

South African insights on conflict and its management

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Claude-Hélène Mayer

Cross-cultural conflict in the South African management context is escalating and growing increasingly more complex. Due to advancing globalization, multiculturalization and restructuring processes in the organizations and joint ventures, cross-cultural encounters have increased, heightening the potential for conflict in social, political and economic sectors.

In this article, selected findings from a study on “Conflict, identity and values in South African managers” (Mayer 2008) are presented. This study has been undertaken in the Department of Management at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. The case study aimed at the collection, analysis and interpretation of conflicts in the managerial context in the automotive industry in South Africa with special regard to identity and values in cross-cultural situations. In-depth interviews were undertaken with 45 managers from a selected international organization in South Africa.

In the South African managerial context, the emergence of international co-operation such as joint ventures, driven by globalisation, and new diversity management trends have changed the way business is conducted. Due to these changes, employees of diverse origins with different cultures, values and identities work together, experiencing work-related conflicts.

Based on the main findings from this case study, it can be concluded that managers with diverse backgrounds experience work-related conflicts which are related to value and identity concepts in the selected organisation. The conflicts experienced fall into the categories of Communication and Treatment, Position and Competition, Organisation and Race and Gender.

The analysis of value statements and their frequency has revealed that equality, communication and respect were the most commonly indicated values in conflicts. The concept of equality included sub-concepts such as race, gender and human equality. The concept of communication included open, personal, free, decent, calm and proactive communication. Finally, the concept of respect was defined by mutual respect for self and others.

Conflict in general seemed to be linked with identity. The extracts based on the key words of the identity factors show that the identity factors were related to weakening or strengthening effects on identities. Social and identity multiplicity in managers provides creativity spaces and flexibility in cases of strong identity patterns. In the case of weak identities, conflict potentials lead to complex conflicts and challenges in conflict management.

For successful conflict resolution management, communication was most often mentioned as useful including talking, round-table talks, smooth communication, face-to-face communication and room meetings. Communication aspects in conflict resolution were followed in frequency by strategies of internal intervention, which included the use of the formal structure of the organisation to resolve conflicts.

Keywords that, in the view of the interviewed managers, contributed to conflict resolution strategies, include communication (face-to-face communication); internal intervention (grievance, hearing, complaint); other resolution measures (‘knock out’, role-play);

negotiation (advice and consultation); avoidance (conflict prevention); apologise (forgiveness); transfer (resign, dismissal); mediation; and external intervention (lawyer, trial).

In summary, the cluster of communication that includes talking, round-table talks, smooth communication, face-to-face communication and room meetings, was most often mentioned as useful for successful conflict resolution management. The communication cluster was followed in frequency by the cluster of internal intervention, which included the use of the formal structure of the organisation to resolve conflicts. Many interviewees had different ideas about managing conflicts. These ideas were clustered in 'other resolution measures' and included, for example, knocking out the conflict party, role play ('change the work bench'), and team-building exercises. Another cluster of negotiation included negotiation strategies, lateral thinking, advice, compromise and consultation, while the cluster of avoidance contained different avoiding behaviours, such as stepping back, withdrawal and preventive measures. Only a small number of interviewees opted for apologising and forgiveness in the cluster 'apologise'. Even fewer interviewees proposed a transfer, resignation or dismissal as an adequate conflict resolution strategy (cluster 'transfer'). The cluster of mediation (including win-win-situation, intercultural mediation and diversity management) and external intervention, such as taking the conflict to court, to a lawyer or to trial, were least often mentioned as adequate conflict resolution strategies in the organisation.

These summarised findings show that either direct communication to resolve conflicts was preferred or – if this approach was not successful – the formal internal intervention process. The direct approach in conflict resolution situations coincides with the value dimension of Schwartz (1994) of self-transcendence, containing value domains such as universalism and benevolence. These value domains include values such as broadmindedness, understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of staff members, which also play a role in direct communication to resolve conflicts in the selected organization.

Additionally, the internal intervention strategy, which was used by the majority of the managers, reflected the value dimension of conservation, which included the value domains of tradition (including values of respect, commitment, acceptance of traditional ideas, humbleness and devotness); conformity (containing values such as restraint of actions, inclinations and impulses to harm others and sticking to social norms); and security (reflecting values of safety, stability, harmony and social order). This shows that conflict resolution strategies went together and were supported by the values guiding managers in the described context and were stringently influenced by their identity concept. Finally, these findings show that there is a broad spectrum of conflict and conflict management strategies in the South African organizational context which needs to be addressed in cross-cultural conflict management trainings and in the development of training tools for cross-cultural conflict management in the South African context.

Claude-Hélène Mayer holds a Masters and Doctorate in Social and Cultural Anthropology and a Doctorate in Management. Her research areas are transcultural conflict management, identity, value and health research. She is currently a Post Doctoral Fellow at the Department of Management at Rhodes University in South Africa.

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