

## **INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT IN A DEPRESSED ECONOMY: THE EXPERIENCE OF NIGERIA (2012-2024)**

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**ABSTRACT:** The study examined the impact of industrial conflicts, particularly strikes in an already depressed economy like Nigeria. Two research questions and corresponding objectives were formulated to aid the study. The study is anchored on the Marxian Conflict theory by Karl Marx. The study is a descriptive type of study that uses desk research methodology. Data was sourced from secondary sources through the internet, newspapers, Journals and textbooks for data collection. The study reveals that grievances as a result of low wages, poor working conditions and lack of promotion lead to conflict. Also, conflicts of any nature hamper the growth of any organization or nation. The study concluded that Although Conflict is an essential part of life, it must be treated carefully as any one perspective of conflict (strike) activity can be quite misleading. Several perspectives have to be taken together in order to provide a fair picture and resolve them effectively for the benefit of all parties involved and the economy at large. It, however, recommends, amongst others, that an institutionalisation of industrial democracy is a proactive and corrective mechanism that should be put in place to be able to detect, prevent and correct the possibility of an industrial conflict quickly when it arises.

**Keywords:** Industrial Conflict, Strike Action, Depressed Economy, Labour Relations, Conflict Resolution

### **INTRODUCTION**

One major characteristic of contemporary society is its intricate organization, which facilitates the engagement of numerous individuals in the pursuit of significant administrative tasks. Workers find themselves subject to service conditions that are governed by an array of rules and regulations established by their employers while simultaneously being supported by robust unions that wield the authority to arbitrate disputes arising between these workers and their employers. Nonetheless, conflicts inevitably emerge from disagreements between parties, often exacerbated by underlying power imbalances that lead to disputes between employers and employees. The nature of conflict serves varied purposes depending on contextual circumstances; it can either seek to reconcile opposing dualities and strive for unity through the eradication of one conflicting entity or manifest as a maladaptive social process that threatens to impede effective communication. In a typical employee-employer relationship, conflict is inherently perpetual and unavoidable. Workplace conflicts may result in considerable stress, which can lead to competition for resources (Abdykalikova & Aikinbayeva, 2024) and, in some instances, conflicts; however, conflict is subject to minimization, diversion, management, and resolution through several mechanisms, such

as collective bargaining (CB). In as much as industrial conflict is bound to exist, its prevalence and reoccurrence in a depressed economy like Nigeria, express the existence of unhealthy relationship between key actors in an industrial setting (Wokoma, 2011).

Industrial conflict encompasses any form of workplace dissatisfaction that can manifest in several ways, such as absenteeism, strikes, and high labour turnover, among others (Okene, 2008). Many discussions on industrial conflict focus on either lock-outs or strikes, as these are the most potent tools employed by trade unions to alter the bargaining framework and secure their demands (Wokoma, 2011). These strike actions adversely affect a struggling economy, as their occurrence leads to work stoppages and significant man-days lost, which disrupt the productivity of various sectors, including hospitals, banks, schools, and more. The concept of industrial conflict involves an exchange relationship between two primary actors: employers and employees, with the workmen playing an intervening role. Consequently, industrial conflict is characterised as the discord that arises when the goals, interests, or values of different individuals or groups in an industrial environment are incompatible, regardless of whether this incompatibility leads to strikes or other forms of protest.

In recent years, industrial conflicts and union disputes in Nigeria have emerged as critical issues, largely attributable to tensions between labor and management, as well as intra-worker conflicts. Consequently, the country frequently experiences economic instability, characterized by recurrent strikes, lock-outs, picketing, diminished employee morale, absenteeism, reduced productivity, and disciplinary problems across various economic sectors. For example, in July 2024, legislators enacted a bill to elevate the minimum wage from 30,000 to 70,000 naira per month, concluding months of negotiations and threats of strikes by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC). These organizations contended that soaring prices and depreciating currency, a consequence of the reforms implemented by President Tinubu's administration, were severely affecting workers' livelihoods. Additionally, on June 3, 2024, union members from the electricity and airline sectors commenced a work stoppage that led to a complete shutdown of the national grid and air travel across the nation (Egbejule, 2024). Moreover, in January 2023, the Petroleum Tanker Drivers branch of the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) threatened a nationwide strike in response to what they termed "illegal activities and overreach" by security personnel, particularly the military task force in the Port Harcourt region. Allegations surfaced that military forces had incinerated two trucks transporting Heavy Fuel Oil (HPFO), disrupting the supply of petroleum products to major areas around Port Harcourt and consequently leading to significant challenges for businesses and an uncontrolled surge in fuel prices (ranging from ₦350-550 per litre in N250 to the current ₦1030 per litre, compared to an earlier price of N180 at the pump) due to scarcity (The Guardian, 2023).

