COMMUNICATION AS TOOL FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Olusola O. Isola
Research Fellow
Peace and Conflict Studies Program
Institute of African Studies
University of Ibadan, Ibadan
E-mail: sola_isola@yahoo.com

Abstract

Communication and conflict are intricately connected as a feature of every human society. Inadequate or poor quality of communication invariably leads to conflict at the individual level and it ultimately leads to social conflicts. However, if adequate attention is paid to communication dynamics in any relationship and in the society, the ultimate result is improvement and development in relationships and in the social environment. This paper examines the intricate web of communication and conflict by looking at the role of perception and stereotypes in the communication process and how it could aggravate social conflict. It analyses how some of the common errors committed in the communication process could lead to misunderstanding, and it makes suggestions on deliberate steps that could be taken to ensure that communication is adopted as a tool to enhance better understanding and quick resolution of conflicts.

Introduction

Communication is a process that defines the essence of humanity. To some extent, animals and even plants do also communicate in one form or the other, but man as a social animal has developed sophisticated communication methods with which he communicates with other people in the same social environment in order for effective interaction and development to take place. Without adequate communication, people cannot live peacefully in a geographical space since the quality of communication defines the quality of interaction among people.

Equally embedded in the social environment of man are the potentials for conflicts. As long as men interact socially, there will always be

disagreements and incompatible ideas competing for attention. It is only through effective communication that men could resolve their problems and disagreements for development to take place. This paper is aimed at exploring how communication could aid effective understanding in social environment in order to reduce conflicts. It also examines how human communication skills can be used to enhance management and resolution of conflicts so that men could progress in spite of the challenges faced in the social environment.

Perspective on Communication and Conflict

Communication is basically the sharing of information between two or more individuals or groups in order to reach a common understanding (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1987). Communication is a simple but complex nature of human interaction. Reaching understanding is such a difficult task to the extent that if careful attention is not paid to the process of communication to facilitate understanding, total chaos may occur in the social environment. This is more so because in every communication process, there is embedded the potentials for conflicts. However, good communication could enhance the reduction and resolution of conflicts among people.

Communication is a dynamic process and every communication has two basic phases. These are the transmission phase and the feedback phase. These two phases have several components, the most important of which are the encoding and the decoding of messages which occur when messages are transmitted and received (Garth, Jennifer and Hill, 2000). Message encoding involves the individual source of message thinking about what to say and formulating an idea into an understandable language, which is then transmitted through a medium. Message decoding requires the individual receiver of a message to decipher what had been said by the source of a message and then interpret it appropriately. In order for effective encoding and decoding to take place, both the sender and the receiver of a message must share a common language background to enhance effective transmission and reception (Garth *et al*, ibid). Embedded in all the aspects of the communication process is the potential for Noise. A noise is any process that could inhibit free flow of messages and that could hamper understanding during exchange of information. Noise could be present in any of the components of the process of

communication. It could be present with the source of a message, with the receiver of the message, in the message itself or in the medium through which the message is communicated. Very often, noise is a constant cause of conflicts because it inhibits communication processes.

Conflict is basically a disagreement between two or more individuals or groups over incompatible goals (Miller and King, 2005). Conflicts vary and occur at different levels. There are inter-personal conflicts, inter-group conflicts, intra-group conflicts, political conflicts, environmental conflicts, armed conflicts, community conflicts, international conflicts, etc. Conflicts could also have at their roots in four major causes. They include: in resources, in values, in psychological problems and in breakdown in communication.

Conflict is not always a negative phenomenon. In fact, it is an inbuilt mechanism to ensure that man progresses in his social environment. It is how conflict is managed and concluded that determines the outcome it will generate for the parties involved; that is, whether it will contribute to progress or whether it will inhibit progress. Not all conflicts could be resolved because sometimes the resources to resolve the conflict may not be available (Albert and Oloyede, 2010). In this situation, the conflict could be managed to minimize its adverse effects on the human environment. Conflict management is thus described as any effort geared towards containing a conflict from escalating and ensuring that it does not hamper progress. However, resolution of conflicts is an ideal to aspire to since it does not always happen. It is only on rare occasions that a conflict is completely resolved and a perfect agreement reached among contending parties (Schmid, 2000).

