**INTRODUCTION**

A beginner in the field of peace and conflict usually perceives or sees conflict as something negative that should be avoided like the plague. Although, due to individual differences, conflict is an inevitable and recurrent fact of life. We should therefore develop our understanding of conflict and its positive management. The Chinese do not see conflict as negative in their language; rather, they see conflict as “an opportunity or chance for change as well as risk or danger.” Therefore, conflict is neither positive nor negative; however, how it turns out to be is determined by our response, which is a function of our perception, attitude, background and the environments. Knowing the root causes of conflicts does not automatically proffer solution or clue on how to prevent or resolve them, as the inherent dynamic of conflicts tend to give them a Life of their own. Conflict tends to emerge/evolve in a cyclical pattern, often with several vicious cycles that are closely entertained. Even a removal of the original problems may not guarantee an end to a conflict, as additional conflict is being generated by the conflict itself. However, having a positive approach to conflict help one to manage it in a constructive manner with positive results while people with negative connotation of conflict tend to handle conflicts in a destructive way with negative effects. Each conflict situation contains certain predictable elements and dynamics that are amendable to regulation and change.

There are two key propelling variables in conflict (escalation) cycle: opportunity and willingness.

**Opportunity**: This has to do with the available resources at the disposal of a person, group or a country such as money, people, arms, land, minerals, good organisation, and external support and so on.

**Willingness**: This is desire or need to act. This is a situation whereby a group of people are determined and convinced to embark on an action aimed at changing their situation irrespective of the likely consequences.

Both the opportunity and willingness are complimentary in nature in the sense that one may have the means to act but may not be willing to do so or the willingness to act may be there but the means is lacking. In the light of the above, for conflict to move from one stage to the other, both must be present because they are dependent on each other.

**Conflict Cycle and Stages of Conflict**

Conflict tend to progress from one place to another when the stakeholders (the oppressed and the oppressor) become more aware of a conflict of interest, means to act and then mobilise to alter the prevailing situation to each group advantage. In the course of altering the situation or addressing the injustice being faced by the oppressed, a sporadic violence can erupt if either party should fail to adopt positive approach of conflict management.

**Stages of Conflict**

The following are the various stages of conflicts emerging in different parts of the world.

**The Formation Stage**: This is the first stage of conflict whereby a problem emerges and acts or things, or situations that were previously ignored or taken for granted now turn to serious issues. The obvious antagonistic shifts in attitude and a behaviour patterns is a clear indication of the early warning signs of conflict formation, which need to be addressed if further escalation is to be avoided.

B. **The Escalation Stage**: This stage is characterised by the formation of enemy images. People begin to take sides, positions harden, communication stops, perception becomes distorted and parties begin to commit resources to defend their position, leaders begin to make inflammatory public statements regarding their positions and street demonstrations intensity.

C. **The Violent Crisis Stage**: At this stage, parties in conflict now begin to use physical barricades to demarcate their territories. Attempts to defend or expand territories or interests lead to direct confrontation and eruption of violence. Stockpiled weapons or arms are now freely used in an attempt to dominate or have upper hand leading to breakdown of law and order and essential. Services are virtually disrupted and people begin to experience discomfort due to lack of water, food, electricity and other essential goods and services.

D. **De-escalation Stage**: This is the stage in which parties in conflict begin to experience gradual cessation of hostility arising from conflict weariness, hunger, sanctions or external intervention.

E. **Improvement Stage:** At this stage, stakeholders begin to have a rethink, shift ground and needs for dialogue are recognised and efforts are made towards attaining relative peace.

F. **Transformation Stage:** All causes of conflicts have been removed at this stage and reconciliation has occurred. This stage is the most difficult stage to attain in any conflict situation, though desirable, attainable and accomplishable.

**Conflict Cycle**

It is now generally believed that conflict most times evolve in a cyclical pattern that are closely related.

1. **Latent Phase**: This is the first phase of the conflict cycle where a conflict is dormant and barely expressed by the conflicting sides that may not even be conscious of their conflicting interests or values. At this phase, a conflict can easily be “nipped in the bud” through a preventive action on the basis of early warning in principle. Although, latent conflicts are difficult to detect with any degree of certainty – and their presence and absence may be hard to verify. Despite that, we can still identify various indicators of impending conflicts, such as inequality, growing poverty, frustrated expectation, unemployment, pollution and a growing tendency to view problems in “us versus them – terms,”.
2. **Manifest Phase:** At this phase, conflicting parties express their demands and grievances openly, but only by legal means. It is easier to identify both problems and stakeholders, at this stage while preventive action can still be taken to prevent conflict escalation or degeneration into violent confrontation. Despite limited time available, exhibit conflict behaviour and regroup themselves in opposing camps. Mediation efforts geared towards compromise solutions still stand a reasonable chance of success provided violence has not occurred.
3. **Violent Phase**: This phase is characterised by direct physical attacks and confrontations leading to spilling of blood and loss of life of both conflicting parties and innocent people and thereby produce additional motives for struggle elongation, if only to “get even” or escape retribution for atrocities committed. Moreover, people having their various private agendas and that are personally benefiting or profiting from the continuing crisis often usurped the initial/existing leadership structure in order to have influence and control over their groups.
4. **Escalation Phase:** Under this phase, violence breeds further violence, producing an escalatory momentum. Moreover, the longer the struggle has lasted, and the more destructive it has been, the more do the warring parties (and especially their leaders) have to lose by laying down their arms. Only victory can justify the preceding bloodshed; hence, the proclivity to struggle on as long as there is even a slight hope of prevailing, thereby attaining the power to set the terms. Neither the violence nor the escalation phases therefore leave much scope for peaceful intervention, mediation or negotiations. On the other, embarking on military intervention at this stage could be regarded as a risky enterprise despite the fact that it might make a difference.
5. **Contained Phase**: Escalation comes to a halt in this stage. This could be because the conflicting parties have temporarily exhausted their supply of weaponry, leading to lower intensity. At this stage, there appears hope for negotiations and mediation efforts by the intervention of a third party aiming towards a truce. Most times, peacekeeping forces can be introduced to protect each side against the possible breaches of the truce by either of the conflicting parties. The truce agreed upon allows for the provision of humanitarian aid to the civilian victims without supporting either of the warring sides.
6. **Mitigated Phase**: Mitigated stage of any conflict is the period during which the basic causes of conflict remain in place, but the conflict behaviour and attitude has been significantly changed with reduced or less violence and more political mobilisation and negotiation. At this stage, the ray of post-conflict recovery can easily be read and felt in the minds of political leaders on opposing sides, while external factors are at the advantage of gaining new leverage, that is, serving as potential (but not unconditional) provider of aid.
7. **The Resolution Phase**: This phase is the most perceived critical stage of all the phases, as success or failure of post-conflict peace-building will determine whether the conflict will flare up again. For a tangible and enduring or sustainable success to be accomplished, both the underlying causes of the conflict and its immediate consequences must be addressed. This include reordering of power relationships, bringing some of those responsible for the preceding bloodshed to trial and facilitating reconciliation between the opposing sides as a precondition of future coexistence. At this stage, the importance of external actors is very crucial in the following areas such as provision of various forms of assistance and support to the emerging civil society after the resolution of the conflict, and to support programmes for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants, including child soldiers.

