CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: A SPRINGBOARD FOR SUCCESS AND PROGRESS IN ORGANISATIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper investigates conflict and conflict management as a springboard for success and progress in organisations in Nigeria. In this paper, which is basically a literature review, the writer undertook a critical analysis of the causes and consequences of organisational conflict. He further attempted to review various scholars' opinions on conflict management strategies. The study reveals that conflict could yield both positive and negative results, but the former outweighs the latter when juxtaposed. This is no gainsaying that effective conflict management results in minimising disruptions arising from the existence of a conflict and proffers a solution that is satisfactory and acceptable for an organisation's progress. The policy implication of this paper is that conflict is indispensable, inevitable, normal, and an integral aspect of social life in any organisation; and administrators should be well trained and equipped in conflict management procedures with a view to stimulating and handling proactive and ideal-based conflicts, since it is a prime-mover of (positive) social change in organisations.

Keywords: Causes, Conflict, Conflict Management, Strategies, Organisations

Introduction

The relevance and function of conflict in organisations have been an issue of major concern. Traditionally, two approaches have emerged to account for the functional and dysfunctional implications of conflict in all organisations. These approaches, according to Singer (1949), are normative and descriptive. The former suggests that conflict is destructive and promotes conflict-elimination as a formula for organisational success and progress while the latter perceives conflict as an inevitable phenomenon in any social interaction and considers its proper management the primary responsibility and concern of all administrators. The normative concept of conflict, strongly influenced by a preoccupation with stability and equilibrium in organisational design, links conflict to violence, destruction,

inefficiency and irrationality (Singer, 1949). This school of thought has been criticised by its descriptive counterpart for suggesting that administrators have the responsibility of avoiding, controlling or eliminating conflict. For the apologists of this school of thought like Otite (1999), conflict may not be conceived only in a negative light of dysfunctional or disjunctive process and a breakdown of communication. Conflict is rather a normal process of interaction, particularly in complex societies where resources are usually scarce.

Mullins (1993) affirms that conflict is a reality of management and organisational behaviour. It is based on the incompatibility of goals which arises from opposing behaviour, and can therefore be defined as behaviour intended to obstruct the achievement of some other party's goals. Little wonder therefore that Schmidt and Kochan (1972) warn that administrators should be aware of 'conflict management' and the need to find a solution. Solutions are easier to find for conflicts when it is understood that conflict is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. It is not caused by 'inadequate' structures, nor is it undesirable. It is natural and inevitable and, if properly managed, it is productive, relevant and creative.

Conflict is endemic in all social life. It is an inevitable part of living because it is related to situations of scarce resources, division of functions, power relations and role-differentiation (Bercovitch 2011). Consequently, every organisation should, as a matter of urgency, devise strategies for managing conflicts, seeing that they are unavoidable in any human organisation. Ekundayo (2012) is of the view that managers should preoccupy themselves with the task of managing conflict rather than detesting it. Perhaps, against this background, Odoh (2006) defines conflict management as the process of reducing tension and the negative effects of conflicts by the application of a number of measures aimed at fostering an understanding of the conflict situation by the parties involved. This remains the only viable option that can be applied where the process of conflict resolution has failed.

Consequently, there are two opposing group of people in every organisation: those who have power or authority and those who do not have it. Conflict arises when those who have power strive to broaden their power whereas those who do not have it struggle for access to it. Conflict, when properly managed, is undoubtedly a springboard for organisational success and progress. Any organisation where ideal-type or virile conflict is promoted, workers' right are safeguarded over time. This is because the presence of conflict in any organisation always calls for 'modus vivendi', an arrangement or reconciliation between parties with conflicting perspectives and antithetical perceptions towards duty which allows them to work together for the actualisation of their organisation's goals. During this brainstorming session, the opposing groups share insightful ideas and adopt innovative approach to work, and these facilitate success and progress in organisations. Thus, the aim of this paper is to identify the factors responsible for conflict in organisations, to appraise the implications of conflict in organisations, and to ascertain how conflict can be managed for the good and benefit of organisations.

