting solution to resolving it.

According to Jones and Geaorge (2003), conflict resolution and conflict stimulation are two techniques under Conflict management. It is noteworthy to state that in a situation whereby a clash becomes dysfunctional in the organization, conflict resolution technique becomes imperative in order to offer a way out to it. Equally, when conflict in organization is low, conflict simulation technique is required to be applied. Therefore, the use of these two techniques is necessary for managers to take a firm decision in order to ensure industrial harmony (Bradford & Burk, 2005). As earlier postulated, conflict is an unavoidable phenomenon which occurs at every sphere of human endeavor, however, if properly handled, findings revealed that it can serve as a channel to expose problems among different parties, as well as compelling the parties involved in dispute matters to have a lasting solution which is acceptable to all.

However, the following are some strategies of managing conflict in an organization. These are;

- i. **Collective Bargaining:** this strategy is used as a legal instrument where issues relating to contracts of employment between workers and management are being settled (Fajana & Shadare, 2012). It is a process of providing a platform for all aggrieved members that are involved in a dispute matter, equal opportunity to express their mind irrespective of cadre or position in the system without fear or favor. Therefore, it is not only for managers to permit everyone to speak; it is also required that their agreements should be given an equal weight when mediating a conflict.
- ii. **Avoidance:** this is another strategy adopted by some organizations in resolving conflict within the system. It is also known as conflict avoidance strategy. It is often said that, any organization that adopts this method will be sitting on a keg of gun-powder and also postponing the evil day.
- iii. **Compromise:** in this strategy, the parties involved are willing to settle the conflict matter amicably without seeing anyone as a winner or vanquished.
- iv. **Accommodation:** this involves the tactics adopted to neutralize the root cause of the conflict and to ensure that all distressed members are pacified as to be on the same page. Also, the strategy is appropriate when there is need for a stop-gap to be put in place or when the members have a mutually significant goal.
- v. **Smoothing:** In this smoothing approach of conflict management style, much emphasis is laid on human relationships. It has to do with individuals ignoring their personal interest and work towards ensuring the majority have their way in order to enjoy industrial harmony.

- vi. **Containment:** under this strategy, conflicts are permitted to come up, but they are well managed by seeing to issues that required to be discussed and providing possible way out of the quagmire. There is also room for all parties to negotiate the outcome of the resolution.
- vii. **Confrontation:** this strategy has to do with survival of the fittest. There are different opposing views to issues and is more of win-lose approach.
- viii. **Positive Perspective:** conflict can be an asset to any corporation provided it is well managed. It most assists the firms to learn from its shortcomings, errors, lacuna and identify areas of needed improvement. Equally, the coming together of people can lead to solution for resolving both internal and external issues.

Therefore, other approaches for management of conflict are for line managers to develop a platform that provides constant engagement with their subordinates, necessary training on dispute management and making them have a sense of belonging within the system.

