

# Effects of interpersonal conflict on organisational performance in selected hotels in Kisiitown, Kenya

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## **Abstract.**

Maintaining a good working environment devoid of interpersonal conflict is critical for the survival of a company in a competitive environment such as the hospitality sector as it can greatly influence performance. Limited literature and studies related to interpersonal conflict exist in the hotel sector in Kenya, hence the need for this study. This study investigated the effect of interpersonal conflict on organizational performance of selected hotels in Kisii town. This was carried out by investigating the types, outcomes and strategies for managing interpersonal conflict. The study employed both descriptive survey and explanatory research designs. It targeted a population of 368 employees of purposively selected hotels. A sample size comprising 194 employees were selected using stratified random sampling. Questionnaires were used to collect data which was validated through a pilot test while reliability was measured using the Cronbach's Alpha. The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics and multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses. The results indicated that interpersonal conflict strategies, relationship conflict and task conflict significantly affects organisational performance respectively, while outcomes of interpersonal conflict does not significantly affect organisational performance. To improve the performance of hotels in Kisii town, emphasis should be put on improving strategies to cope with costs, followed by alleviation of task conflicts, relationship conflicts and finally outcomes of conflicts. Various useful recommendations are made for handling interpersonal conflict so that various situations can be effectively dealt with.

**Key words:** Interpersonal conflict, relationship conflict, strategies, task conflict, outcomes of conflict.

## Introduction

Organizational performance comprises the actual output or results of an organization as measured against its intended outputs. According to Richard et al. (2009) organizational performance should be related to factors such as profitability, improved service delivery, customer satisfaction, market share growth, and improved productivity and sales. Organizational performance is therefore affected by a multiplicity of individuals, group, task, technological, structural, managerial and environmental factors. Individual incompatibilities between the employees and in their groups can adversely affect their work output resulting in decreased performance.

Conflict is an inevitable part of a hospitality organizational life since the environment of hospitality industry has a number of distinctive features that may add to the development of conflict situations. These include the triadic relationship that exist between management, staff, and customer; the speed of operation, causing stress and pressure for the operatives of the participants. The level of interdependence between departments in many situations is necessarily high if the customer is to receive a satisfactory service, thus increasing the tendency of occurrence of conflict (Rajinder, 2002).

Interpersonal conflict can be regarded as a dispute that occurs when interests, goals or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible with each other (Henry, 2009). This results into a situation whereby they frustrate each other in an attempt to achieve their objectives. Conflict arises in groups because of the scarcity of freedom, position, and resources. People who value independence tend to resist the need for interdependence and, to some extent, conformity within a group. People who seek power therefore struggle with others for

position or status within the group. Conflict is a part of organizational life and may occur between individuals, between the individual and the group, and between groups (Wehrich, 1992).

The traditional view of interpersonal conflict within hospitality organisations was relatively straightforward: conflict was a bad thing, as the organisation was viewed as an integrated and harmonious whole. Managers were tasked with eliminating or minimising conflict, since it interfered with the smooth and normal functioning. According to Mullins (2002) interpersonal conflict was seen as a dysfunction outcome and could be explained, for example, by poor communications, personality clashes or the work of agitators.

Since the late 1970s, however, a different perspective has emerged. This perspective is, more properly, an interdisciplinary series of views which oppose the traditional one, views which are not necessarily homogenous. The pluralistic approach views interpersonal conflict as an inherent feature of organisations and induced, in part, by the very structure of the organisation, for instance, Anderson et al. (1998) view hospitality organizations as comprised of distinct groups that are actively autonomous and interdependent. They also consider conflict among these groups inevitable and impossible to resolve permanently. According to Mullins (2002), the radical perspective is associated with the ideas of writers such as *Karl Marx*; it challenges the traditional view of conflict and sees organisations in terms of the disparity in power and control. Conflict is seen as a feature of the unequal nature of organisational life and a means of bringing about change.

A more recent view of conflict is the interactionist perspective, which believes that conflict is a positive force and necessary for effective performance. This approach encourages a minimum level of

conflict within the group in order to encourage self-criticism, change and innovation, and to help prevent apathy or too great a tolerance for harmony and the

status quo. Townsend(2007) sees conflict as a sign of a healthy organisation – up to a point. Conflict, *per se*, is not necessarily good or bad but an inevitable feature of organisational life and should be judged in terms of its effects on performance (Mullins, 2002). According to Rajinder (2002), this is a realistic view of hospitality organizations because interdepartmental conflict is a common occurrence, particularly at the kitchen/restaurant interface. However, rather than being destructive, the conflict may actually be used to redesign more effective and efficient production and service systems. However, most evaluations suggest that negative effects are the more prevalent, and this explains why most organisations take steps to reduce internal conflict.