There is always a linkage between communication and conflict in conflict resolution and conflict management processes. Every effort to embark on management and resolution of conflicts begins and ends with communication, and the extent of success achieved from these efforts depends on the quality and sophistication of communication strategies adopted.

Role of Perception in Communication and Conflict Management
Perception plays an important role in communication and conflict management. Most of what is communicated in the messages

circulating among the conflicting parties and how it is received are influenced and coloured by the perception of the various senders and receivers participating in the conflict resolution effort.

Perception is the process through which people select, organize and interpret sensory inputs to give meaning and order to the world around them (Garth, *et al,* 2000). Perception is inherently subjective and it is influenced by people's personalities, values, attitudes, moods, as well as their experiences and knowledge. When senders and receivers communicate with each other, they are doing so based on their subjective perceptions. The encoding and decoding of messages, and even the choice of medium to pass messages around, hinges on the perception of senders and receivers.

In managing social conflicts, it is important that the manager's perception of the parties and issues involved in conflict be accurate and free from biases and stereotypes. At the same time, it is important to ensure that the parties in conflict come to negotiation with better perception of each other. This is because perceptual biases can hamper effective communication and resolution of conflicts. Perceptual biases are basically systematic tendencies to use information about others in ways that result in in-accurate perception. If allowed to influence one's perception in a conflict environment, biases can lead to arrival at wrong conclusions on important matters that affect the resolution or management of a conflict.

Stereotypes are simplified and often in-accurate beliefs about the characteristics of particular groups of people. This also has the tendency to interfere with the encoding and decoding of messages in the communication process. When stereotypes and biases affect the perception of individuals involved in communication and in management of conflicts too often, it leads to in-effective communication and conflict resolution may be difficult to achieve (Isola, 2009).

In order to ensure accurate perception in the communication process in a conflict environment, Garth, Jennifer, and Hill (2000) has suggested a number of precautions that could be taken:

1. It is always wise to be open to others' points of views and perspectives. People who are open to other peoples' perspectives put their own beliefs and knowledge to an

important reality test and will be more inclined to modify or change them when necessary. In other words, no one is a repository of wisdom and the only way to get wiser is to be open to other opinions.

2. It is better not to be afraid to change one's view about a person, an issue or an event. It does not make sense to be too rigid about one's perception of issues, individuals or parties involved in a conflict. Our perception may be wrong and so, it is always good to be flexible about issues concerning others.

3. It is wise to seek out opinions of others who have had different kinds of experiences than one. So many issues are often involved in a typical conflict, and there are as many ways of viewing a conflict as there are people involved on both sides of the conflict. Seeking opinions of others will enrich the quality of decisions that will be taken at the end of the day with no side feeling neglected in the management and resolution of a conflict.

4. When one has made what turns out to be a bad decision or has not performed up to expectations, it is important to try to determine if one's perceptions were faulty. No one is perfect and, sometimes, conflict handling is a trial and error process. There is no standard template for the resolution of all conflicts; therefore, anyone involved in conflict management is liable to making mistakes. The only way to avoid costly mistakes is to constantly put one's perception of the issues and individuals to test and seek out opinions of others about our own performance.

Effective Communication Skills for Conflict Management

There are various kinds of barriers to effective communication when managing or resolving social conflicts. While some barriers have their origins in the receivers or in the medium being employed in discussions while conflicts are being resolved, others have their origins in the senders of information. When messages are unclear, incomplete or difficult to understand, when they are sent over an in-appropriate medium or when no provision for feedback is made, communication suffers (Ajala, 2000). In the like manner, when receivers pay no attention to or do not listen to messages well, or when they make no

effort to understand the meaning of a message, communication is likely to be in-effective.

In order to overcome these barriers and effectively initiate discussions with parties in conflict, conflict managers must possess or develop certain communication skills. Some of these skills are important when sending messages to the parties in conflict, while others are important when receiving messages from the parties.

