



Higher Education of Social Science
Vol. 6, No. 1, 2014, pp. 39-44
DOI:10.3968/j.hess.1927024020140601.2955

ISSN 1927-0232 [Print]
ISSN 1927-0240 [Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

Influence of Leadership Style on Interpersonal Conflict Management Among Teaching and Non-Teaching Staff in Secondary Schools in Osun State, Nigeria

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Received 2 October 2013; accepted 9 January 2014

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find out the influence of leadership style on interpersonal conflict management among teaching and non-teaching staff in secondary school in Osun State, Nigeria. The population for the study was the entire permanent staff of 16 public schools in Isokan Local Government Area of Osun State, Nigeria. Two instruments were used for data collection, namely School Style Scale ($r=0.75$) and School's Interpersonal Conflict Management Scale ($r=0.52$). Data collected were analyzed using the conventional matrix and multiple regressions. The results of the finding indicated that secondary school heads must have ability to demonstrate democratic style and a little bit of autocracy.

Key words: Leadership style; Interpersonal conflict; Management; Osun State; Democratic; Autocratic

Oladitan, O. I., Ajibua, M. A., Fashogbon, B. A., Ajayi, M. O. (2014). Influence of Leadership Style on Interpersonal Conflict Management Among Teaching and Non-Teaching Staff in Secondary Schools in Osun State, Nigeria. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 6(1), 39-44. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1927024020140601.2955> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1927024020140601.2955>

INTRODUCTION

To understand how leadership style influences interpersonal conflict management, it is imperative to bring to the fore meaning of conflict. Rao (2010) defined conflict as perceived differences resulting in interface or opposition. Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (2008) stated that

conflict generally emerges whenever, at least, one party perceives that one or more of its goals or purposes or preferences or means of achieving a goal or preferences is being threatened or hindered by the intentions of one or more parties. Arising from the foregoing, conflict is an inescapable problem in any given human organization. The members of an organization are interdependent; they have inter-locking activities (Crawley, 1992). Despite the fact that there are control mechanisms in an organization, such as role specification of staff, status hierarchy, etc., there still exists a number of inadequacies and problems. The organization of secondary schools is no exception to this kind of strained relationship.

The presence of conflicts, inhibits the needs of individuals, obstructs the achievement of the objectives of educational organizations and could be detrimental to the growth and existence of educational enterprise. Therefore, efficient administration of educational system is contingent on the future production of the required manpower needs of the country. One of such good administrative machineries is effective resolution or management of conflicts when they occur among individuals.

With a look into how school as an organization cope with or manage conflict between the subordinates and the super-ordinates, one would have the feeling that, a particular management style might be more favourable than the other in managing conflict. Ojiji (2006) posited that when we talk about conflict handling style, we refer to the responses that people make to address the situation that is considered detrimental to the attainment of a desired goal. He goes further to state that a conflict situation is a significant challenge on the cognitive and physiological resources of the actors involved.

According to Kinicki and Williams (2003), there are five conflict handling styles or techniques a leader can use for handling disagreements and these are: Avoiding, Accommodation, Forcing, Compromising and Collaborating. A good leader must not deal with

personalities in conflict situation, rather he must deal with issues raised. This is one of the peculiar traits of an autocratic leader who tended to treat any kind of disagreement, even simple suggestion as disloyalty and forced his way to achieve result. A good leader therefore, must be able to accommodate compromise and collaborate to resolve issues amicably. The paper focused on conflict in an educational organization with specific reference to causes of conflict and their resolution in relation to the style of leadership.

For many centuries, leadership has been an aspect of every human organization and it exists naturally in all establishments. However, there are different leadership styles with their attendant problems which often manifest in form of conflicts between the leader(s) and the led.