The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) has embarked on a series of industrial actions due to the inability of parties to settle their internal disputes or their failure to honour collective agreements reached during negotiations, alongside the removal of the fuel subsidy in January 2012 and the subsequent hike in fuel prices. Similarly, it has become an annual concern that members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) go on industrial action demanding improved working conditions, such as better access to canteens, rest areas, recreational, accommodation facilities, travelling allowances, and healthcare services (Reuters, 2024). In an effort to resolve

these disputes, the Federal Government inaugurated a seven-member committee on 14th October 2024 to probe the 2009 agreements reached with ASUU (Abdulganiyu, 2024). Furthermore, the issue of labour unrest in the country has become a source of concern for all Nigerians, as it has the potential to undermine the peace and stability of the nation. No sector is free from industrial disputes and conflicts organised by various local and national unions. The list of these unions includes the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASUU) and the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT). Others are the Medical and Health Workers Union, the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), and the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas (NUPENG) workers ([www.nigeriadailynews.com](http://www.nigeriadailynews.com)). Notably, the 'almighty umbrella unions' include the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), among others. Whenever a group of workers decides to lay down their tools in demand of enhanced working conditions, it becomes difficult to quantify the financial and economic cost to the nation, which has far-reaching implications for a struggling economy.

The Nigerian government, despite its state privatisation programme and the corresponding downsizing policy in line with the neo-liberal structural adjustment programme (SAP), remains the largest employer of labour. However, its industrial relations have been marked by numerous industrial conflicts and crises since the return to a democratic political system on 29 May 1999. Consequently, the relationship between the government and its public administration has resembled that of cat and mouse (Adeobasi, 2020).

Historically, a lack of communication and the denial of workers' active involvement in decision-making are regarded as major triggers of industrial unrest, which manifests daily in the working lives of modern employees. Osezua (2006) describes this as a struggle over claims to status, power, and scarce resources among two parties that perceive incompatible interests or exhibit hostile attitudes. However, with the increase in diversity, conflict in the workplace cannot be discounted, even with the presence of labour unions.

In a study conducted by Nieftagodian (2008) on the rise of conflict in Africa, he utilised the Endemic Poverty Theory, discovering that conflict tends to take root in areas plagued by poverty and economic stagnation. He recalls South Africa's Alexandra, where violent conflict erupted in May 2008 between South Africans and foreigners. He further describes Alexandra as a place where the majority of the population lived in makeshift shacks, coupled with a 30% unemployment rate. However, there are other places in the world where people are certainly poorer than the inhabitants of Alexandra, yet these locations have not experienced the alarmingly high levels of violent conflict seen in Alexandra. This suggests that the Endemic Poverty Theory, on its own, cannot account for the causes of conflict in Africa, and Nigeria in particular.

Similarly, Solaja (2015) conducted a study on industrial conflict and its management strategies in selected manufacturing companies in Lagos, Nigeria, employing a co-relational survey method that utilised structured questionnaires and personal observation to gather information from respondents. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The study identified conflict management strategies such as dominance, avoidance, smoothing, compromising, hierarchical decision-making, and appeal procedures as voluntary methods for conflict resolution within an organisation.

Jolayemi, et al. (2020) in the study causal relationship between industrial action and economic growth in Nigeria examined the direction of causality between industrial action and economic growth in Nigeria using endogenous growth model to determine whether or not man- day – lost to industrial crisis in Nigeria through high number of industrial action Granger caused economic growth in Nigeria. The study revealed that whenever the economy is growing, the citizen(s) may agitate for higher wage increments, and this could lead to higher industrial action in the country.