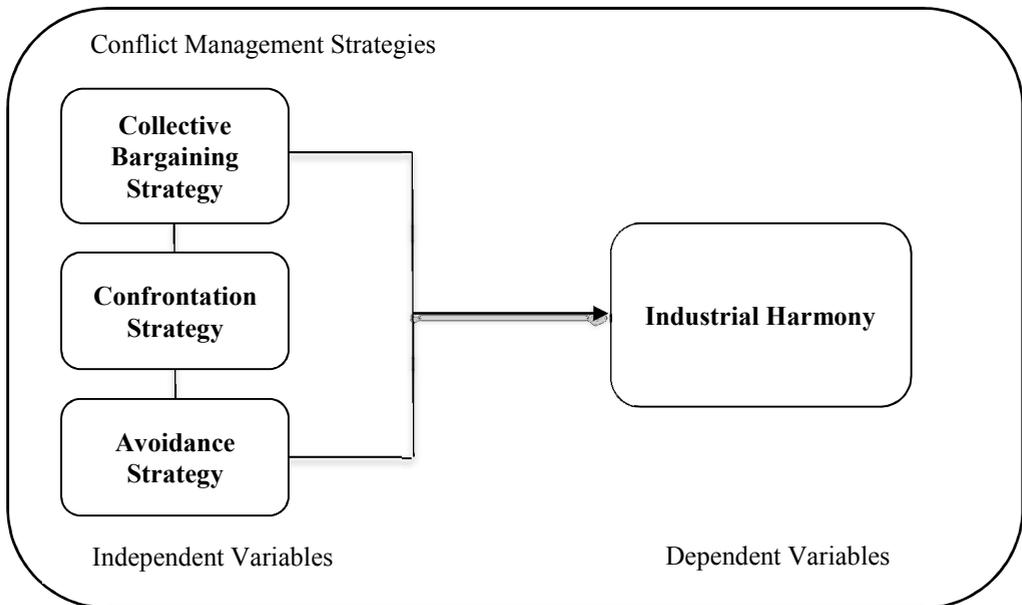


Fig. 1. Researcher Conceptual Model

2.2.3. Concept of Industrial Harmony

The term *industrial harmony* can as well be described as industrial democracy (Fejoh, 2015). One aspect of labor relations issues that is most delicate and complex to handle is achieving industrial harmony in the modern industrial society. This concept has to do with decentralizing decision making process within the organization. Industrial harmony also involves the participation of the major actors in labor relations matters i.e. (employer and employee) when it comes to issues relating to conditions of service for all staff (Puttapalli and Vuram, 2012).

According to Otobo, (2005); Osad and Osas, (2013), industrial harmony is explained as a friendly and cooperative agreement on working relationship between employers and employees for their mutual benefit. Also, it involves management and employees working harmoniously in order to achieve the stated organizational goals and objectives. In a related study by Odia and Omofonmwan (2007), the latter opined that industrial harmony can further be explained from four broad viewpoints which are; cooperation, collective bargaining, employment policy, consultations and communication respectively.

Otobo (2005) confirms that industrial harmony plays a significant role in the life of any business venture because it encompasses joint consultation, co-determination, co-operation and co-ownership. Therefore, it brings about an employee having a sense of belonging in the running of affairs of the organization and taking responsibility which can as well lead to a peaceful working environment (Chinedu, Vincent and Enaini, 2018).

2.3. Empirical Review

Conflict is obviously connected with power and it mostly arises when the stated objective and goals of any business enterprise is circumvented. Previous scholars on the issue of conflict are of the view that, the root source of conflicts is deeply entrenched in our biology. Schellernberg (1999) describes such approach as individual characteristics theory that focuses on the individual and his acts, rather than the context of the act. However, Fajana (2002) develops in his study two major sources where conflict can emerge in an organization. These are external and internal sources respectively. The external sources of conflict occur because of its peculiarity, meaning that it is always from outside the organization. It has to do with a situation when a third party intervention to industrial dispute is required and which most of the time is one sided or biased. Meanwhile, the internal sources of conflicts are referred to as those elements which are in-built within the structure of an organization. Some

key features when it comes to internal sources of conflict were identified which are; opposing interests, divergent interests, poor-relationship e.t.c (Fajana, 2002).

Another perspective to sources of conflict in an organization is a study by Katz (1990) who categorizes conflict sources into three groups. They are; structural conflict- which has to do with conflict arising when a department depends on another department in order to function effectively. Role conflict- this is a conflict which emanated as a result of special sets of agreed conduct, while resources conflicts are those coming from different concern groups which are contending or fighting for administrative resources (David 2012).

Robbins (2005) further identifies another set of organizational conflicts sources and indicates that when the root source of conflict is acknowledged or known, it will bring about proper conflict management within the system. Some of the sources are; communicational conflict, which comes up as a result of misunderstanding. Structural conflicts emerge due to business roles and individual conflicts are all about individual differences. Similarly, Suliman & Abdulla (2005) conducted yet another study and identified conflict sources which include; politics and priority characterization, personality and allocation of resource, unresolved prior conflicts, procedures in administration, communication and leadership problem. Another study by Duke (1999) further identifies other major sources of conflict to corroborate earlier submissions. These are interpersonal disagreements which occur when an individual is stressed up; the problems of role conflict; and power struggles that makes people join forces together to achieve personal selfish interest. This study therefore intends to expand the frontiers of knowledge by investigating conflict management strategies and its implications towards achieving industrial harmony.