According to Wehrich (1992), Interpersonal conflict can be seen as a 'constructive' force and in certain circumstances it can be welcomed or even encouraged. For example, it can be seen as an aid to incremental improvement in hospitality organisation design and functioning, and to the decision-making process. Interpersonal conflict can be an agent for evolution, and for internal and external change. Properly identified and handled, it can help to minimise the destructive influences of the win-lose situation (Helmut, 2009). Pondy (1992) also stated that the absence of interpersonal conflict may indicate autocracy, uniformity, stagnation, and mental fixity; the presence of interpersonal conflict may be indicative of democracy, diversity, growth, and self-actualization. Tjosvold (1998) complements this statement arguing that interpersonal conflict is not the opposite of cooperation but a mechanism that allows perceiving benefits of cooperative work. Furthermore,

interpersonal conflict is considered psychologically and socially healthy. It is psychologically healthy because it provides a breather for frustrations and enables a feeling of participation and even of joy. And it is sociable healthy because it encourages opposition to the status quo and provides conditions for social chances and democracy stemming from pluralism and respect to diversity. Therefore, according to Butler (1973), interpersonal conflict is ubiquitous, not necessarily dysfunctional and can be required to defy people to perform and stimulate progress.

According to Hornsey (1986) the prevalence of interdepartmental conflict in hotels seems to be one of the distinctive features of their operation. Four possible reasons for the heightened interdepartmental interpersonal conflicts in the hospitality industry, either in isolation or collectively include; Interdependence, environment, rewards and Status and stigma consequently resulting into various types of interpersonal conflict such as task conflict (disagreements among group members about the content of tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions" (Jehn, 1995), relationship conflict ( interpersonal incompatibilities among group members and may include personality differences), horizontal conflict ( between employees working at the same hierarchical level) and vertical conflict (between employees working at different hierarchical level).

According to Helmut (2009) success in businesses and other entities, like international organizations, depends on several issues, a key one being conflict management. Yet most leaders and their senior managers seem unaware of the negative impact that interpersonal conflict in the workplace can have on their bottom line. Interpersonal conflict in the workplace is a well-known daily phenomenon and it is on an upward trend (Sandra, 2010). Increasingly insecure employment

combined with continuous changes in the workplace to achieve efficiency gains have increased stress levels amongst employees and lowered morale. To make matters worse, the current global financial crisis is adding significantly to staff concerns over future employment and organizations' concerns to maintain shareholder support, forcing them to step up efforts to reduce costs by using the right interpersonal conflict resolution strategies.

Thomas and Kilmann (2008) developed a model that identifies five common styles for dealing with interpersonal conflict: competitive, collaborative, accommodating, compromising or avoiding. Thomas and Kilmann believe that people are capable of using all five interpersonal conflict styles. However, certain people use some styles better than others and therefore tend to rely on those more heavily. People's interpersonal conflict behavior in the workplace is therefore a result of both the respective personal predispositions and the requirements of a specific situation (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2005).

To understand the constructive or destructive nature of interpersonal conflict, it is important to consider social interdependence theory, which suggests that, Interpersonal conflicts are inherent in all social relationships, and are not inherently negative. Although conflicts are inherent in all social relationships, a conflict can have "destructive or constructive outcomes" depending on whether the conflict takes place within a cooperative or competitive environment (Johnson, 1989).

While it seems obvious that unmanaged or badly managed interpersonal conflict result in high direct and indirect costs for any organization, many leaders brush off incidents of low morale and unhealthy interpersonal conflict as the unavoidable result of "doing business" (Connie, 2008). The effects of interpersonal conflict in the

workplace on the efficiency and performance of the organization does not seem to be a major concern in the hospitality sector, thus leaving a big gap that this study helped fill. Is it the discomfort, fear and negative associations surrounding interpersonal conflict that keep hospitality organizations from addressing costs of interpersonal conflict at work? Or are the costs just not visible enough to gain the attention they deserve? This research therefore examined the effects of interpersonal conflicts on organisational performance

### **Statement of the problem**

Dana (2001) estimated that 65 percent of performance problems result from interpersonal conflicts between employees, representing a huge expense for organizations. In addition, he opines that unresolved interpersonal conflict represents the largest reducible cost in many businesses, yet it remains largely unrecognized. The harsh economic conditions and high inflation rates being experienced in the country have greatly affected the profitability of various organisations including hotels, resulting in cost cutting measures.