The present body of research indicates that, despite the prevalence of scholarly discourse surrounding industrial conflict, there exists a notable gap in the literature regarding the interplay of such conflict within a depressed economy, particularly in the context of Nigeria. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by investigating industrial conflict in relation to Nigeria's economic challenges. The primary focus of this paper is to analyze the effects of industrial conflict, specifically strikes, on employee welfare and working conditions during economic downturns. This research concludes with recommendations for proactive strategies to mitigate future industrial conflicts. In light of the aforementioned issues, the following research questions have been formulated to guide the investigation: What are the underlying causes of industrial conflict between employees and employers? How has industrial conflict affected a depressed economy such as Nigeria? Based on these research questions, the central aim of this study is to examine the implications of industrial conflict within Nigeria's depressed economic environment.

### **Clarification of Concepts**

**Depressed economy:** an economy is said to be depressed when that economy is in a state of financial turmoil, often the result of a period of negative activity based on the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rate. It is a lot worse than a recession, with GDP failing significantly, and usually last for many years. This depression is primarily caused by worsening consumer confidence, deflation, a worsening unemployment rate, a decrease in manufacturing orders and an oil price hike, which causes a ripple effect on almost everything in the market and leads to a decrease in demand, thereby forcing businesses to lay off employees to survive.

**Conflict:** it is any situation in which there are incompatible goals and emotions. That is, contradictions arising from differences in interest, ideas, ideologies, prescriptions and tendencies.

**Industrial conflict:** Various authors have defined conflict in different forms and concepts, depending on their different perceptions. Andesine (2009) sees industrial conflict as the act of striking together, mutual interference of opposing or incompatible forces, ideas, interest context, and discord. For Anioke (2002), Conflict is the difference or disagreement of opinions, ideals or goals between parties, individuals or groups.

Conflict between the ownership of an organisation and its employees is referred to as industrial conflict. Such conflict may manifest as interpersonal or intergroup; it can present itself in either a single or multi-dimensional form. It can be violent or non-violent, latent or manifest. Ufok (1987) and Iwok (1995) express similar views regarding the meaning of conflict, perceiving industrial conflict as a state of emotional stress experienced by an individual or group due to the clash of differing needs and methods of operation in a given situation. Industrial conflicts often manifest

overtly or covertly, allowing individuals to perceive their existence. This suggests that Fox's (1971) classification of industrial conflict aligns with the aforementioned observations. Consequently, one can deduce that industrial conflict can occur within:

- An individual: known as intra-personal conflict
- Between two groups (non-union members and management): known as inter-personal conflict
- Between or among groups of people, units, or departments (such as a labour union or one of its members and the management group): known as inter-group or unit conflict.
- Between or among different organisations or nations (collectivities): known as inter-organisational or international conflict.

Fujana (1997) stated that “modern industrial conflicts seem inevitable since the domination of management is to maximize profit while labour's concern is to secure and maintain the highest level of wages with the best conditions of their service. In this context, conflicts emerged between the social partners in an effort of each partner to obtain maximum benefits of the industry. Anugwom (1997) argued that conflict goes a long way in shaping the industrial relations system of any nation. In spite of their differences, both parties are committed to the continuation of their relationship (Fashoyin, 2010).

Industrial conflict seems to be more pronounced in public sector organizations, especially at local government councils. Anugwom and Ukaegbu (1998) argue that public unions have substantial market power and are usually in a position to play a key role in the political process. It is this unique positioning that make them conflict prone. Underlying the inevitability of conflict in industrial relations, Njoku (2000) writes that “one of the qualities of a good trade union leader is his ability to resolve conflicts and settle grievances without hullabaloo”. Today, the Marxist interpretation of the nature of the relationship between employers and employees in industrial organizations (especially in capitalist countries) appears unrealistic and old-fashioned. For, in most developed nations, both the employers and the employees have developed through mutual cooperation strategies for conflict resolution.

1. **Strike:** When industrial conflict occurs constantly, it sires room for strike. Strike is the temporary stoppage of work in pursuit of grievance or demand. Strike forces the owners of organization to concede to employees demand. Most times, strike actions are used to change the structure of bargaining and to win substantive demand by workers.
2. **Economic depression:** A depression is characterized as a dramatic downturn in economic activity in conjunction with a sharp fall in growth, employment and production.