As a sender of information, the effectiveness of a conflict manager depends on his ability to be able to send clear unambiguous messages to parties or individuals on both sides of the conflict divides. There are a numbers of skills to ensure that when a message is sent, it is properly understood and its transmission is effective. Some of the following steps are suggested:

1. Send clear and complete messages. A message is clear when it is easy for the receiver to understand and to interpret. It is always good to learn to anticipate how receivers will interpret the message so that one can adjust messages to eliminate confusions.

2. Efforts should be made to encode messages or statements in symbols that the receiver understands and is familiar with. Use of simple languages in making statements is always beneficial and as much as possible the use of jargons or other words that may not be easily understood should be avoided.

3. It is better to always select a medium that is appropriate for the message. Face to face verbal means of communication still remains the best medium of communication. There are however other means of communicating messages to parties in conflict, especially now that telecommunication and ICT means are getting popular. Messages can now be sent on the internet, through mobile phones, the mass media, fax, etc. When that is being done, it is always very important to carefully consider the implications of using any of the media of communication to send messages when trying to manage or resolve a conflict. Each of the medium is subject to misinterpretation of messages by the receiver and so, it is wise to anticipate what those interpretations could be and how the receiver could react to messages emanating from each medium.

4. It is wise to select a medium that the receiver monitors. It is good to always learn whether there is any disability that can prevent the receiver from accessing a medium and to avoid such medium. For example, it does not make sense to use the telephone to communicate with a deaf or partially deaf individual when trying to resolve a conflict involving such individual.

5. It is better to always include a feedback mechanism in any message sent to parties in conflict. This could be in form of a request for a response to indicate acceptance or rejection of a proposal. This will assure the conflict manager of clarity of his messages and efforts and it will give assurance to the conflicting parties that their interests are being dealt with appropriately.

6. It is wise to always strive to provide accurate information to all the parties involved in the conflict. Provision of inaccurate information can lead to misunderstanding and rumours among the contending parties which can be injurious to the conflict resolution efforts. Sometimes, it may be suspected that any of the conflict parties is providing inaccurate information. If this is the case, the conflict manager should insist on knowing the truth and encourage the parties to divulge accurate information during his intervention.

In the process of resolving a conflict, it is also important for a conflict manager to cultivate appropriate personal communication skills that could enable him to be an effective receiver of messages and an active listener. In order to do this, the following, as adapted from Garth *et al* (ibid), are suggested:

1. Learn to pay attention. Adequate attention should be focused on the subject being discussed and efforts should be made to avoid distractions during negotiation process or discussion in the course of conflict resolution. Distractions could come in so many ways. Sometimes, issues that are not relevant to the conflict being resolved could be introduced in the discussion process. A good manager of conflict should be able to detect

and isolate such irrelevant issues so that it does not distract negotiating parties from the main issues in contention.

2. Be a good listener. This can be done by refraining from interrupting anyone making statements or disclosing information by maintaining eye contact with such individual, by asking questions, by making clarifications and by paraphrasing or restating difficult words in simple ways. This will enhance explication of thorny or difficult issues and encourage the person making statement to express himself in simpler ways. It will also make things easier for other listeners. If the facilitator is good enough, the need to ask questions frequently could be reduced if all clarifications are made when the statement is being made.

3. Be empathetic. It is good to try to understand how the parties in the conflict feel and to interpret their messages from perspectives that will convey their feelings. As much as possible, even if the conflict manager or facilitator is not affected by the issues in contention, he should feel or appear to be touched by those issues. This is likely to breed confidence from the parties in conflict who may be willing to disclose more information that they otherwise would not want to do to a person who does not belong to their group.

Conclusion

Conflict management and conflict resolution are very tough and rigorous processes. They are even much more difficult when the issues involved in the conflict are about the value system or the psychological orientation of the parties involved in the conflict. Even though resource-based conflicts are easier to be resolved, they can equally prove tough if accurate diagnosis of the issues involved is not made. Effective communication is at the heart of any effort to resolve all varieties of conflicts, and this requires skilful handling by not only the conflict manager or the third party, but also the various parties involved in a conflict. While conflict resolution is a difficult task, an experienced and skilful third party interventionist can use appropriate communication skills to manage conflict to ultimately achieve complete resolution of a conflict.

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