

# **Employee's Perceptions of Conflict and Conflict Management: A Case Study of Tongaat Hulett Zimbabwe**

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## **Abstract**

Conflict can either be functional or dysfunctional. Human capital management specialists have been trying to develop leadership skills meant to counter conflicts within the organization, particularly dysfunctional conflicts. This study aims to assess employees' perceptions of conflict and conflict management in Tongaat Hulett Zimbabwe and the impact of conflict and conflict management on the economic security of employees. The framework of this study was a quantitative study with a mixed method approach using non-probability sampling of one hundred and eleven participants. To gather primary data, a standardized questionnaire was used in conjunction with document inspection, focus groups, and interviews. The data analysis method used was the tabular method. The analysis of data was descriptive. The findings indicated causes or sources of organizational conflict could be attributed to management style, with management depending on the case and situation, avoiding issues, detecting outcomes, and to some extent negotiating and mediation. Recommendations are that parties should rely on negotiation and mediation to manage conflicts and that strong conflict-resolution skills are essential to be an effective leader in the workplace.

**Keywords:** Conflict Resolution, Economic Security, Mediation, Negotiation

## **Introduction**

Organizational change and continued turbulence in the social, political, technological and economic environments at regional and global levels are creating an uncertain and complex environment in which organizations have to operate (De Dreu, 2002). In most developed countries, private sector organizations drive economic growth, ensuring economic security, thus preventing conflict at micro, meso and macro levels. Increasing uncertainty and complexity in the operating environment of organizations provide fertile ground for conflict in the workplace (De Dreu, 2002). A conflict-free world hardly exists, not because conflict is a pervasive and inevitable phenomenon in society, but is inherent in all aspects of human endeavor. Some observe conflict as dysfunctional and counterproductive which organisations should avoid at all costs while others perceive it as an opportunity for growth and learning and a phenomenon that requires management (Deutsch, 1973).

The few studies that were done confirm the presence of conflict in organisationa and that every organisation is unique and operates in its own unique environment. Tongaat Hulett Zimbabwe (THZ) is no exception. The execution of conflict management practices is subject to numerous perceptions as a consequence (Awan & Saeed, 2015). Thus, perception plays an important role

in understanding, assimilating and managing conflict. Hence, organisations, along with national governments and social development practitioners, are searching for effective ways to manage employees' perceptions of conflict and retain employees through conflict management.

In that regard, the study provides insights into the anatomy of conflict and conflict management at the workplace. Various organisations can benefit from this study. In their basic form organisations can dissect conflict and have an understanding of causes and possibly sources of conflict at the workplace. Further, the impact of both functional and dysfunctional conflict. Such an understanding obviously will feed into the designing of organisational conflict resolution mechanism. Human resources management practitioners on the other hand designing training manuals that fosters employee cohesion and a harmonious culture conducive for productivity. Sugar producing companies will enhance operational effectiveness taking into cognisance that effective conflict management mechanisms will positively impact on motivation, human capital retention and reduction in workplace accidents.

The general objective of the study was to assess employee perceptions of conflict and conflict management in THZ. The followings were the specific objectives of the study:

- To interrogate employees' perceptions of conflict and conflict management style at THZ;
- To assess the effects of conflict on THZ and employees' economic security; and
- To examine the conflict management strategies and styles adopted by management in conflict situations.

Based on the objectives, research questions to this study were:

- What were the employees' perceptions of conflict and conflict management style at THZ?
- How did conflict impact THZ and employees' economic security?
- Which conflict management strategies and styles were employed by management in conflict situations?

The study's hypothesis was:

H1: That employees perceive management style as the major source or cause of conflict in THZ.

H2: That conflict negatively impacts THZ and employees' economic security.

H3: Those employees perceive management as more likely to adopt competitive conflict management strategies in conflict situations.