The study is anchored on the Marxian conflict theory embedded in the works and ideas of Karl Marx. The Marxists theorised that conflict is an inherent characteristic of society. This view of industrial relations looks at the nature of the capitalist society, where there is a fundamental division of interest between labour and capital, and sees workplace relations against this background. The theory further explains that conflict is inevitable and stems from inequalities of power and economic wealth inherent in a capitalist economy or society. In a Marxian analysis,

conflict is attributable to an enduring power struggle between workers and their employers over the control of various aspects of work (Fashoyin, 2007). Identifying the causes of workplace conflict, Fashoyin (2007) further submits that “inequality in the distribution of the proceeds of industry, job-insecurity of the worker, and poor management control strategies breed grievances which lead to conflict.” Here, conflict is seen as inevitable, and trade unions are a natural response of workers to their exploitation by capitalists since it is rather difficult and dangerous for workers to express their grievances to management individually. Conflict theorists posit that there may be periods of acquiescence in this conflicting relationship. These periods of acquiescence may be influenced by institutional pressures that can lead to collaboration (Sedgwick & Lemaire, 2023). This theory (Marxian conflict) is of much relevance in explaining industrial relations in Nigeria. Observably, industrial relations in Nigeria are largely imbalanced and antagonistic between the parties involved, often in favour of capital. The employer wields so much power at the expense and exploitation of the worker. Thus, in response to such exploitative tendencies, conflicts result over processes of work relations and control. With regard to wages, the capitalist endeavours to purchase labour at the lowest price.

This study is a descriptive type of study using desk research methodology. Data was sourced from secondary sources through the Internet, journals, books, and reviews. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the descriptive information in visible form from the reviews.

## **RESULTS/DISCUSSION**

### **Causes of Industrial Conflicts in a Depressed Economy**

Conflicts at the workplace may arise due to a number of issues such as inefficient and ineffective administrative processes and leadership styles. The tensions created by incessant strikes in the country have become alarming. For instance, ASUU embarked on a four-month strike in 2009, which necessitated the much-touted 2009 agreement with the government. Also in 2010, the South Eastern State branch of ASUU embarked on strike over non-implementation of 2009 Federal government – ASUU agreement that lasted over five months spreading into January, 2011. In the same year, medical practitioners embarked on strike over poor salary and working conditions. Academic activities nationwide came to a halt in December 2011 due to another strike action, which lasted for 59 days before it was called off in 2012; also, the strike action themed “Occupy Nigeria”, which was in response to the fuel subsidy removal by the government. Failure to review the retirement age of professors from 65 to 70 years by the federal government amongst others was the actual issues of the industrial conflict in 2013. The year 2017 and 2018 were not left out as ASUU was again on an indefinite strike over non-implementation of all outstanding issues as contained in the 2017 memorandum of agreement. But the longest strike action was witnessed in 2020, when ASUU went on a nine-month strike followed by a roll-over strike in February, 2021 due to failure on the part of the government to assent to the demands of ASUU (Business Day, 2022). As a pathological situation and threats to societal cohesion and national security, conflict alone have accounted for more than half of the challenges confronting the Nigerian State ranging from Farmers-Herdsman conflict, violent militancy, the Boko haram menace, electoral conflicts among political contestants and parties and host of others which threaten the corporate existence

of the Nigerian State owing to the failure of its successive governments to adopt a pragmatic conflict prevention and management technique over the years (Olawale, 2020).

Several scholars have made a list of different types of settings where industrial conflict can occur; the following are some of the identified reasons why workers and their unions answer Marx's clarion call of 'revolting against capital'. Adopting a micro theory of conflict, Fashoyin (2007) identified the following causes of industrial conflicts: structural-organisational causes, inadequate decision-making power, management policies, intra-organisational policies, interpersonal and personal sources, and procedural sources. However, in addition to Okene's (2008) identified causes of strikes, the following issues are identified to bring about industrial conflicts and strikes.