Further studies carried out by various groups have also supported the increasing importance of interpersonal conflict management in organisations. A study conducted by the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution reveals that 80 percent of disputes have a significant impact on the smooth running of business and that British business conflict costs businesses £33 billion every year (CEDR, 2008). Productivity suffers when unhealthy interpersonal conflict persists, for instance a loss of productivity of 25 percent reduces an average working week to fewer than 20 hours (Cram, 2008). Research findings show that as much as 30 percent to 70 percent of a manager's time is spent simply

dealing with employees in interpersonal conflict (Taylor, 2008; Watson, & Hoffman, 1996). Left unresolved, interpersonal conflicts risk simmering with great potential to escalate. Emotionally, the work environment grows more toxic and financially, the toll can be catastrophic consequently affecting the performance of the organisation. Further there exists limited literature related to interpersonal conflict in hotels and especially in the Kenyan context. This study on the effects of interpersonal conflicts on organisational performance helped fill this gap. Recommendations from this study will greatly help hotels to reduce the costs brought about by interpersonal conflicts hence improving their profitability and performance.

## **Research objectives**

### **General objective**

The main objective of this study was to investigate the effects of interpersonal conflict on organisational performance of selected hotels in Kisii town.

### **The specific objectives**

1. To determine the effects of interpersonal conflict types on organisational performance.
2. To establish the effects of outcomes of interpersonal conflict on organisational performance.
3. To examine the effect of strategies adopted for managing interpersonal conflict on organisational performance.

### **Hypotheses**

**H<sub>01</sub>** The type of interpersonal conflict does not significantly affect organizational performance.

**H<sub>02</sub>** The outcomes of interpersonal conflict do not significantly affect organizational performance.

**H<sub>03</sub>** Strategies adopted for managing interpersonal conflict do not significantly affect organisational performance.

## **Literature review**

According to Harbor (1997), Performance measurement is the process of measuring work accomplishments and output, as well as measuring in-process parameters that affect work output and accomplishments. He claims that there can be no interpersonal conflict without a modicum of information as to performance information in basis period and, ideally, a targeted performance in a future time period. Using the balanced score card by Kaplan and Norton (1996); he refers to four dimensions of evaluating performance in hotels; the customer dimension, employee dimension, internal process dimension, and the financial dimension. Different approaches used in managing interpersonal conflict will result in either a decrease or increase in the variables under each dimension. Hotels should therefore aim to ensure the effective management of conflicts so as to improve the overall organizational performance.

Schreiber (2003) defines conflict as a situation in which at least one person in his action, thinking or feeling perceives an encroaching difference in the action, thinking or feeling of at least one other person. Dana (2001) defines workplace interpersonal conflict as a condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem. This analysis defines workplace interpersonal conflict as a situation in which interdependent workers, perceive positions or action as irreconcilable, with the consequence that at least one of the parties

perceive that disagreement emotionally upsetting, causing a problem at work. In addition to irreconcilability, feelings and perceptions, this definition includes the element of a workplace problem caused as a result.

Interpersonal conflicts can either be constructive or destructive in nature. This distinction is important as interpersonal conflict is a reality of our daily lives and interpersonal conflict is thus inevitable in a human workplace (Townsend, 2007). Disagreement occurs even in the best working relationship and challenging another's ideas can strengthen an outcome. Though the claim that well managed interpersonal conflict automatically results in efficiency gains is challenged by some (Beer, 2008), it is generally accepted that the right kind of friction and constructive confrontation and arguments over ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect can help any organization and has the potential to drive greater performance and creativity.

The question of how well interpersonal conflict is managed and how interpersonal conflict is addressed can either add to or take away from an organization's bottom line. According to Bobinski (2008), well managed interpersonal conflict in an enabling environment allows for issues to be tabled and discussed with objective language. Each party is empowered to state his or her position with confidence that the other party is genuinely listening, wanting to understand. Possible solutions are explored with open minds therefore improving organisational performance. In badly managed interpersonal conflict, personal attacks are common. People can get visibly angry and feelings get hurt. Words can become weapons that leave nasty scars. When co-workers do not respect the fact that approaches in addressing issues at work can differ, everyone suffers. Left unresolved, interpersonal conflicts risk simmering with great potential of escalates. Emotionally, the work environment grows