Fiedler (1967) in this wise, pointed out that the performance of a group is related to both the leadership style and the degree to which the situation provides the leader with the opportunity to exert influence. This is to say that a task-oriented or task-initiating structural approach work best for leaders and their situations. Such an approach is highly favourable and in such a condition in which the leader has power, formal backing and a relatively well-structured task, the group is ready to be directed and told what to do.

In unfavourable conditions, such as in an emergency, the task-oriented leader will be more effective than the considerate leader who is concerned with interpersonal relationship. The latter will do better in some unstructured or unconducive situation or where his/her power as a leader is restricted. Fiedler calls this contingency theory of leadership. Reddin (1970) suggested that, the notion of single ideal style is not sound. He further says that there is no real evidence to suggest that one style of leadership is better than the other when situation is not considered.

Akubue (2001) posited that management is a method where a group of people at the highest level of organization plans, organizes, communicates, coordinates, controls and directs the action and activities of people who work for the organization towards the achievement of organizational objectives. However, Filani (1998) said that democratic leadership will yield greater effort from employees than that of autocratic leadership which cannot truly be supported or rejected.

1. LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP STYLE

Leadership has been defined in different ways by various management theorists. Some theorists such as Jayeoba (2007) saw it as “the process of influencing the activities of an organized group toward goal setting and goal achievement”. She further asserted that it is “the ability to persuade others to get things done”. Muthins (2005) posited that it is “a force that can initiate action among

people, guide activities in a given direction maintain such activities and unify efforts towards common goals”.

To Osundina (2005) leadership is the “ability to promote adaptive or useful changes. Good leadership focuses on consulting with subordinates seeking and taking their suggestions into account before making decisions”. Fabunmi (2006) on the other hand saw leadership as part of a manager’s job. It is a process of influencing people to direct their efforts towards the achievement of specific goals. He emphasized that not all leaders are managers. A leader of an informal group may not necessarily be the manager of the organization.

The basic sources from which leaders get their influence are through the leader’s position or power and through the subordinates’ willingness to comply. In this view, Warren (2006) defined “leadership as a function of knowing yourself, having a vision that is well communicated, building trust among colleagues, and taking effective action to realize your own leadership potential”.

In spite of the various perspectives, there seems to be a general agreement that leadership involves the process by which people are influenced to have their efforts directed towards the achievement of some specific goal or goals. For instance, in a secondary school as an organization, the principal is the force that will guide the activities of the members of staff and students towards the achievement of the school’s objectives as well as the general educational objectives and he occupies a leadership position that provides the force through which the educational objectives and goals are achieved.

In performing leadership function, various classifications of leaders have been identified. Each kind determines how conflicts could be managed in an organization. The classes of leaders are as follows:

a. Autocratic leaders

Here, leaders emphasized productivity at the expense of human consideration. The leader commands and expects utmost compliance.

b. Democratic leaders

Under this leader, workers are said to have satisfaction, hence, perform very well. This is because a democratic leader demonstrates respect for every person in the group. The leader consults with subordinates. Decisions are made through group or communal effects.

c. Laissez faire leaders

High degree of independence is given to the subordinates in their operation. The style grants complete freedom to the subordinates to make their own decisions. This leadership style could easily lead to chaos and anarchy.

d. Transactional leader

The leader here is fully aware of the needs and expectation of the group and the organization. He therefore tries to integrate the two. This kind of leader determines how conflicts could be managed especially by showing extreme consideration for the members.

2. NATURE OF CONFLICT IN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Conflict has been stated to be inevitable in any human organization. This means any opposition to or from others in an organization or relationship whether official or personal. Most secondary schools also witnessed conflict as a result of its being inherent in human nature where goals and aspirations differ. The difference in opinions, pluralistic nature and experiences are major causes of conflict in secondary schools in Osun State.

Conflict is an inevitable and natural part of human existence, as Omole (1983) observed. Ajayi (1983) also accepted the fact that conflict is inevitable and that it is a permanent phenomenon in an organization. For most individuals, the word conflict means aggression, threat, arguments, hostility as well as war.