**i. Demand for trade union recognition**

Workers often resort to strikes so that the employer recognises them as a union and thus makes them parties in collective bargaining. Apparently, a breakaway faction of the Association of Senior Staff of Banks, Insurance and Financial Institutions (ASSBIFFI) in Union Bank, known as Union Bank Association of Senior Staff (UBASS), was involved in a trade dispute that forced the management of Union Bank to accord them recognition as a collective bargaining party (The Guardian, February 21, 2011).

**ii. Understanding the plight of the workers**

This is perhaps the most singular reason why labour embarks on strike actions. A non-conducive working environment, low wages, poor welfare services, irregular promotion, persecution of labour leaders and union executives, etc, are some plights of the workers that spur them to strike. For instance, the Transit workers union in Vancouver reported that its members are underpaid compared to their counterparts in Toronto (Boynton & Little, 2019). Likewise, in 2007, the casual workers in the Nigerian Port Authority (NPA, Port Harcourt branch) caused an uproar as they were seen agitating for better working conditions (Ome-Egeonu, 2020). In 2010, medical doctors in Edo State embarked on strike to protest the level of insecurity in the state, which had led to the kidnapping and killing of its members. Also, ASUU had embarked on several strike actions from 1999 to 2022 to press a range of demands, including an improved salary scheme, reinstatement of 49 lecturers who were dismissed many years earlier and FG settlement of debts owed the body (Nigeria Tribune, 2022).

**iii. Non-implementation of agreement:**

This refers to the terms of employment between employees' union and the employer's representative which in the long run is not implemented. This can lead to industrial unrest. Like the unimplemented agreement entered by the Federal Government and ASUU in 2009 and 2013 to inject a total of #1.3 trillion into public universities as funding for the revitalisation of public universities (Business Day 2022) to which only #200 billion has been released since 2013. Otobo, in Theophilus (2013), noted that grievances and dissatisfaction arose as a result of noncompliance of the employer to fulfil agreement reached in the process of bargaining.

iv. **Unsuccessful Collective Bargaining in the Nigerian Public and Private Sectors**

Collective bargaining is regarded as the only effective means of protecting workers' interests as well as the most effective means of preventing and settling industrial disputes (Webbs, in George et al., 2012). According to Francis et al. (2011), the practice of industrial relations as a discipline and that of collective bargaining in particular emanated from the private sector the world over. Thus, many of the practices of public sector collective bargaining are modelled after the private sector. Fashoyin, in Francis et al (2011) stated that Collective bargaining gained its root in the public sector owing to the near absence of private sector at the turn of the century. Furthermore, they stressed that, in Nigeria, the public sector pays lip service to the collective bargaining machinery. Governments at all levels (federal, state, and local) have continued to set aside collective bargaining and give wage awards to score political points. Okene (2008) avers that "the main justification for industrial action is the failure of collective bargaining". When workers and employers engage in collective bargaining, there is no guarantee that it will be successful. Even when successful, there is no guarantee that it will be honoured. Consequently, unsuccessful bargaining and failure to adhere to agreed terms naturally lead to industrial conflicts and the dislocation of industrial harmony and peace. For example, the just-ended industrial action between ASUU and the Federal Government lasted for over seven months between February 14th and October 2022 as a result of the non-implementation of the agreement between the Federal government and the union since 2009.

v. **Unpopular and harsh public policies**

Unfriendly and harsh policies by governments and employers are veritable factors that have caused many severe industrial conflicts. Most public policies made by the government have met stiff opposition by the labour. Workers and their unions usually resort to strikes to express their displeasure on such perceived anti-labour policies, decisions and or legislations. In Nigeria, a number of public policies have stirred a series of industrial conflicts. Notably, among such policies was the incessant fuel price hike that was the mainstay during President Olusegun Obasanjo's civilian administration (1999 to 2007). During this time, Nigeria witnessed frequent and regular series of industrial conflicts in the form of strikes called by the central labour organisation, NLC, led by the 'powerful' comrade Adams Oshiomohle. These actions were a result of labour's disapproval and total rejection of the hikes in fuel price. Elsewhere, in 2010, France witnessed a damaging industrial conflict and protest against the government's decision to raise the retirement age of workers.