**Conflict Handling Styles**

These are various forms or ways by which individual, groups, societies or nations perceive and respond to conflicts arising from diverse/conflicting views, opinion, ideas, values and belief. The behaviours and attitudes of the parties concerned usually determined the success and failure of any conflict which can be described along these two basic dimensions namely:

a. Assertiveness: This describes the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy his needs and concern.

b. Cooperativeness: This explains the extent to which a person attempts to satisfy his needs and concerns as well as the other person’s needs. These two basic dimensions of behaviour can be applied to define or explain the following five conflict handling styles: dominating/competing; accommodating; avoiding; collaborating and compromising.

i. **Dominating/Competing**: This takes place when an individual is very assertive and not cooperative. Such a person pursues his own concerns at another person’s expense. It is a power-oriented mode. It is a position that states: “I have to win.” It can also mean: “I have to stand up for myself, for my rights.” It entails defending a position by argument, by rank, or by economic advantage. This position connotes “you win, the other loses.”

ii. **Accommodating**: You are unassertive and cooperative. It is the opposite of competing. When accommodating, you neglect your own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this handling style. It can be selfless, generous; it can be yielding because of weakness or low self-esteem.

iii. **Avoiding**: You are unassertive and uncooperative. You do not (immediately) pursue your own concerns or those of other person. You do not address the conflict. It can be a diplomatic way of handling conflict, postponing for a better time. It can also be a withdrawal that could lead to worsening of a relationship.

iv. **Collaborating**: Under this dimension, you are both assertive and cooperative. It is the opposite of avoiding. You are working with the other person to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns of both parties. It means dialogue, it means good listening, it means understanding your and the other person’s needs and concerns and creating solutions to meet those concerns. In this case, both sides win. A win-win situation for all.

v. **Compromising**: You are partially assertive and partially cooperative. When you compromise you attempt to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties. When you compromise, you split the difference, you make concessions, and you give up something, to gain something in return. You seek middle – ground position. You win a little, and you lose a little.

**Model Two of conflict handling styles**

This second model grouped conflict handling styles into three major headings or classifications in as much as approaches to conflict vary from individual to individual. The classifications are thus:

1. **Avoidance/Denial**: This is a common way of handling or dealing with conflict. We may decide to avoid the other party/person or pretend that the conflict does not exist even though we are hurt or angry. We need to observe that this approach or style of handling conflict often leaves us feeling more hurt, frustrated, and annoyed. It can be likened to a housewife who keeps sweeping dirt under the carpet; the dirt will surely become a heap, which she will not be able to manage one day. This approach creates room for a win/lose option, an option where one person gets what he/she needs and the other person gets nothing. This style does not actually solve the problem but buries it for the time being. However, this style is useful is some situations, for example, avoidance method can be a stop gap to reflect on what next line of action or step to be taken.

2. **Confrontation/Fighting**: In this approach, some people, group, nation or state might decide to slog it out with the other party in conflict situation. They threaten, attack, yell, insult and tenaciously hold on to their point of view and disagree with the other party’s point of view. This approach often leads to violence and it creates lose/lose option, an option where both parties lose. Neither party gets what he/she needs. In some cases, confrontation might also lead to win/lose where the stronger party with bigger power wins while the weaker party ends up being the loser.

3. **Problem Solving**: This is an approach whereby the parties in conflict listen with the intent conflict and attack underlying elements in the conflict and attack the issues. The parties adopting this style normally show respect for differences and look for ways to resolve the problem. Furthermore, people using this style or approach are less concerned about who is right or wrong. They view conflict as belonging to both parties which require their mutual collaboration to resolve. This approach creates room for a “win/win solution”- a situation where both parties come out satisfied with the solution. They are both happy and satisfied because their needs and desires have been met and their relationship has been restored.

CONCLUSION: Based on the above discussion, it is now crystal clear that it is important to know the stages or phases of conflict progression to enable you ascertain the step to be taken in the prevention of conflict escalation and management approaches to be adopted in managing conflicts that are at different stages or phases of conflict cycle.