2.4. Conflict and its effect on Organization

Rachin (2002) in his study, stated that conflict should not be perceived in a negative form; its outcome, be it constructive or destructive, largely depends on how it is being addressed by those in position of authority. Conflict can come in a different form within the organization. It can be between superior versus subordinate, heads of department etc. Groups can also be involved when it comes to issue of conflict based on performance as well as unknown management rivalries. It is a general assumption that there is always a negative consequence of conflict for the organization and individual. The effects can be in the form of Physiological responses (headache, hypertension and heartburn), Behavioral responses (alcoholism, aggressiveness, work sabotage and decreased communication) and Psychological responses (work anxiety, frustration and job dissatisfaction). However, one can conclude that conflict does not

only hinder the performance of individuals, but can also lead to emotional disorders, which invariably affects the individuals' health in the long run.

3. Methodology

This study used a descriptive research design. The research targeted a working population of one thousand, one hundred and forty eight (1,148) employees of Unilever Nigeria Plc. A simple random sampling technique was adopted in selecting a sample size of two hundred and ninety six (296). A structured questionnaire was adopted as a research instrument for the study. However, from the 296 questionnaires administered, only 210 were filled and returned appropriately. The questionnaire was divided into 2 major sections. The first part of the questionnaire sought for the demographic reports of the respondents, while the second part comprised 20 items-questions to be answered in Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with numerical value 5-1, which was used to measure pertinent constructs of (collective bargaining, confrontation, avoidance strategy and industrial harmony) independent and dependent variables for the study. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics of (Pearson correlation coefficient) in order to test the formulated hypothesis.

4. Result and findings

Table 1

Mean and standard deviation of factors of conflict management strategies and industrial harmony

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Collective Bargaining Strategy			
My organization often adopts strategy of collective bargaining to resolve dispute.	210	3.52	1.40
There is always a mutual agreement in settling matters arising from conflict in my organization.	210	3.50	1.26
The adoption of this strategy shows signs of weakness from the management.	210	2.96	0.99
No conflict can be resolved using collective bargaining strategy.	210	2.66	1.19
Collective bargaining is a legal requirement to resolve matters relating to contract of employment.	210	4.16	0.93

Confrontation Strategy			
Confrontation strategy is the best approach of resolving dispute matters in any organization.	210	2.09	0.93
The adoption of this strategy can always lead to industrial harmony.	210	1.82	0.76
This strategy is all about survival of the fittest.	210	2.03	0.58
Confrontation strategy always affects organizational performance.	210	3.79	1.29
No business can move forward using this type of strategy to settle disputes among aggrieved parties.	210	3.97	1.11
Avoidance Strategy			
The best way to ensure industrial harmony is to adopt avoidance strategy for conflict management.	210	1.89	1.81
The strategy is a short term approach of managing conflict in a company.	210	3.88	1.21
My organization often adopts this strategy to suppress the wishes of the union.	210	3.93	1.30
The strategy mostly leads to more conflict in my organization.	210	3.91	1.11
Avoidance strategy is a poor way of managing conflict in any organization.	210	3.79	1.32
Industrial Harmony			
To achieve industrial harmony all employees must be treated with mutual respect.	210	3.49	1.42
The best approach for conflict management is to adopt collective bargaining strategy.	210	2.35	1.24
Personal interest must be ignored and uphold general interest in resolving conflict.	210	3.88	1.21
Conflict is a good tool for achieving industrial harmony.	210	2.54	1.35
I am satisfied with level of conflict management strategy adopted in my organization.	210	4.00	1.07
AVERAGE		3.31	

Source: Authors Computation, (2018).

The information in table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of conflicts management strategies and industrial harmony alongside with the mean and standard deviation value. On the average, the mean value on the statement of evaluation is (3.31).