The Need for Conflict in Organizations

Conflict is an indicator of imbalance and undemocratic-work environment while its absence implies that imperious and despotic leadership style prevails in such organizations. It signifies that a given system is not functioning as expected and as a result needs to be overhauled. Noteworthy here is that the manner with which an identified conflict is handled determines where the pendulum of the affected organization swings, successful or unsuccessful. Conflict, therefore, becomes a springboard for success and progress in organizations when it is properly managed. For instance, the six months strike embarked upon by the South East Chapter of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 2011 has done more good than harm in the system. The conflict between the ASUU and the University authorities has really improved the condition of service and protection of workers' right. The students seem to have benefited most from it as they no longer witness series of industrial actions that do occur every semester in Nigerian educational system. They now graduate as and when due unlike before this endemic conflict was ill-managed, or perhaps, unresolved.

In social life, conflicts do occur but they are managed by family members, friends and relatives. The same case applies to organizations; when conflicts arise, it needs to be resolved by management for the sake of the organizational growth, survival and enhanced performance. However, conflicts are rarely resolved easily and to certain extent most conflicts are managed as individuals work out their differences (Barker et al, 1987; Ongori, 2009). Therefore, it is figured out that conflict keeps administrators abreast of recent development in their organizations. The implication is that managers should avail themselves of this ample opportunity of organizational appraisal created by conflict. Put differently, they ought to incorporate ideal-based conflict management strategies into their organizations to enable them rather exploit and utilize the vicissitudes and course of the problem(s) that led to the conflict. By so doing, the organization is bound to flourish–because it will enable the management to identify and correct unethical tendencies in their organisations–such as espionage, sabotage, care-free attitude, and indifference and insensitive to sensitive organizational matters,

Amoson (1996) submits that conflict improves decision making outcomes, especially on task-related conflict and group productivity by increasing the quality through constructive criticism and individuals adopting a devil's advocate role. Jehn (1995), as recorded in Ongori (2009), attests that task-related conflict is beneficial to organizations since it allows for exchange of ideas and assists better performance among group members. All these, we must admit, are catalyst for success and progress in any organization where proactive conflicts are promoted and well handled.

Parker (1974) contends that if conflicts arise and they are not properly managed, it will lead to delays of work, disinterest, lack of action, and in extreme cases, it might lead to complete breakdown of the group. Unmanaged conflict may result in withdrawal of individuals and unwillingness on their part to participate in

other group's activities and assist with various group's actions or programmes in the organization. It is against this backdrop that this present paper sets out to close the gap in literature, or contribute to the body of existing knowledge on conflict and conflict management; and also to examine how and to what extent conflict management could serve as a springboard for success and progress in organizations in Nigeria instead of otherwise.

Factors Responsible for Conflict in Organisations

Organisational conflict manifests in various forms and has differing causative factors. Social factors like inadequate motivation, political interference in labour issues and undue pressure exerted on the organisational structure by employers of labour often cause conflicts in organisations. No wonder Odoh (2006) detailed the causes of conflict in organisation to include: style of management, social consciousness of workers, irregular or non-payment of salaries and wages, improper termination of appointment, condition of employments that does not make for average living, promotional and motivational factors, cumbersome grievances and dispute procedure, breach of collective agreement, anti-union actions, interdependence, difference in goals and differences in the perception of reality.

The Nigerian University system has witnessed a plethora of strike in recent times occasioned by inadequate motivation of staff, and this has accounted for low productivity and output in students. Lecturers have some problems (needs) that are to be solved so as to enable them perform their duties more efficiently. But in a situation where these needs are not met, conflict may occur, and if not resolved or well managed, it can lead to insubordination, frustration, truancy and extortion on the part of lecturers. This invariably has adverse effects on students because they may not cover their syllabus which could lead to poor performance. They may also use the strike period to get involved in antisocial behaviour such as drug abuse and alcoholism, prostitution, gambling, rape, robbery and kidnapping since an 'idle mind is the devil's workshop'.

