**DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT**

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND CONFLICT**

Basically, conflicts arise when individuals and people in communal and organisational settings perceive that others represent threats to the accomplishment of their goals regardless of whether these threats are real or imagined. In other to strategically approach this subject, we shall guide our discourses with two frameworks, namely;

1) the perception characteristics framework,
2) the causes of conflict framework.

**Perception Characteristics Framework**: Under this framework, we shall examine the relationship between the five characteristics of perception and conflict.

1. Perception and the Environment (People’s actions, emotions, feelings and thought processes): The way in which a person perceives the environment largely determines the way he/she will react to it. If an individual perceives that the environment is friendly, accommodating and appreciative of his/her personality he/she is less likely to be aggressive to the environmental actors. Conversely, where the perceiver concludes that the environment represent significant threats to him/her then he/she may resort to defence mechanisms that gain expression as aggressive behaviours, which are simply conflict-oriented behaviours.
2. The perceptual process and meanings: The relationship between perception and conflict also draw significantly from the degree of accuracy of the meanings obtained from an individual perceptual process. The framework of this process consists of receiving information (inputs) which is then selected/interpreted (organised) before the perceiver embarks on his actions/reactions (outputs). From this framework, it is evident that conflict can ensue if the perceiver does not receive complete inputs or is incapable of processing the received information correctly due to its huge volume. You will recall that stereotype is one factor that prevents a perceiver from acquiring detailed information about someone being perceived.
3. Transition from Perception to Action: The time lapse between perception and the perceiver’s responses is another factor that links perception to conflict. When perceptions are built on stereotypes, such as the ethnic stereotypes that exist across Nigeria, the attendant actions are usually quick and not subject to deep consideration. This is one factor that is probably responsible for the ethnic conflicts we frequently experience in Nigeria. But where there is sufficient time lapse to subject the information received by the perceiver to thorough scrutiny, it is less likely to result into an aggressive behaviour or conflict.
4. Perception and Cognition: The relationship between the information that a perceiver receives and the knowledge he acquires from processing it definitely has bearing on the manifestation of conflict. Basically, if the acquired knowledge is not thoroughly processed, the perceived group/individual will not be thoroughly understood, appreciated and treated with dignity. Under such circumstances, the perceived may react to his/her uncharitable treatment to precipitate crises. But the potentials for conflict can be drastically reduced if the perceived is carefully understudied and understood before appropriate reactions are targeted at him/her.
5. Perception and Needs Satisfaction: Where the perceiver situates the perceived as a threat to the accomplishment / satisfaction of his/her needs, he is most likely to behave aggressively towards the perceived. On the other hand, where the perceiver does not envisage any iota of threats to attainment of his/her needs from the perceived, he/she will most surely behave responsibly towards the perceived.

 **Causes of Conflict Framework**

Under this framework, the relationship between perception and conflict will be discussed using the following causes of conflict as guide.

1. Perception and Common Resources: The relationship between perception, common resources and conflict appears to be one on the most direct to determine. This is particularly the case where the common resource is scarce or exhaustible by nature. Thus, when a certain group perceives that another group that is competing with it is likely to block its access to the resource in question the perceiver-group could become highly aggressive. In Nigeria, conflicts have occurred around such common resources as land, water, school and other infrastructural resources. In the mid-1980s the Umuleri-Aguleri conflict centred on a parcel of land bordering the two communities. There was also the EkpanUbeji conflict that occurred around the ownership of the land on which the Nigeria National Petroleum Company Refinery is sited. The recurrent crises on the ownership of portions of Warri between the Urhobo and Itsekiris on the one hand, and between the Ijaws and Itsekiris on the other, were land resources-based conflicts. You cannot also forget the Ife-Modakeke land-related conflict in a hurry. Outstanding conflicts in the middle-belt of Nigeria include the Tiv-Jukun conflict that occurred in Benue state; the indigene-settler conflict in Plateau state, not forgetting the Berom-Fulani pastoralist conflict over grazing lands. However, the armed youth resistance against the Federal Government over the exploitation of oil resources appears to be the most complicated conflict in Nigeria. A common feature of these conflicts is that they all seem to be informed by the wrong perception that one party is either obstructing the other’s access to or enjoyment of the resources or deliberately having access to an unfair share of the resources in question. At the level of individuals, perceptions that another person constitutes threat to access to certain resources has also informed conflicts in Nigeria. Frequently, we read in the newspapers about how people struggle over the properties of a departed parent. Properties around which these individual conflicts occur include the immovable such as land, economic trees, buildings, and companies/business premises and movable such as cars, furniture, financial resources held as bank balances and investment in stocks/shares.
2. Perception and Values: Wrong perception of the values of other groups has also been a source of conflict in society and organisations in general. Conflicts at this level, are usually the most difficult to appreciate and settle. This is because the basis of any social group is the value to which they subscribe. These values are usually our system of beliefs that we are usually not ready to compromise no matter how “backward” they portray us to the outside world. When groups in negation talk about fairness, transparency, equality, honesty and commitment they are basically calling issues of values into existence. Conflicting parties usually stand up to defend their position with all their might when it concerns their values. Actions that are based on wrong perception of the values of any social group causes resistance by the wrongly perceived group. Similarly, individuals whose values are mis-perceived expectedly react aggressively. For example, if you perceive some as having an abrasive personality which he really does not have, any relationship with such a person based on this wrong diagnosis will be met with aggression.
3. Perception and Psychological Needs: To wrongly perceive the social psychological requirement of a group is a sure invitation to conflict. Many Nigerian societies still attach a lot of importance to large families that derive from one man having several wives and children. Individuals in certain societies still feel great about the exploits about their past war heroes and ability to prepare potent charms. In some parts of Nigeria, a woman dare not open her mouth because where men are quarrelling; otherwise, she will be ridiculed. Also, women are celebrated for giving birth to a certain number of male children in parts of Nigeria. These are most psychological values that a perceiver may be criticising at the right of attracting aggressive behaviour to him/her. Perception is therefore a major determinant of conflict as we have clearly demonstrated.