Olaoba (2005) said that conflict takes various forms and dimensions in African societies. Owing to this, it seems to be part of the excitement for networking relationship whether negatively or positively.

Albert (2001), at technical level, defined conflict as “opposition among social organizations, directed against one another”. Since human goals and aspirations will always clash, it is therefore, unreasonable to hold the vision of educational organization without conflict. Conflict therefore is inherent in human nature and it will always occur in an organization where there are more than one people or group of people. This is applied to the situation here in the secondary schools at Isokan Local Government Area of Osun State. In support Kester (2002) maintained that conflict is a state of disagreement or argument between people, groups and organization over things, opinions, beliefs, sentiments, feelings or impressions. Therefore, organizational conflict results from differences of opinion between two or more employees, work groups or departments.

2.1 Inevitability of Conflict

Conflict is inevitable in any human organization as theorists agreed that conflict is unavoidable in an organization. On this basis therefore, it will be incorrect to feel that conflict is evitable in secondary schools at Isokan local government area of Osun State. Some staff in the schools depend on one another either as a result of the organizational set-up or their location to achieve organizational goal.

Furthermore, no two or more persons who walk together think alike, not even identical twins. Due to this individual differences and opinions, there is bound to be conflict. Conflict can thus be seen partly as a positive occurrence, as it makes school administrators sit up, examine areas of inadequacy and find necessary solutions.

Nigerian society, being heterogeneous and pluralistic in nature, cannot avoid tribal conflict in our organizations. This is because there is diversity almost

in all spheres of our lives, such as culture, language, custom, interest, religion etc. With all these in view, people are bound to face some unique problems because of the nature of the society.

2.2 Effects of Conflict on Organizations

Conflict provides need for question. It provides the opportunity to avoid stagnant thinking and poor decisions. Tension produces and stimulates interest and creativity. Sometime, the super-ordinates help the staff under them to work through the problem successfully. It should not be regarded as a solely negative experience. It can shake people out of their mental ruts and give them new frameworks, new assumptions and new points of view.

According to the classical or traditional philosophy, “all conflicts were seen as destructive and it was management role to rid the organization of them”. However, in the modern practical view, conflict has been recognized as a valuable source of organizational renewal.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this study was the descriptive survey research design. The target population was the entire permanent teaching and non-teaching staff of the 16 public secondary schools in Isokan Local Government Area of Osun State. The stratified proportionate random technique was adopted to select 300 teaching and 100 non-teaching staff across the 16 schools used for the study. Four research questions were raised and answered. Two instruments were used for data collection, namely School Leadership Style Scale ($r=0.75$) and Schools’ Interpersonal Conflict Management Scale ($r=0.82$). Data were analysed using the correlational matrix and multiple regression.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The result obtained was used to draw some useful conclusions on the relationship between leadership styles and conflict management in secondary schools in Osun State. This paper, considered three leadership styles as independent variables in conflict management. The leadership styles are Democratic leadership, Autocratic leadership, and Laissez faire leadership styles.

Table 1
Joint Effect of Independent Variables (Leadership Styles) on the Dependent Variable (Interpersonal Conflict Management)

Model	Sum of squares	DF	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	2967.459	3	494.577	15.129	.000
Residual	38999.791	397	32.691		
Total	41967.250	400			

$R=.266$, $R^2=.071$; Adj $R^2=.066$

It was shown from the table above that the joint effects of independent variables (Democratic, Autocratic and Laissez-faire leadership styles) on interpersonal conflict management was significant ($f(3,397)=15.129$; $R=266$,

$R^2= .071$; $AdjR^2= .066$; $P< .05$). About 7% of the variation in Interpersonal Conflict Management was accounted for by the Independent variable.