more toxic and financially, the toll can be catastrophic consequently affecting the performance of the organisation. According to Hornsey (1986) the prevalence of interdepartmental conflict in hotels seems to be one of the distinctive features of their operation. Four possible reasons for the heightened interdepartmental interpersonal conflicts in the hospitality industry, either in isolation or collectively include: Interdependence, environment, rewards and Status and stigma. To understand the nature of interpersonal conflict, this study considered social interdependence theory, which suggests that, although interpersonal conflicts are inherent in all social relationships, interpersonal conflict can have destructive or constructive outcomes depending on whether the interpersonal conflict takes place within a cooperative or competitive environment. The hotel environment is both competitive and cooperative due to the high level of interdependence between departments. Interdependence in hospitality situations is caused by the nature of work flows; the product or service that the customer receives is the outcome of close and often immediate cooperation between two or more departments. Coupled with this, the time requirements for coordination are very short compared with other industries. In fact, they can often be measured in minutes or seconds, hence making the hotel environment cooperative.

Goal differentiation between the departments makes the environment competitive as each department has its own goals to achieve, for instance the chef's concern is primarily with quality and that of service staff primarily with speed. For each department to achieve its own goals and at the same time cooperate with other departments in achieving the overall goal of the hotel while competing for scarce resources shared with other departments results in both interdepartmental and interpersonal conflict. The use of social

Interdependency theory through cooperative interpersonal conflict management as an approach for resolving interpersonal conflicts in the hotels will ensure that management work towards managing interpersonal conflict in the organisation which will result in achieving a cooperative relationship in all their staff and maintain constructive interpersonal conflict only.

A cooperative relationship will help the hotel reduce the outcomes of interpersonal conflict and enjoy the benefits of constructive interpersonal conflict such that staff was able to discuss diverse views open-mindedly, create innovative solutions, learn from their experience, better understanding of others, better solutions to problems and challenges, improved working relationships, higher performance in the departments, and increased motivation. The interpersonal conflict may actually be used to redesign more effective and efficient production and service systems. Cooperative interpersonal conflict has been associated with effective communication, friendliness and helpfulness, coordination of effort and division of labour, treatment of interpersonal conflicting interests as a mutual problem to be solved through collaboration, and mediation.

### **Research methodology**

The study employed both descriptive survey design and explanatory research design. It targeted a population of 368 employees of purposively selected hotels. A sample size comprising 194 employees were selected using stratified random sampling techniques. Questionnaires were used to collect data which was validated through a pilot test while reliability was measured using the Cronbach's Alpha.

The data was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics and multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses.

### **Results of the study**

#### **Demographic Profile of the Respondents**

The results indicate that 55.6% of the respondents were male while a sizeable percentage of 44.4% were female. Majority (78.7%) of the respondents were below 40 years while only 21.3% were above 40 years, which could mean that majority of the employees in the hotel industry are young which could be attributed to the heavy physical workload in hotels requiring young and energetic people. With regard to level of education, majority (60%) of the respondents had attained college level education, followed by secondary level education (19.4%), 15.6 % had university level education while only 5% had primary level education. This could mean that most of them have the ability to undergo training on issues pertaining to interpersonal conflict management.

With regard to the duration of employment, 93.8% of the respondents had worked in the establishment for a period of less than 5 years which implies that there could be a high rate of employee turnover in hotels maybe due to ineffective interpersonal conflict management leading to their destructive effects on employees, thus forcing employees to look for better work conditions elsewhere. 40% of the respondents worked in the Food and Beverage department, followed by 31.9 % in the Front office while the least (28.1%) worked in the Housekeeping department

#### **Summary of findings**

A regression analysis of organizational performance against relationship conflict, task conflict, outcomes of conflict and strategies to deal with conflicts was done and the results indicated that there existed a negative relationship between organizational performance and relationship conflict, task conflict and outcomes of

conflict and positive relationship between the Organizational Performance and strategies to manage conflicts. The deductions above about the signs of the parameter estimates were further supported by the results of the partial correlation coefficients.

Partial correlation coefficient was used to identify the independent variable with the greatest incremental predictive power beyond the predictor variables already in the regression model. The figures revealed that strategy to deal with conflict was the most important determinant of organizational performance among the studied employees of hotels in Kisii town. The strategies to deal with conflicts were closely followed in importance by task conflict, though in the inverse direction, in the determination of organizational performance of selected hotels in Kisii town. The third most important factor in the determination of organizational performance

was relationship conflict and of the four independent variables, outcomes of conflict ranked lowest in determination of organizational performance among the sampled employees of hotels in Kisii town.