### **Theoretical approaches to conflict**

Workplace conflict is an uncomfortable circumstance that, if ignored, may soon turn into a serious issue. It may lead to elevated stress levels at work, reduced job satisfaction, elevated absenteeism rates, decreased productivity, low morale, and subpar work output. One way to understand the term "conflict" is to divide theories of conflict into functional, situational and interactive. The functional approach asserts that conflict serves a social function and those who view a conflict as situational, suggest that conflict is an expression under certain situations. The third theory views conflict as interactive. This study adopts the situational and interactive approaches to conflict as explained hereunder. Situationists usually ask the questions: When do we have conflict? Under what circumstances does it occur?" while interactionists ask:

“why there is conflict? What are the methods and mechanisms used to express it?” According to the situationalist school, conflict depends on the obtaining situation. Conflict arises because of different conditions, such as a person’s influence and external factors. Because conflict is synonymous with situations of scarce resources, division of functions, power relations and role differentiation, it is an inevitable part of human existence (Deutsch, 1973).

The interactive view introduces two important concepts: interdependence and perception, which is central to this research. Interdependence connects to such situations where one party’s future actions depend on another party’s actions. This approach views conflict as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from the other party in achieving their goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). It perceives conflict as a disagreement in opinion between people or groups, due to differences in attitudes, beliefs, values or needs (Thomas, 2005). Conflict exists when any potential positions of two behavior units are mutually incompatible (Boulding, 1963). This perspective, a key element of conflict is obstruction: one actor attempts to attain a desirable value, but another acts as a barrier to obtaining that desirable value. Conflict occurs when there is an incompatibility in the aim, goals or interests of two or more individuals, groups or other units.

## **Forms of organizational conflict in THZ**

### **Class conflict**

The employees in THZ provide labour in exchange for reward derived from the ownership of the means of production. The management dominates the employees until the latter organize to protest exploitation. This type of exploitation is the main source of class conflict. In the Marxist paradigm, conflict between classes arise out of differing material interests. A capitalist society identifies two main classes. A few people monopolize the means of production such as land and factories; the bourgeois class owns the capital and material resources needed for mass production. The conflict intensity in a capitalist organization links to the concentration of economic and political power in one class. This form of conflict grows out of one class holding itself superior and trying to dominate another for its interests. These interests may be social prestige, religious objectives, or political power or economic advantages.

### **Economic conflict**

Poverty is a worldwide phenomenon but it is not homogeneously distributed. Poverty is easy to identify wherever it is found in the form of high levels of unemployment, poor nutrition, inadequate health care and education, little or no savings, high level of indebtedness, inadequate housing (Barash & Webel, 2002). This type of poverty breeds dissatisfaction, which, in turn, leads to conflict in organizations. Social and political factors also contribute to income disparities. When wealth accumulates in the hands of few (management) and the large majority (employees) live under perpetual poverty, the constructed situation is one of the potentials in economic conflict. Economic conflict is the biggest problem in organizations, society and the world. In general, it is understood that all people would like better living conditions. For assuring peaceful and satisfactory life, they want certain goods and services. A shortage of these goods and services causes dissatisfaction which gets converted into frustration and leads to conflict.

## **Social conflict**

In THZ, employees and management should ideally corroborate to achieve organizational goals. Social conflict ensues in THZ as a relationship between the two parties who believe they have conflicting goals. Such views are inherent in human relations. These major sets of factors are often proposed as the basis of social conflict: those within one or more parties, the relation between the parties of social conflict are found in inequality in political power or property ownership or incompatible religions or ideological convictions (Kriesberg, 1997).

Conflict is a permanent feature of all organizational systems. The diverse views as to the sources of workplace conflict are symptomatic of an area in which only a limited amount of research has occurred and this is the case (De Dreu, 2002). The CPP Global Human Capital Report (2008) provides a valuable perspective on workplace conflict. This is because their study looked at what was happening in workplaces. This contrasts with the theorists discussed in this section whose views do not appear to have research support, only supported by other theorists.