4.1. Test of Hypotheses

Table 2

Pearson Moment Correlation Results of the tested Hypotheses Correlations

		Industrial Harmony	Collective Bargaining Strategy	Confrontation Strategy	Avoidance Strategy
Industrial Harmony	Pearson Correlation	1	.418**	.127**	.131**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.569	.487
	N	210	210	210	210
Collective Bargaining Strategy	Pearson Correlation	.418**	1	.103**	.133
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.143	.168
	N	210	210	210	210
Confrontation Strategy	Pearson Correlation	.127**	.103**	1	.125*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.569	.143		.138
	N	210	210	210	210
Avoidance Strategy	Pearson Correlation	.131**	.133	.125**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.487	.168	.138	
	N	210	210	210	210

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Interpretation

Table 2 revealed the Pearson product moment correlation for the three (3) variables used for the study to test the relationship between the independent variable (collective bargaining, confrontation and avoidance strategies) and dependent variable (industrial harmony).

Hypothesis 1: Collective bargaining strategy has no significant relationship with industrial harmony. From the result above it is evident that the correlation of collective bargaining strategy with industrial harmony is 0.418 and the significant level of 0.05. Also, P-Value of 0.000, which is less than 0.05. On this premise, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected and it is concluded that collective bargaining strategy has a moderate significant relationship with industrial harmony ($r=0.418$, $P<0.05$). It implies that collective bargaining as a strategy plays a key role in

resolving dispute matter among aggrieved members in any organization. The result is in line with the study of (Fajana & Shadare, 2012), which states that the strategy provides the aggrieved members the platform to express their minds without any form of intimidation.

Hypothesis 2: Confrontation strategy has no significant relationship with industrial harmony. The result from table 2, also indicates the correlation of confrontation strategy vis-à-vis industrial harmony as 0.127 and the significant level of 0.05. Also, the table shows that the P-value is 0.569 which is greater than 0.05. Therefore, we reject the alternate hypothesis and accept the null hypothesis which states that confrontation strategy has no significant relationship with industrial harmony ($r=0.127$, $P>0.05$). This implies that an organization that adopts the strategy of confrontation as a method of resolving conflict will achieve little or no result.

Hypothesis 3: Avoidance strategy has no significant relationship with industrial harmony. Table 2 result also revealed the correlation of avoidance strategy with industrial harmony as 0.131 and the significant level of 0.05. Also, the table indicate the P-value as 0.487 which is greater than 0.05. Therefore, we reject the alternate hypothesis and accept the null hypothesis which state that avoidance strategy has no significant relationship with industrial harmony ($r=0.131$, $P>0.05$). The result emanating from the analysis above shows that avoidance as a strategy cannot achieve any positive result if choosen as a tool for industrial harmony.

5. Conclusion

The way and manner through which conflict is been resolved in an organization will determine the level of coherence within the system. Hence, this study examined conflict management strategies; a tool for industrial harmony. However, findings from this research revealed that the human nature and conflict are synonymous and it is equally important to study because the causes of conflicts can be constructive or destructive to a business. Moreover, the study lay emphasis on the fact that conflict arises from different sources such as external i.e. conflict from outside the organization and internal conflicts which are inherent within the framework of an organization. Also, three variables which are collective bargaining, confrontation and avoidance were used as a determinant of conflict management strategies for the study.

Subsequently, the result shows that collective bargaining as a strategy will achieve a better result in resolving conflict in an organization as against adopting confrontation and avoidance strategy respectively. The study concluded that for industrial harmony to be achieved in the organization, it is necessary to explore all other available methods of conflict resolution such as accommodation, compromise,

etc. A properly managed organizational conflict is expected to bring about institutional benefit, increase productivity, competitive advantage and above all effective attainments as well as achieving the set goals and objectives for the business.

6. Recommendations

Arising from the study, the following under listed points are herewith recommended:

- i. There is need for management to develop different strategies that can promote industrial democracy within the organization.
- ii. Room should be given to the participatory style of management rather than the autocratic style which is rigid in nature.
- iii. There is need for effective and proper communication procedures to be put in place in order to resolve conflict.
- iv. Management should provide an avenue for different unions in the organization to be part of the decision making process- by so doing they will have a sense of belonging in the business.
- v. It is also going to be of benefit if there is adequate interaction and dialogue in conflict resolution.
- vi. Management should also organize trainings, workshops, seminars that centered on conflict management periodically for all members of staff in the organization.

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