

Conceptual Model of Conflict Resolution for Personal Assistants of Nigerian National Assembly Members

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Abstract

The paper investigated the major conflicts of interests existing between the assembly members and the people they are representing and suggested possible ways in which the personal assistants of the national assembly members could help them to resolve such conflicts and foster good relationship. It was shown that the people and the assembly members may differ in opinions because of the varying levels of sensitivity of the assembly members to certain issues, however, the personal assistants of the assembly members could help by adopting conflict resolution and management techniques and take some definite steps in addressing such issues. The steps to be taken have been well enumerated and a model was suggested.

1. Introduction

The honourable assembly men and women have been chosen by the people to represent them at the centre and as such the people have certain expectations to this end. The performance of the assembly members are judged by the degree of fulfilment of these expectations. To achieve this among other functions, the assembly members are thus assisted by the various personal assistants. How well the personal assistants do their job depends on how well they have assisted the assembly members to achieve the herculean objectives of meeting the expectations of the people.

It is important to note that the first important step towards achieving this is the correct identification of these expectations, however in situations where the expectations are not well articulated and encapsulated, deviations ensued and dissatisfaction follows with reactionary drive called conflict. Conflict is endemic to all social life. It is an inevitable part of living because it is often related to situations of scarce resources, divisions of functions, power relations and role-differentiation (Bercovitch, 2011). Conflict is often linked to violence, destruction, inefficiency and irrationality (Singer, 1949). It has been suggested that any social interaction in which people compete for resources or values has the capacity to generate conflicts (Mack, 1965). Conflict refers to all kinds of antagonistic interactions. Mitchell (1991) defines it as a situation in which two or more parties have incompatible objectives and in which their perceptions and behaviour are commensurate with that incompatibility. Applying this to our context, often times there may be situations in which the objectives of the assembly member may defer from the objectives and aspirations of the community he serves and thus perceptions and behaviour that ensued shall be commensurate to this incompatibility.

There are several dimensions of conflict, firstly there is the dimension of antagonistic-psychological relations, secondly, the antagonistic behaviour only, thirdly, the antecedents, affective, cognitive and behavioural conditions. From the foregoing it may be easier to summarise the dimensions into; conflict situation (the basic incompatibility), conflict attitudes (range of psychological factors) and finally conflict behaviour (set of related behaviour) (Mitchell, 1991). The need to consider this three dimensional conception stemmed from the fact that the parties (the assembly member and the constituency/community) come to possess incompatible goals, their structure of interaction and the nature of their goals in the course of events. It is also important to consider the emotional (e.g. distrust) and cognitive (e.g. stereotyping) orientations that accompany a conflict situation as well as the range of action undertaken by any party in situation of conflict.

Conflict resolution is vital if the goals of the assembly members in satisfying their constituencies must be achieved. Conflict resolution is a systematic line of actions that helps to settle areas of contention that made parties to take different positions on a matter as a result of incompatibility of objectives. For the assembly members to achieve the desired results the Personal Assistants may more often than nought learn the evolvement of constituencies' objectives, the motive behind the assembly members objectives and its generation, as well as resolving issues where there are incompatibilities.

1.1 Conflict in Constituencies

The constituencies are made up of people with diverse interests, hence often times there are different interest groups in a constituency. The different interests normally beg for satisfaction; however the resources to be used are often limited. This often calls for rationing and in some cases lopsided treatments depending on the degree of compatibility of the assembly member's objectives with the constituency (See figure 1). The different groups enviously assess the contribution of the assembly member to the development of their own area and take a position, and where the assembly member did not particularly satisfy any interest group, then there is a gang up that puts the assembly member against the whole constituency.

1.2 Stages of Conflict

Peters (2006) recognized four established stages of escalation of conflicts to crisis:

Dispute (or latent) stage: when there is a bitter argument, but no fixed position taken. Conflict situation exists, but not yet recognized.

Polarisation (or perceived) stage: When bitter arguments still go on and fixed positions are becoming discernible. We say conflict situation is recognized at this stage.

Segregation (or tension) stage: When the disputants have taken fixed positions that cannot be compromised and they are ready to fight to maintain their positions.

Destruction (or manifest) stage: The disputants take steps which are usually violent, to maintain their positions.

It is important to note that conflict is not the only factor responsible for crisis/violence and that crisis/violence is not just limited to breaking of limbs and bones and spilling of blood. In fact, violation of various constitutional and civil rights of individuals (and groups) constitute violence against these persons. Thus apart from physical violence, we have:

- Social Violence (social inequality; denial of right to education, etc.)
- Economic Violence (state-induced poverty, etc)
- Environmental Violence (noise, degradation, pollution, etc)
- Mental/Psychological (keeping one in-communicado, etc)
- Sexual Violence (rape, weird sexual practices, etc)
- Verbal Violence (foul and aggressive language, curses, etc)
- Cultural Violence (unfair and discriminatory cultural practices, etc)
- Intellectual Violence (plagiarism, using the intellect to glorify violence)
- Domestic Violence (child abuse, spouse battering, etc).