The partial correlation coefficients of the variables in the study were both positive and negative which was in agreement with the conceptual framework that such aspects as types of interpersonal conflict and outcomes of interpersonal conflict contribute negatively to organizational performance while strategies for managing conflict contribute positively to organizational performance. It was therefore concluded that to improve the organizational performance of hotels in Kisii, more emphasis should be put on improving strategies to cope with costs, followed by alleviation of task conflicts, relationship conflicts and finally outcomes of conflicts. Four null hypotheses were tested using the T- test; three were rejected while one was accepted as shown in the table below.

**Table 1: Summary of results of hypotheses testing**

HYPOTHESES	STATEMENT	RESULTS
<i>H01:</i>	Relationship conflict has no effect on organizational performance of hotels in Kisii town.	REJECTED
<i>H02:</i>	Task conflict has no effect on organizational performance of hotels in Kisii town.	REJECTED
<i>H03:</i>	Outcomes of conflict have no effect on organizational performance of hotels in Kisii town.	ACCEPTED
<i>H04:</i>	Strategies adopted for managing interpersonal conflict do not significantly affect organizational performance.	REJECTED

Source: Regression analysis, 2013

Table 1: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.734 <sup>a</sup>	.539	.480	.606441	.539	18.641	4	155	.000	1.812

- a. **Predictors:** (Constant), Relationship Conflict, Task Conflict, Outcomes of Conflict, Strategies.  
 b. **Dependent variable:** Organisational performance  
 Source: Survey data, 2013.

Table 2: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error				Beta	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance
1 (Constant)	.574	.397		1.445	.151	-.213	1.361					
Relationship Conflict	-.185	.085	.195	2.176	.032	.017	.353	-.143	-.202	-.160	.671	1.490
Task Conflict	-.058	.025	.071	2.320	.000	-.031	.257	-.201	-.251	-.179	.573	1.500
Outcomes of Conflict	-.002	.101	.002	.018	.986	-.198	.202	-.053	-.002	-.001	.675	1.482
Strategies	.239	.075	.325	3.203	.002	.091	.387	.534	.291	.235	.524	1.907

a. Dependent Variable:  
 Organizational Performance

Source: Survey Data, 2013.

The regression equation

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \epsilon_i$$

$$Y_i = 0.574 - 0.185X_1 - 0.058X_2 - 0.002X_3 + 0.239X_4 + \epsilon_i$$

### Conclusion

From the research findings, conclusions can be drawn based on the independent variables; types of interpersonal conflict, outcomes of conflict and strategies used to manage interpersonal conflict and their effects on the dependent variable

organizational performance. An improvement in the management of interpersonal conflict through the use of the right strategies would likely result into improved organizational performance.

First, types of interpersonal conflict affect organizational performance. This conclusion is drawn from the fact that the findings from the study pointed out that relationship and task conflict negatively affected the performance of the hotels. It was noted that relationship conflict has a more adverse effect on performance than task conflict. Further, the research findings indicated that horizontal interpersonal conflict is frequently experienced in the hotels when compared to vertical interpersonal conflict.

Secondly, outcomes of interpersonal conflict do not affect organizational performance. This conclusion is drawn from the fact that although the research findings showed that outcomes from unmanaged or badly managed interpersonal conflict were detrimental to the performance of the hotels, the extent to which the organizational performance was affected was insignificant. In addition, the regression results indicated that outcomes of interpersonal conflict negatively affect organizational performance of hotels but by only a small decline.

Finally, strategies for managing interpersonal conflict effect organizational performance. This conclusion is drawn from the fact that the research findings pointed out that one strategy is not sufficient for managing interpersonal conflict as different interpersonal conflict cases need to be managed differently for positive improvement in performance to be seen.