 **Barriers To Perception**

Barriers to Social Perception: In the course of studying this unit, you may have come across most of the barriers to social perception. These barriers will be treated in this sub-section. The barriers are as follows:.

1. Selective Perception: This barrier derives from the perceiver’s attempt to filter the huge amount of information that he/she receives to support his/her viewpoint. In doing this, the perceiver tend to leave out those pieces of information that are capable of threatening or bringing discomfort to them in one way or the other.
Nelson and Quick illustrate this factor using the analogy of an employee who does not complete his monthly sales report promptly. But because this employee consistently brings in the highest number of new sales contracts his manager always gives him/her positive performance evaluation reports. Indicatively, the manager is applying selective perception leading him to overlook the negative information being generated from the employee’s constant failure to complete his/her sales report promptly.
2. Stereotyping: This “is a generalisation about a group of people” (Nelson and Quick). Furthermore, these authors explain that working with stereotypes helps perceivers to decrease the “information about a people to a workable level, and they are efficient for compiling and using information.” Sometimes stereotypes could become genuine perceptual frameworks when they turn out to be accurate. But, when stereotypes do not portray the correct picture, which is mostly the case, they harm the perceived. Attractiveness is also a stereotype to the extent that it projects the perceived as sensitive, warm, sociable and outgoing
3. First Impression Error: Forming long-lasting impression about the perceived “based on initial perception” is what this concept describes. One of the reasons for which we tend to maintain first impressions is because they tend to be easily kept in mind. The fundamental error in first impression arises from observation of a little part of the perceived and generalising as a true characterisation of the perceived.
4. Implicit Personality Theories: This explains the usually inaccurate “mini-theories” that we harbour in our minds for determining the appearances and behaviours of the perceived. These theories basically help us structure our thoughts and map out short cuts to our perceptions. In other words, perceivers tend to “group traits and appearances into clusters that seem to go together” (Nelson and Quick). You should note that personality theories constitute barriers to admitting new information even when available.
5. Self-fulfilling Prophesies: This category of barriers addresses how our expectations affect our interaction with people and the accomplishment of that which we desire. Nelson and Quick (op cit) illustrate that “self-fulfilling prophecy is also known as the pygmalion effect, named for the sculptor in Greek mythology who carved a statue of a woman that came to life when he prayed for his wish and it was granted.”

**Managers And Perception**

The management process is indeed complex. What makes it complex derives from the fact that it requires that judgement be made about the actions of people at work. Thus, whether managers are aware or not they are involve in the perceptual process on a daily basis. This is because whether as a manager you are undertaking a performance appraisal, conducting an employment or promotion interview, settling disputes between two employees that are equals or having a senior-junior relationship, handling an employees’ case of dwindling performance, an inter-departmental conflict, cases of perpetual lateness to work, rudeness or that of an excellent employee who feels too superior to relate appropriately with other staff members you inadvertently need to deal with the perception of people. In other words, the management process places you in a situation whereby you need to make decisions about the motives, values and actions of people within your organisation. Therefore, the manager ought to be able to distinguish between the ideal and the real world. The manager needs to be aware of the fact that, just as he reacts to his perception of his employees, the employees in turn react to him perceptively. Thus, it is irrelevant whether the employees find their roles in the organisation sufficiently motivating or whether the manager’s roles are truly supportive to the process of employee’s task management. What are most important are the inter-personal perceptions that occur between the manager and employees. But more importantly, the perception of the manager’s actions by employees should interest the manager the most. According to Rao and Narayana (1998) “a manager can improve his perceptual accuracy if he becomes aware of how perceptions are formed and distorted.” But majority of managers appear to have been arriving at employee-related decisions through observations and trials and error approaches. These authors listed the following examples of some of the assumptions that guide manager’s dealings with their employees:

• the notion that people are basically lazy and should be controlled

• the notion that organisations are basically successful because they are large

• the notion that leaders that have mastered the art of speaking are logically good leaders

• the notion that organisations that are insensitive to their employees are usually the large ones.

• the notion that people tend to be generally emotional

• the notion that a productive employee always turns act a satisfied worker.

However, a critical assessment of those statements reveals they are not axiomatic or always correct. In as much as managers may work with these kinds of perceptions, they are, nevertheless, encouraged to strive for perpetual precision or accuracy. Lawler and Rhode posit that: Experiencing the environment is an active process in which people try to make sense out of their environment. In this active process, individuals selectively notice different aspects of the environment, appraise what they see in terms of their own experience, and evaluate what they experience in terms of their needs and values. Since people needs and past experience often suffer markedly, so do their perceptions of the environment. From the foregoing, it is apparent that a manager’s knowledge of the perceptual process is the most profound step towards achieving effectiveness as head of his department or unit or organisation.