Thompson (1960) identifies three factors that give rise to conflict in organizations, viz: structural conflict, that is, conflict arising out of the need to manage the interdependence between different organisational sub-units; role conflict, that is, conflict emanating from sets of prescribed behaviour; and resource conflict, which is conflict stemming from interest groups competing for organisational resources. Robbins (1974) came up with similar factors that cause conflict in organizations, and these include: communicational conflict, caused by misunderstanding; personal conflict, stemming from individual differences; and structural conflict, arising from organisational roles. Suggesting a varying perspective, however, Bercovitch (2011) traces the cause of conflict in organizations to the units of analysis involved. According to him, units of analysis are the parties to a conflict. They perceive, initiate and sustain a conflict. Their characteristics specify the conditions which affect the cause of a conflict and determine the mode of its management. By implication, there exists conflicts that originate in the individual

person, conflicts that have their bases in the relationship between individuals, and conflicts that are caused as a result of interactions between groups.

Virtually all the extant literature so far reviewed has been dissected, modified and espoused by contemporary organisational conflict scholars. For instance, Vecchio (1995) asserts that managers typically attribute a sizeable proportion of conflict arising in an organisation to poor communication. Given the imperfection of communication, which results in the receiver not always receiving the message exactly as intended by the sender, many opportunities exist for misunderstandings that give rise to conflict. Incorrect, distorted or ambiguous information can create hostility and consequently result in conflict. Vecchio added participation as a cause of conflict in an organisation. In his argument, the higher the subordinate participation, the higher the level of conflict. This is because an increase in participation can lead to greater awareness of individual differences. However, the consequent conflict is not necessarily undesirable, as it can enhance the overall performance of the work unit and thus its existence can be productive.

Apata (2011) identified stress/frustration and insensitivity to grievances and early warnings as factors responsible for organisational conflict. Here stress or frustration represents a situation of blockage and obstruction to achieving a desired goal. Therefore, an attempt to remove the obstruction may lead to commotion, anxiety and emotional instability which are causes of conflict. Insensitivity, on the other hand, suggests that the lackadaisical attitudes of some concerned bodies to crisis-indicators are to say the least major causes of conflict in an organization in Nigeria. In addition, inadequate or unjustified motivation can also cause conflict in a given organisation. This assertion was justified by Vecchio (1995) when he argued that conflict is easily generated when one party obtains rewards at the expense of another party. This form of conflict is the difference between line and staff units within an organisation. Line units, according to him, perform jobs that are directly related to core activities of the organisation while staff units perform jobs that support the line function. Conflict can occur between line and staff divisions because of the functions they perform, the differing goals, and the value and backgrounds of the members.

Implications of Conflict in Organizations in Nigeria

Scholars have written on the wide-range of implications of organisational conflict. Substantial number of them opined that conflict in its entirety does not produce deleterious effects (see also Otite, 1999; Odoh, 2006; Bercovitch, 2011; and Ekundayo, 2012). We deduced from their studies that an organisation is just a miniature or an offshoot of the society as a whole. Accordingly, we should expect that what obtains at the organisational level is just a reflection of what happens in the larger society. A proactive and well managed conflict is to an extent normal, functional and prime-mover of social change in all organizations, especially in Nigeria. It is on this premise that we posit that absence of conflict in an organisation portends great danger, which includes system inadequacies. Reacting to the

speculations that conflict is often dysfunctional and detestable, Otite (1999) opines that conflict should not be regarded only in a negative light of dysfunctional or disjunctive process and a breakdown of communication as some scholars tend to suggest. He rather sees it as a normal process of interaction, particularly in complex societies where resources are usually scarce. Schmidt and Kochan (1972) maintain that conflict is natural and inevitable and, if properly managed, it is productive, relevant and creative.

Mondy et al. (1989) note that situations can arise where conflict can lead to greater creativity, more enthusiasm and better decisions, in which case people can develop by learning that certain perceptions or piece of information they held were incorrect. Thus, positive outcome of conflict can take the form of improved ideas, searching for new options and increased interest and creativity. Robbins (1998) reiterates that conflict, though can be destructive, leads to improvements in the quality of decisions, stimulation of creativity and innovation, and it can encourage interest and curiosity. Functional and constructive conflict can provide a medium through which problems can be aired and tension released, and also an environment of self-evaluation and positive change.