Furthermore, the regression results indicated a positive relationship between strategies adopted for managing interpersonal conflict and organizational performance.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, the researcher recommends the following:

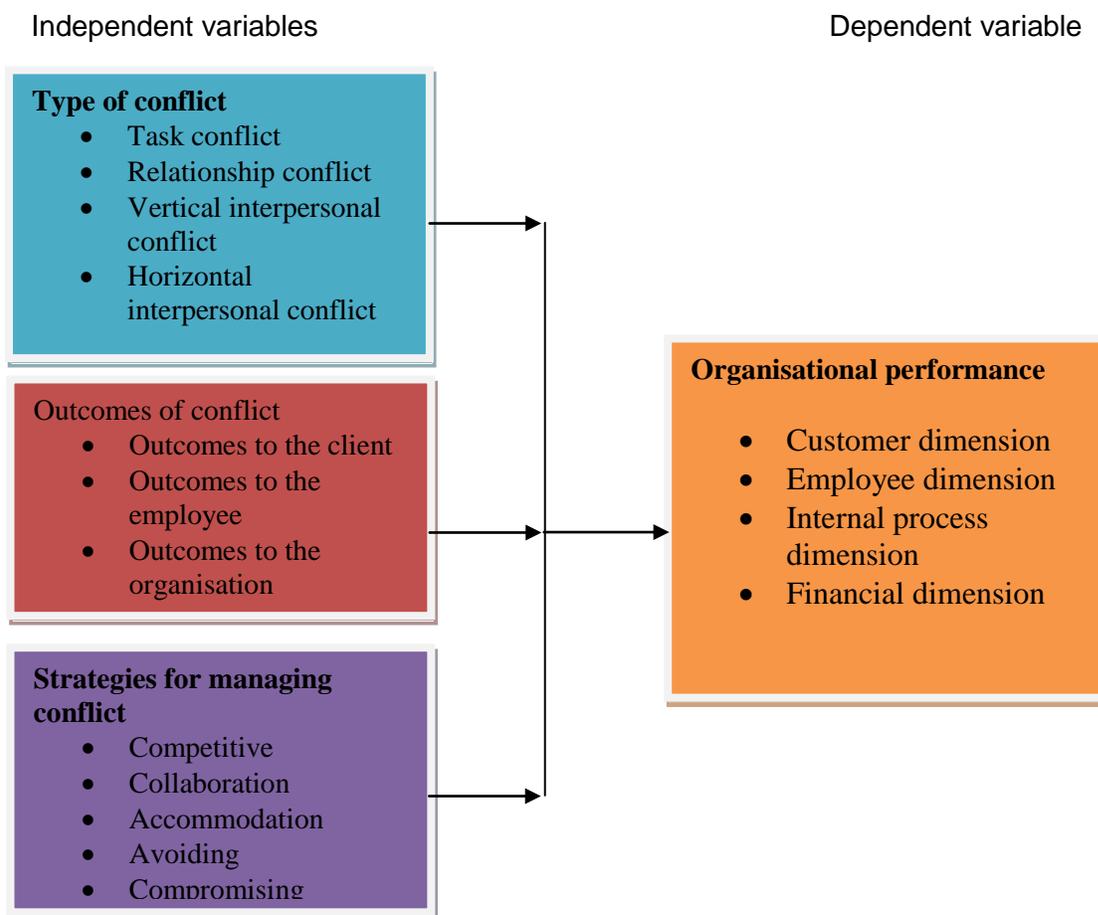
1. Efforts should be made by the managers to occasionally stimulate constructive task conflict by encouraging divergent views and rewarding staff and department for outstanding performance while relationship conflict should be completely prevented.
2. Outcomes of interpersonal conflict should not be overlooked by managers and accounted for as part of the normal outcomes of doing business but should be minimized by clarifying to staff at large where to go for advice in case of conflict and build peer-support structure of conflict advisors.
3. Managers should develop diverse but appropriate strategies to resolve and manage conflicts as they arise before escalating to unmanageable level.
4. Proper communication procedures should be put in place to resolve conflict. For instance, when any disagreement arises among the employees, it should be reported to the management and then management should get statements from the parties involved, brainstorm the issue and make recommendations on how to resolve the conflict.
5. Efforts should be made by the management to organize in house training/ seminars/workshops on organizational conflict management from time to time for the employees .This will enable employees learn about conflict and how it can be effectively managed for individual and organization effectiveness.

6. Lastly managers should review existing rules and procedures for their impact on the hotel's conflict culture, i.e. do they sanction and suppress conflict or do they invite dealing with conflict in a constructive way.

outcomes of interpersonal conflict and strategies for managing interpersonal conflicts were itemized as independent variables and organizational performance which was measured using the balanced score card was itemized as dependent variable. It implies from the figure that if interpersonal conflict is well managed by using the right strategies and reducing the outcomes of interpersonal conflict, it would affect the performance of the organization.

**NB. Conceptual framework**

This study adopted a conceptual framework where types of interpersonal conflict,



Source: Author (2013). Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

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