1.3 Analyzing Constituency Conflict

Three distinct criteria defines the role of a personal assistant generally; planning, resource allocation and conflict resolution/management. The awareness of the various conflict resolution techniques that can be adopted at different stages is vital if personal assistants are to organize efforts towards influencing the conflict situation, parties' attitudes or their behavior. Effective analysis of the conflict can only be done by looking at the sources of the conflict. These are:

- **Structural Conflict:** This is a conflict arising out of need to manage the inter-relationship between the different units making up the constituency and the honorable member.
- **Role Conflict:** This is a conflict arising from sets of prescribed behavior for the constituency as required by the assembly member.
- **Resource Conflict:** This is a conflict stemming from interest groups competing for resources as expected to be executed by the honorable member.

Robbins(2004) notes that an understanding of the sources of conflict improves the probability of effective conflict resolution and management.

The main factors that serve as sources of conflict are:

- **Communicational:** Conflict arising from misunderstanding between the honorable member and the constituency.
- **Structural:** Conflict arising from expected constituency roles of the honourable member.
- **Personal:** This is a conflict stemming from personal characteristics of the honorable member which is affecting his/her job and the relationship with the constituency.

The unit of analysis of the constituency conflict is the parties to the conflict, which are; the constituency and the honorable member, as personal assistants that intend to bring constant and consistent resolutions to such problems, it is important to be able to know that these are the parties that perceive, initiate and sustain the conflict. Their characteristics specify the conditions that affect the course of a conflict and determine the mode of its management or resolution. It is important to note from the analysis done so far that we have conflicts that originate in the relationship between individuals (e.g. the opinion leader of the communities and the honorable member) and conflicts that occur as a result of interactions between groups. Boulding (2012) describes this in the light of intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict and inter-community conflicts (as it relates to our context).

1.4 Conflict Resolution/Management

The different categories discussed above raises different issues about the three interrelated components of conflict and each emphasizes different aspects of conflict resolution/management.

Intrapersonal Conflict: This is internal to an individual (e.g the honorable member) though its influence can profoundly affect the constituency. It is about the most difficult conflict to resolve or manage. It is actually a conflict between two incompatible tendencies. It arises when a stimulus evokes two different and incompatible tendencies and the individual is required to discriminate between these tendencies. It is often predicated on incongruity between individual needs (e.g. the honorable member) and the constituency requirements. It is possible for the individual to experience frustration in this situation and allow the conflict situation to be expressed in a range of behavior such as apathy, boredom, mind absenteeism, excessive drinking or destructive behavior. The resolution of this is divided into two:

Cognitive strategies: it is often called defense mechanisms, it helps the individual to falsify, distort, or deny a particular conflict. It represents an attempt to control or manage negative and disturbing feelings associated with conflict in order to

allow the individual to continue with his/her normal activities (See figure 1). Cognitive strategies include:

Repression – an attempt to push the conflict out of existence.

Rationalization- Hiding the truth from oneself, which involve fantasy or even denial of reality.

Behavioral strategies: The behavioral strategies for resolving intrapersonal conflict involve:

Escape: Silent withdrawal from the situation.

Withdrawal: Obvious disengagement from the situation.

Aggression: This is done against convenient and weak targets.

These strategies are used to resolve the conflict in the short run, they help to reduce level of anxiety and tension. They can prevent or avoid disruptive behavior.

So, the Personal Assistant must evaluate the situation rationally and decide upon more effective responses before reasonable advice could be given to the honorable member. He must help him to unload his thoughts and reactions and reorienting his thinking towards a more benevolent and self-maintaining pattern of behavior(See figure 1).

Interpersonal Conflict: The interpersonal conflict emphasizes the interaction between opinion leaders in the constituency and the honorable member (See figure 1). This may be personal or functional. It is personal when noting that individuals are not identical, constant or consistent. Every individual has its qualities, attributes and skills; conflict may ensue if their values and attitudes do not match. While interpersonal conflict is functional when we consider the fact that there are some expected sets of behavior for the honorable member by his/her position, and such behavior are expected to be congruent with constituency preferences for consistency and predictability. Noting the political terrain, this role specification may be ambiguous and incomplete, and this often leads to conflict. So the major causes of interpersonal conflict include; personal differences (interaction between dissimilar people), perceptual differences (individuals perceive unfair allocation of resources), and functional differences (conflict arising from incompatible role requirements). Interpersonal conflict becomes destructive when it is augmented by personal distrust, misconception and competition.