Table 2
Relative Effect of Independent Variables on Interpersonal Conflict Management

Model	Unstandardised coefficient	std. error B	Standardised coefficient B	T	Sig
(Constant)	29.107	1.200		24.256	.000
Democratic	.460	.191	.071	2.408	.016
Laissez-Faire	.484	.237	.061	2.040	.042
Autocratic	-1.479E-02	.208	-.022	-.071	.943

The result above shows the relative contribution of each of the independent variable on the dependent: Democratic ($B=.071, P<.05$), Laissez-faire ($B=.061, P<.05$), Autocratic

($B =.022, P<.05$). It is shown in the result above that the independent variables of Democratic, Laissez-faire and Autocratic were not significant.

Table 3
Correlation Matrix Showing the Relationship Between Each of the Independent Variables and the Dependent Variable (Interpersonal Conflict Management)

	Interpersonal conflict management	Democratic	Laissez- Faire	Autocratic
Interpersonal conflict Management	1	-.034	.047	.025
Democratic	-.034	1	.330	.029
Laissez-Faire	.047	.330	1	.135
Autocratic	.025	.029	.135	1
Mean	33.1750	3.28	3.19	2.90
S.D	5.9162	.75	.75	.91

In the above table, there was no positive significant relationship between Interpersonal Conflict Management and Democratic, Laissez-faire and Autocratic Leadership styles respectively.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the data in the table indicated that significant relationship exists between leadership style and conflict management in school administration. By implication, this means that active or positive leadership style in school administration has its consequences, and is associated with conflict management in the school system. This result is supported by the findings of Nweke et al. (1989) which found that conflict management in an organization is achieved by the kind of existing leadership style. Also, Ezeilo (1995) contended that democratic style of leadership goes a long way in conflict management, and that any organization which hopes to succeed must create an atmosphere of congeniality between the leadership hierarchy and the workers. Hopewell (2005) further asserted that leadership contributes significantly to the image building of an organization, particularly during conflicts.

Therefore, there is a significant relationship between democratic style of leadership and conflict management in an organization. This implies that democratic style of leadership is a determinant, and that leadership style in

general is related to conflict management. Leadership by coercion is itself a source of conflict because it does not allow sampling of wide range of opinion and perspectives.

In another study, Clemens (1999) observed that autocratic leaders often exhibit poor judgment in conflict situations. He noted that autocracy is of very little benefit in the management of conflicts because it promotes unitarism perspective. It also creates further conflict because it pitches the leader against his/her followers who sees the leader as despotic and power-drunk.

There is no significant relationship between autocratic style of leadership and conflict management. What this implies is that, if a leader is domineering or autocratic, such a leader will not be able to resolve conflicts effectively. Whatever peace such a leader is able to achieve will be based on coercion rather than acquiescence. This corroborated the work of Lovelace (2003) who observed that autocratic leaders always find it difficult to maintain peace because of their unwillingness to brook opposition or dissent. Dwight (2002) also contended that a leader with democratic style and good disposition is more likely to succeed as an administrator than one who lords it over his/her subjects. The leader who takes the opinion of others into consideration stands a chance of being popular among lower level workers who will be ready to listen to him. Sucre (2007) also found that democratization of leadership engenders closer collaboration among workers, and that during conflict

situations, it create an atmosphere of peace because the opinion of everyone would be considered. In his opinion, many organizations have not succeeded in times of crisis because the leadership often fails to incorporate varied shades of perspective into solution finding efforts. Conflicts and breakdown in communication are usually the lot of such organization where the style of leadership is not democratic.

This implies that effective and ineffective *laissez-faire*'s leadership style is also a determinant of conflict management in school administration. The respondents perhaps felt that *laissez-faire*, which is as absolute as democratic and autocratic styles of leadership, is a better evil than the other two styles. A *laissez-faire* style of leadership is liberal, and allows for innovative approach in conflict management. As Edwards (2005) observed, *laissez-faire* leadership also enable leaders to be creative in their approach to conflict management. The relative absence of control and excursive relations also provide *laissez-faire* leaders with opportunities to explore a wide range of options when confronted with conflict situations.