Depending on how conflict is managed, the experience can be growth-enhancing for the individuals involved or destructive to relationships and self-esteem. Conflict, if well managed, can utilise the creativity and problem-solving skills of workers, taking advantage of different gender, cultural and role perspectives in creating mutually beneficial solutions. But badly managed conflict or consistently avoided one, reduces productivity, undermines trust and may spawn additional conflicts (see also Siders, 1999). Based on this, Bercovitch (2011), quoting Boulding (1957), Aubert (1963), and Deutsch (1969), states that administrators must not seek to stifle or eliminate organisational conflict for that is hardly a realistic goal. An organisation devoid of conflict may indicate autocracy, uniformity, stagnation and mental fixity. It would also be protecting only the vested interests of the status quo. Administrators must accept, and indeed, occasionally encourage conflict because change and other desirable consequences are products of conflict. The challenge faced by administrators is to utilise such conflict management techniques that would ensure that as a conflict passes from a latent to a manifest phase, it proceeds towards its potential and realises its constructive values.

However, studies have shown that conflict could be negative or dysfunctional in an organization. Mondy et al. (1989) informed that dysfunctional conflict can arouse anxiety in individuals, increase tension in the organization, lower satisfaction and decrease productivity. Other adverse effects, they observed, include people feeling defeated and demeaned, thereby widening the emotional distance between individuals. A climate of mistrust and suspicion can arise and resistance rather than teamwork can develop. To Robbins (1998), unconstructive or excessive levels of conflict can affect the effectiveness of the organization or the group, which can result in reduced satisfaction of employees, increased absence and turnover rates, and eventually, lower productivity.

There has been a paradigm-shift in virtually all formal organizations with regard to conflict and conflict management. Certain globalization trends such as outsourcing, flexible life and work-life-balance have played a leading role in the success and progress of organizations. This does not mean that these concepts do not have their shortcomings, they do, but the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. Studies have shown that "too much work can lead to a variety of stress-related illnesses (conflicts) that sap workers' vitality, making them more prone to errors on the job, absenteeism, burnout and turnover" (Hakala, 2006). Quite incidentally, work-life-balance is imperative owing to the fact that it allows individual workers to live healthy in their workplace. So, it is necessary that administrators restore work-life-balance to workers by ensuring that work flexibility is given to all classes of workers in their organizations. This is because flexible life and work-life-balance can make even the unhappy worker who has been going through severe condition of service to improve up to a reasonable standard, hence a springboard for organizational success and progress.

Outsourcing simply means a significant change in work patterns. It refers to a situation whereby an employer of labour or management 'contracts out' work that is supposed to be done by permanent employees. The concept of outsourcing can cause conflict in an organization where it exists. But the manner with which the work was contracted out and manned determines the success and progress of the organization. It may adversely effects organizations by replacing greater number of permanent workers or very few of them reabsorbed by the 'contractor', thereby throwing many individuals out of job. Nevertheless, outsourcing can reduce cost for managers and equally reduce the workload of the retained permanent workers, if any, by employing people that are specially trained in the job. The current trend in virtually all Federal Government and some Private Establishments in Nigeria where civil security jobs, laundry works, catering services, gate-keepers, cleaners, and the like have been contracted out to professionals in these areas is a classical example of outsourcing. These contractors are well grounded in the work compared to the permanent workers who are employed with little or no professional training. By virtue of their expertise and technical-know-how, the success and progress of organizations where outsourcing is deeply embedded are guaranteed.

Strategies of Conflict Management in Organisations
The task of managing conflict is a major concern of administrators. Effective conflict management is necessary in an organisation that wants to thrive. A review of different strategies or forms of conflict management techniques that can be employed at different phases of the development of a conflict is paramount to this study. Although every organisation has its own modus operandi (MO) of managing conflict, they all are geared towards survival. As Bercovitch (2011) rightly states, these MO are consciously employed by administrators to influence the course and development of a conflict. The success or effectiveness of such procedures can be gauged by the extent to which they help to achieve a satisfactory solution.