**Socio-Economic Cost of Industrial Conflicts**

The incessant stoppage of work owing to industrial conflicts has a lot of socio-economic effects in a depressed economy like Nigeria. No matter the logic behind conflict, it is obvious that there are attendant socio-economic misfortunes. While to an economist, conflict like strike causes economic fracture, which has serious negative economic consequences, to a sociologist, industrial conflict causes a dislocation in the sociological importance of work as well as the socialisation process.



Economically, industrial conflict and other forms of conflict like work stoppages obliterate the desired growth and development in any economy. This effect is in two-fold: while it hinders national productivity, it on the other hand, scares away the needed foreign investment. Human productivity is an important index in calculating national productivity. This is because it is the human element that transforms all other resources toward achieving an increased national productivity. However, trade disputes and conflicts instigate work stoppages, which result in man-days lost. Thus, when labour productivity depreciates in the form of man-days lost, it automatically results in a reduction and loss in productivity, which affects the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as well as the Gross National Product (GNP).

Sociologically, industrial conflicts, strikes and work stoppages have serious consequences. Foremost, we need to understand that work is a fundamental connection among humans, creating the basis for social integration (Durkheim, 1960). Grounded on the demonstrable societal significance of work as an elementary human condition and as a principal means to fashion and preserve mores (socialisation), we could concur, therefore, that:

beyond the mere provision of income to cover basic needs, it is through the social bonding of work which links individuals to society, gives them social standing and status, serves as a basis for the construction of their personal identity. Given our cultural heritage, work is for most an existential necessity, providing livelihood and meaning in life (Mohammad et al., 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Although Conflict is an essential part of life; the expression of disagreement in the form of conflict must always be held within tolerable bounds, as any one perspective of conflict (strike) activity can be quit misleading. Several perspectives have to be taken together in other to provide a fair picture, especially in terms of overall balance. Nonetheless, industrial Conflict exists in various categories; within an individual, between individuals, between employees and employers, organization and organization, group and government among others. Where there are labour relations, one inevitably finds industrial conflict even in small measures, and the need to resolve them efficiently, effectively and equitably for the benefit of all the parties involved.

The capability to strike would basically furnish management with an expanded incentive to oblige workers' concerns in the occasion of any real elective of a game plan. To the management, incentives are far important in deciding labourers' fulfilment in the association. In comparable thought, individuals are inspired to perform through monetary motivators. Collective bargaining is an institutional focus piece relation. It is noteworthy for grievance resolutions in the process of labour administration relations, as well as labourer cooperation in the workplace. Notwithstanding, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) established by the Employment Protection Act 1975 in its annual report for 1999/2000 saw a change of emphasis away from collective bargaining to broader issues of organisational effectiveness which includes; Mediation and Conciliation, Arbitration and Adjudication to promote the improvement of industrial relations and conflict resolution.

## Recommendations

The incessant industrial conflicts in a depressed economy like Nigeria need to be urgently addressed and checkmated. In view of the identified impact of industrial conflicts, the following measures, amongst others, are recommended as ways of reducing industrial conflicts and effects.

- i. Proactive and corrective mechanisms should be put in place. Proactive actions should detect and prevent the possibility of an industrial conflict, and corrective actions should quickly resolve the conflict when it arises. One such mechanism is the institutionalisation of industrial democracy.
- ii. Legislation is needed to give legal backing to collective agreements. Such legislation would give statutory recognition to collective agreements and make them enforceable within a legal framework. This would go a long way in containing the propensity to default in honouring collective agreements.
- iii. There is a need for the government, as an employer, to emulate the human resource management and employee relation strategies applicable in the private sector. This is because strike propensity is very high and predominant in the public sector and infrequent in the private sector (Awe and Ayeni, 2010). Towards achieving this, public sector employers should accord premium to labour, and their employee morale should be boosted by all means possible. Employers should recognise that human resources are the soul of the business and not the sole to be trampled on. This will go a long way in aiding both parties to achieve both individual and collective interests and objectives within a world of intense interconnectivity and integration. Likewise, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) established by the Employment Protection Act 1975 should be empowered to promote the improvement of industrial relations for the resolution of conflict and organisational effectiveness.

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