Blake and Mouton (2004) suggest five modes of conflict resolution or management, these are;

- **Withdrawal:** This is an attempt to manage interpersonal conflict by avoidance.
- **Smoothing:** involves emphasis of common interests, constituency interests and yielding by one or both parties.
- **Compromise:** is an attempt to manage conflict by expecting each one to give up something.
- **Forcing:** occurs when interpersonal conflict is managed in a manner that compels one party to acquiesce.
- **Problem solving:** is an attempt to achieve close collaboration and integrative decision making between individuals.

Maier (2010) however noted that of the five methods of resolving/managing interpersonal conflict, problem solving is the only method that is directed towards attitudinal, situational and behavioral components of conflict. It is the only method that does not focus on relatively automatic, unthinking responses. Also, it is the only method that utilizes higher mental processes to achieve a high-quality, integrative and satisfying outcome.

It was however noted that a number of conditions must be satisfied if problem solving must be adopted, these are;

- **Situational requirements:** Informality and flexibility of interactions, absence of time pressures and power symmetry are important
- **Attitudinal requirements:** Trust and confidence in each other, belief in conflict resolution rather than conflict avoidance are necessary.
- **Perceptual requirement:** Individuals must not perceive threats or need to win or dominate the other and finally
- **Behavioral requirements:** There must be free information, definition of issues, discussion of alternatives and exhaustive search for solutions (See figure 1).

However, the major underlying assumptions for usage are when:

- There is deficiencies in perception and this is the main cause of interpersonal conflict.
- There is barrier to improved information which has prolonged and aggravated conflict.
- There is inadequate interactions between individuals which prevent them from managing the conflict constructively.

The Personal Assistant of the honorable member must therefore understand the psychological and operational environment of the honorable member and adopt the use of problem solving (See figure 1).

The Personal Assistant must be able to:

- provide conceptions about the conflict,
- offer content observation by suggesting various outcome interpretations,
- offer process observations by increasing productive interactions through openness and synchronization of efforts

- give freedom, opportunity and motivation to move away from rigid behavior or reiterating positions.
- Acquaint himself/herself with the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of interactions and combine task and socio-emotional activities.

The major techniques used in resolving interpersonal conflicts are:

- *Perceptual Procedure*: This involves; identifying conflict issues, defining alternative issues, and reality testing.
- *Informational Procedures*: This involves; clarifying issues, encouraging and gathering information (through interviews, meetings or other instruments) and increasing frequency, openness and accuracy of communication.
- *Interactional Procedures*: This entails; regulating the pace of interaction, offering process observations to help individuals see how to be more effective, injection of inputs in the form of concepts, models or principles which might be useful in understanding the conflict and helping in the design of implementation steps through which conflict resolution would be possible.

Inter-Community Conflict: Conflict between communities within the constituency that the honorable member of the house is expected to mediate as part of his duties is a natural consequence of human activities (See figure 1). As communities enter different developmental challenges, the stage is set for incompatibility of goals and competition for scarce resources. It may be dysfunctional and counterproductive on one hand; however it can be highly functional and stimulate intra-community growth and creativity.

During inter-community conflict there is always high level of cohesion and unity amongst individual community members but there is high perceptual distortion and negative reactions between the communities. With rise in prejudicial attitudes between communities there is increase in hostility and a decrease in communication. Under this circumstance a conflict becomes a matter of victory or defeat, winning or losing. The attitudinal characteristics involve a competitive orientation, the evaluative characteristics include antagonistic feelings, and the behavioral characteristics include circumscribed interaction and distorted communication.

The structural attributes of a conflict must be taken into consideration in proposing resolution/management. The major method of resolution apart from the legalistic option, is appealing to opinion leaders and using them to come at a compromise, if this could not produce the desired result, then mediation or arbitration committee could be used.

In the light of this the Personal Assistant could:

- Induce an emotional-cognitive change as a prelude to collaborative interactions.
- Provide a supportive environment informal and learning well-suited to creating the requirements conducive to problem solving.
- Employ techniques such as survey-feedbacks, questionnaires and interviews, individuals from whom information would be gotten must be seen as persons not research tools or segmented individuals striving to cope with their role demands.

Conclusion

Generally therefore, the Personal Assistant needs the following for effective dispensation of his/her duties: Information, Skills, Values and Analytical mind. The interaction of these four factors would greatly help the Personal Assistant to carry out his duty in helping to resolve conflicts involving the honorable member and his/her constituency or conflicts within the constituency. Peace ensue when conflicts are adequately and promptly resolved and an environment of peace gender growth and development, as well as a re-election into office or higher level of responsibilities.

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A Framework for Constituency-Assembly Member Conflict Resolution/Management