Vecchio (1995) advanced five conflict management strategies. They are: forcing, collaborating, accommodating, avoiding and compromising. The forcing approach attempts to overwhelm an opponent with formal authority, threats, or the use of power. The underlying features of this style are assertiveness and unco-operativeness. It is a dominating approach to conflict management which represents a maximum focus on meeting private concern and minimal focus on meeting the concerns of the other group. The collaborating procedure is a combination of assertiveness and co-operativeness. Collaboration involves an attempt to satisfy the concerns of both parties through honest discussion. For this strategy to be successful, trust and openness are required of all participants. Accommodating approach to conflict management combines unassertiveness and cooperativeness, and may involve giving in to the other party's wishes.

From the above source, it is further observed that accommodating behaviour may be motivated by the desire to be charitable or pro-social and this approach appears to be the best for a party in a truly weak position. This situation may also arise when preserving the peace and avoiding disharmony are more important than reaching a solution that maximises a particular group's concerns. The last of Vecchio's five conflict handling styles, avoiding, is the combination of unassertiveness and unco-operativeness which leads to an avoiding style. This strategy assumes that a person will either improve or worsen a conflict situation. This procedure may thus be desirable in certain cases to ensure a short-term benefit or temporary solution to the organisation (see also Ivancevich and Matteson, 1999; and Lourens, 2000).

Some researchers suggest that negotiation/bargaining, mediation, arbitration, conciliation and strike can suffice in conflict management (Roberts, 1991). Of these factors, conciliation is singled out and defined as a process of peace making and a human institution that is useful in all fields of human activities: domestic, business, national and international political conflicts. When conciliation fails and internal machineries for settling conflict have been exhausted, the matter can be taken to arbitration. Here the disagreeing parties are not guided to further negotiation, but are requested to support the claims of the arbitrators and all the facts and arguments in their command.

Conflict management can be perfected through preventive and control procedures. Preventive measures refer to procedures that are initiated in order to avert conflict. This is apparently the most suitable pattern of conflict management, which is in accordance with the maxim of 'prevention is better than cure'. The control measure is a management function of monitoring, regulating and checkmating conflicts that have already occurred so as to prevent it from getting out of hand. Through these measures, the errors and flaws in the organisation may be detected with a view to correcting and preventing future recurrence. The decisive action taken by the management of Ebonyi State University over the violent protests by the students of this institution in March 2013 is a prime example of a control strategy of conflict management. The students accused the management of unjustified increment in school fees and then ran amok for three days to effect reversion. The

school on the third day of the protest was abruptly shut down pending when normalcy will be restored. Similarly, cult conflicts are commonplace in Nigerian institutions of higher learning. Rival cult groups often disrupt critical academic activities like examination. To guard against this, the school authorities instead of capitulating on this criminal subculture adopt preventive conflict management strategy by engaging the services of the Police or Joint Task Force (JTF) to ensure there is no disruption in the system.

Conclusion

Thus far, conflict and conflict management in organisations in Nigeria and elsewhere have been examined. Through the literature review, the major causes and consequences of conflict were unravelled just as various perspectives on conflict and its management were highlighted and discussed. The conclusion was also reached that proactive and ideal-based conflict is feasible and commendable in organisations.

Conflict with its proper management is inevitable, normal and a catalyst for social change in every organisation. Thus, in any system where functional or virile conflict is encouraged, staff rights are often guaranteed and the organisation's mission and vision achieved without reservation. It is on this premise that we conclude that absence of conflict in any organisation portends great danger and system inadequacies.

Recommendations

Administrators in organisations in Nigeria should be well trained and equipped in conflict management with a view to stimulating and handling functional conflicts while avoiding dysfunctional ones in organisations. The government, alongside administrators, should organise seminars and conferences to properly address the issue of conflict and conflict management in their different organisations. This will go a long way in dispelling the popular but erroneous notion that conflict is abnormal, destructive, and should be discouraged. It is recommended that administrators acquaint themselves with appropriate strategies of conflict management and to match that with the conflict situation.

Finally, the researcher subscribes to the descriptive school of thought as explained in the introductory part of this paper. Having abundantly justified the position that conflict is an indispensable part of social life and is ever-present in personal, intrapersonal, interpersonal and intergroup relationships, it is therefore important that every organisation be exposed to conflict and its management strategies in all its ramifications. This will have the advantage of not only equipping administrators and leaders with the requisite skills for managing their countries but also reducing the adverse effects conflict can generate in any environment.

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