6. FINDINGS

From the data presented, the paper revealed that:

- i. There is a significant relationship between leadership styles and conflict management in secondary schools in Isokan Local Government Area of Osun State. The data elicited from respondents suggest that active or positive leadership style in the selected secondary schools administration has its consequences, and is associated with conflict management in the schools system.
- ii. Democratic style of leadership is rated high by respondents as a contributing factor in conflict management in the schools sampled.
- iii. Autocratic style of leadership is least favoured in conflict management in the selected schools
- iv. *Laissez-faire* style of leadership is also rated high by respondents as a contributing factor in conflict management in the schools.

Leadership in secondary schools is often vested primarily in the principal. To some people however, the Head of secondary school mean different things e.g. "a counselor, a public officer, a building contractor, a nurse, a curriculum developer, a teacher, an educated administrative trainer, and even a messenger" (Ojo & Olaniyan, 2008). However, the National Policy on Education refers to Head of secondary school as the principal who is responsible for policy decisions. He determines the direction and objectives of a school.

The development of human beings demands a lot of capability and capacity by the principal. The principal's ability to withhold, contain and contend with the various activities will depend on his managerial capability; for he is expected to set out plans that will lead to goal achievements and effective communication with his staff,

students and even the community, so that he can contribute towards the common goals. And at the same time, he has the responsibility of supervising and coordinating all efforts to reduce or manage conflict situations among or between staff and students.

Alimba (2008) reported that the inevitability of conflict in secondary schools as in other educational setting is indicative of the existence of human beings. He noted that where human beings are found, there is bound to be conflict situations, since interaction/communication or the lack thereof is often the primary triggering factor for conflict.

The management of conflict situations in secondary schools is normally the responsibility of the principal. The National Policy on Education (1998) is specific about appointment of principals, stating that:

The government will work towards improving the quality of secondary education by giving support to measures that will ensure effective administration; these will include the selection of person of the right caliber for principalship of schools, the mounting of induction courses for newly appointed principals and prompt disciplinary set to deal with principals who misuse their power or prove inefficient (p.21).

The new 6-3-3-4 educational structure for instance calls for variety of teaching and administrative skills, including conflict management skills. The success of the system will depend on abundant supply of efficient management and administrative personnel, particularly personnel with proven integrity and strong capacity for conflict management. The current growth in Nigerian education is yet to be matched by an increase in number of trained administrative staff. At the moment, fewer opportunities exist in Nigeria for adequate training of professional school administrators/managers.

Consequently, the right caliber of principal can be determined by the measure of his managerial capacity. However as a result of public demands for secondary education, many principals were appointed as managers of newly established public secondary schools without giving much considerations to some managerial criteria such as competence, experience, ability to plan, organize, coordinate, motivate, control, administer, supervise, and above all manage conflicts, or act in any previous managerial capacities. The National Policy on Education (1998) in allying with Smithrin (2002), stated that no educational system could rise above the quality of its administration. Fagbamiye (2000) remarked that teacher's competence and conflict management ability contribute to pupils' achievement. David (1995) affirmed the above that administrative functions of the school principal are more complex than the structure of the institution he administers. As a school manager, therefore, the principal is regarded as the one supervising the delivery line and activities of the individual within the school system. As much as possible, the manager is expected to create a very conducive atmosphere that would make for the general

cooperation and supportiveness towards maximum productivity by the teachers.

CONCLUSION

As the data have shown, secondary school heads, must have demonstrated ability in a leadership style that combines democracy with a little bit of autocracy. It is not good for a school principal to be completely democratic in his/her approach to the administration of the school. A measure of autocracy must be allowed. As Monday (2005) suggested, a good administrator should be able to put down his/her foot on any issue he/she feels very strongly about. Such an action may be deemed autocratic, but it is necessary at times for the sake of progress.

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