## **Methodology**

The researcher designed this study as a mixed method research, aimed at objectively assessing employees' perceptions of conflict and conflict management in THZ. Hence, since methodologies are closer to research practice than the philosophical concepts found in paradigms, this was a 'mixed method' rather than 'Critical Theory' or positivist research (Thomas, 2005). Accordingly, the researcher descriptively and analytically interpreted the findings of the research survey to describe the results and to infer a relationship between the variables (Groves, 2009). The researcher selected the quantitative approach because it had higher credibility in the academic and scientific communities. Data collection is a collection of related observations, facts or figures (Groves, 2009). Four distinct methods were used for data collection in this study, namely survey through a questionnaire, interviews, focus group and document inspection. In addition to focus groups, interviews, and document examination, the questionnaire was used as the major data collection tool. This study population was 18 972. Using Cochran's Sample Size Formula, P equals 0.5. This is because when determining the sample size for a given level of accuracy, researchers use the worst case percentage (50%). The study required a 95% confidence level and 7.5% plus or minus precision was, hence the researcher calculated the sample size as follows:

$$Z^2 pq/e^2$$

Where

e is the desired level of precision (that is, margin of error)

p is the (estimated) proportion of the population that has the attribute in question

q is 1 – p

The z – value is found in the z- table

$$(1.96)^2(0.5)(0.5)/(0.075)^2$$

$$(3.8416)(0.25)/(0.005625)$$

$$0.9604/0.005625$$

$$= 170.73778 = 171$$

## **Results and discussion**

The results from the survey were used to answer a number of research questions, including, the types of conflict management practices in use in the studied organization.

### What are employees' perceptions of the major causes / sources of conflict in THZ?

Table 1: Major Conflict Causes in THZ

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Management style	64	43.8
Rewards	45	30.8
Communication breakdown	14	9.6
Common resources	6	4.2
Roles and expectations	17	11.6
Total	146	100.0

Source: Author

Sixty-four of the one hundred and forty-six respondents (43.8%) were of the view that conflict that is bedeviling the sugarcane growing and sugar producing company emanate from the management style while forty-five respondents (30.8%) indicated rewards as the cause. In December 2015, operations at the private sector organization almost ground to a halt as the employees embarked on a strike due to delays in the completion of the collective bargaining exercise while the organization's management remained intransigent. The management style of dictating at THZ has often led to workplace disputes which have often compromised the effectiveness and efficiency of the company. 11.6% of the respondents selected roles and expectations as a major cause of conflict in THZ. Six of the respondents attributed common resources as one of the main causes of conflicts. 9.6% of the respondents attributed conflict to communication breakdown between employees and management. Further, 45.5% of the respondents indicated that they were very dissatisfied with the relationship between employees and management.

The majority of respondents (91.8%) indicated that they had experienced conflict at THZ. The source of conflict came from problems in the communication process, ambiguity and role conflict. The result is consistent with the situationalist theoretical approach which perceives conflict as arising because of different conditions, such as a person's influence and external factors. Respondents (85.6%) indicated that conflict impacted in THZ was negative. Only 14.4% of respondents viewed conflict in the organization positively.

Table 2: Conflict Impact on THZ and Employees' Economic Security

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Positively	21	14.4
Negatively	125	85.6
Total	146	100

Source: Author

The theoretical approach viewed conflict as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from the other party in achieving their goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). The majority of the male respondents (100%) indicated that conflict negatively impacts THZ and employees' economic security. The majority of the female participants (62%) indicated that conflict has a positive impact on the organization. These results were consistent with studies which found that male employees have a more pessimistic view of organizational life and peace than female employees.

### Which conflict management strategies and styles are employed in THZ?

Table 3: Conflict Strategies Used in THZ

Strategy	Frequency	Valid Percent
Mediation	47	32.2
Conciliation	4	2.8
Arbitration	10	6.8
Negotiation	85	58.2
Total	146	100

Source: Author

The majority, 85%, of the participants selected negotiation as the conflict strategy most used in THZ. This implies that structures and processes for conflict management in a non-violent way exist and are recognized. Ngcobo & Komichi (2015) recommended that parties should rely on negotiation and mediation to arrest conflicts before it escalate. Mediation is attractive because it can potentially deliver a win-win outcome and has a high success rate. Although all five conflict management styles were used within organizations, researches give evidence that the most frequently used conflict management style is compromise as people tend to seek other people approval and compromise towards the group mean. The finding of this study is inconsistent with these researches as it demonstrated that the most frequently used conflict management style in THZ is dominating (51.4%).

Among the different conflict management styles practiced in THZ, the researcher found out that the organization usually adapted the dominating style of managing conflict while the integrating style was rarely adopted. The avoiding style was the next most preferred style after the dominating style. It was then followed by the obliging style and then the compromising style with the integrating style being the least preferred. The results of the findings further revealed that THZ employees preferred the negotiation and mediation conflict strategies as they usually led to a peaceful management of the conflict rather than breed bitterness and hatred between the parties involved.

The research findings revealed that, of all the factors influencing conflict, organizational management style stood out as the most influencing factor. This was closely followed by the reward/remuneration system. The least influencing factor according to the findings was conflict over common resources. Most of the employees considered management style as the most pressing influence because they believed the kind of management style affects relationships within the organization and the conflict management strategies and styles used. The employees also considered the remuneration or reward system as another important factor after management style. This was due to the fact that the remuneration/reward system, depending on its appropriateness, could either make conflict management a success or a failure. Also, a considerable number of employees also considered sharing of common resources as an important influencing factor.

The research revealed that some of the employees did not have adequate knowledge of conflict. The management of private sector organizations could therefore organize workshops for the employees to enlighten them on the concept of conflict management and the benefits of conflict. This would broaden their understanding of conflict and the right approaches to managing it. The employees would learn to appreciate the need to manage conflict both in and out of the organization through the workshops.

The findings of this study revealed that managing conflict may require some basic skills on the part of management which without them managing of conflict may be ineffective. Management in private sector organizations could, therefore, be given special education on the appropriate ways of managing conflict through the organization of internal meetings and seminars. Through workshops, the management could be educated to acquire good listening skill which is essential in conflict management. The management could further be educated to accommodate employees' behaviors and differences.

The research findings further revealed that the style of management had an influence on conflict management. It is recommended that management could vary their conflict management approaches based on the conflict problem they would be dealing with. Management may be required in certain situations to adopt a more paternalistic and democratic or obliging or compromising management style when dealing with sensitive issues. In other words, the challenges inherent in assessing and comprehending employees' perceptions of conflict and conflict management may require innovative solutions. Such innovative solutions may be located in a less structured management style, which accommodates participatory and emancipatory management. However, an autocratic or dominating style may also be recommended in dealing with conflict in certain situations.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Even though there is no unified definition of conflict or a firm theoretical framework, there is an increasing focus on organizations to manage conflict and contribute to economic security. The world over, the private sector organization is the major contributor to economic security, and ultimately sustainable peace and development. Economic security is a major element of national security as it impacts on capital, business, profit, jobs and taxes to a point of leading nations to strife and disintegration (Robbins & Judge, 2009). However, conflict threatens economic security at both organizational and national levels. Conflict in organizations is a daily occurrence because a consensus concerning rules governing the entity seldom exists among management and employees. They see each other as adversaries, and not as partners working towards a common goal in the organization. There are potentials for conflict in practically every decision that management makes. A distinction is often made between conflict resolution, which is finding a solution that satisfies all parties, and conflict management, that is, making a temporal arrangement that serves to control conflict. Resolving a conflict ends the dispute by satisfying the interests of both parties (Harris, 2011).

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