

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOL ORGANISATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Conflict is inevitable in any given organisation where there are human beings, which constitute the human resources of such organisation. However, organisation is a union of people with similar experiences that find themselves in one way or the other working together as a team for a purpose of achieving common goal which the organization is established for. Inevitably, disagreements and differences in opinions can occur from time to time. Conflict is a word which encompasses two segments, positive and negative. When conflict is not well managed or handled, it will result to crisis. Therefore, this paper examined conflict management in school organisation in Nigeria. It identified the causes/sources and types of conflicts in an organization, be it schools, industries or government offices. There are many management techniques for ameliorating the phenomena called conflict in school organisation. Management being one such technique is an art of putting an event or phenomenon under considerable control through the use of various methods, strategies and techniques at the disposal of the managers that manage the school organisation. Thus, this study enumerates management strategies that can be adopted in reducing conflict in school organisation. The study will also contribute meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge on conflict management in school organisation and open the understanding of school managers and administrators to techniques of managing conflicts in their schools. The study is a theoretical one. And it recommends that the school managers/administrators should always endeavour to identify some factors responsible for conflict situation among their staff both the teaching and non-teaching, even among the students/pupils of the school.

Keywords: Conflict management, School organization, Nigeria

Introduction

Organization is a conglomerate of people with different values, cultural backgrounds, norms and mores that work together as a team in order to achieve common goals. These people are bound by certain rules and regulations in order to maintain peace, to achieve a particular set of goals and objectives. Organisation may be formal or informal. It is formal when the relationship of the people that constitute an organisation is official, while it is informal when relationship is not official. Thus, where conflict does not exist or come up, it means that, the existence of human beings is not in operation. As long as human beings exist, conflict is bound to occur, because every human being has his/her own beliefs, values, and norms;

however, each of them have a different cultural background. It is pertinent for an average person to protect his/her beliefs, values, norms and cultural background.

According to Adeniji (2009) conflict is wide spread in human societies, meaning that it cannot be ruled out in any human organization, be it schools and colleges, business firms or even social clubs etc. He stated further that conflict is bound to occur because every individual is dependent on other individuals in the organization and once there is interaction, therefore, conflict cannot be ruled out. He maintained that conflict is seen as both disruptive force within an organization and primary source of individual stress. Yet, it is not entirely destructive. The goal of an organization should be how to control conflict in order not to degenerate into crisis rather than eliminating it.

Obasan (2004) opined that conflict is part of organizational life and may occur within the individual, between individuals, between individual and the group that an individual belongs to, and between two or more groups. He emphasized that conflict is generally perceived as dysfunctional, it can be beneficial because it may occur in different perspectives. Conflict may be interpersonal or intergroup. It is interpersonal when it occurs between a superior and his subordinates or between two individuals at the same level of organizational hierarchy. Intergroup conflicts occur between two different groups such as two trade unions, two departments or management and the line staff while making an attempt to implement the organisational policies and programmes.

Ositoye, Adebayo, Alade and Omolade (2012) attributed conflict to be a clash of interests, values, actions or directions that often spark the phenomenon (conflict). Therefore, conflict exists when the reduction of one motivating stimulus involves an increase in another, so that a new adjustment is demanded. In addition, conflict is the inability of one of these parties i.e. managers and workers, to reach agreement on any issue connected with employer-employees interaction, whether or not this ability results in strikes or other forms of protestations.

Conflict is not always negative; but the way it is handled may produce negative impacts. Conflicts can be used constructively, if handled properly. For instance, we live in a world where everyone thinks and acts differently; meaning that we do not perceive things in the same way. Therefore, differences are bound to arise from time to time on various subject matters that are expressed through various ways. Every time when conflict situation arises, where differences are being identified, it must be addressed and an appropriate resolution must be reached. Failure to address differences will eventually lead to crisis and undesirable consequences. In an organization, crisis situation does not arise over the night. In most cases, differences must have been on for a period of time, neglected, left unattended to, storing negative energies, which eventually is bound to bust one day. When it happens, those responsible are surprised, then question of "how this could have happened?" will come to mind. In fact, one should be surprised, how come people just left this unnoticed, unattended to that has become so big a crisis (Sudhakar I. Prabu <http://www.tpmc.in/lew.html>). 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).

It is observed that school organization is vulnerable to experience conflict among the stakeholders working directly in the organization. The differences may be as a result of resources allocation, classroom allocation and/or subject allocations to mention but a few. Although, conflict is not restricted to schools alone, it can ensue at home or elsewhere, the baseline is that conflict is inevitable where human beings exist, it cannot be totally ruled out. Therefore, this study examines conflict management in school organization in Nigeria. It identifies the various types of conflict, sources of conflict and how conflict can be managed

in school organization in Nigeria, and offers recommendations which can assist school managers in reducing conflict situations in schools.

Types of Conflict

Katz and Kahm (1978), John (1993) cited in Obasan (2004) identified five types of conflict and these include:

- **Conflict within the individual** This arises from uncertainty about organisation expectation or the situation where work conflict with other demands personal to the individual (intra personal).
- **Conflict between individual** This is usually caused by personality difference, eg. conflict between the manager and the subordinates (inter personal).
- **Conflict between individuals and group** This arises from the methods adopted by an individual to conform to the group norms (Intra Group conflict).
- **Conflict between group in the same organization** This arises from series of factors such as role conflict, power struggle etc for example, management and line staff conflict, labour management conflict etc (Inter Group conflict).
- **Conflict between organizations** This is usually caused by economic factors such as innovation, price war, market share conflict etc (Inter organizational conflict).

Ositoye, Adebayo, Alade and Omolade (2012) classified the types of conflict into:

- **Intra-personal** This occurs within an individual
- **Inter-personal** This occurs between individuals in the same organisation. Meaning that as individuals relate and interact in the same organisation in achieving set objectives, because of the differences that exist in them as individuals and in the organisation, there is bound to be such conflict situation.
- **Inter-group** This occurs between groups consequent upon their contact and interaction.

Sources of Conflict

Ajuzie (2005) attributes conflict to events that abound in the society on the account of the many facets of inequality and exploitation of individuals in their groups and collectivities. It is the presence of inequality that makes conflict an inevitable phenomenon in social life. Thus, it gives rise to social violence, unrest, competition, hostility and armed robbery. She stated further that, when conflict is generated, it indicates the dissatisfaction of the oppressed because they too are human, cannot but continue to fight until they get redress and cease to agitate.

The sources of conflict refer to the root causes of conflict and these include:

- ❖ **Competition for the scarce resources** such as human resources, material resources, financial resources and physical resources. Thus, insufficiency of these resources brings about conflict.
- ❖ **Differences in work characteristics** Conflict in most organisations persists between management staff and line staff because it is virtually impossible to define precisely the responsibility and authority relationships between the two.
- ❖ **Divergence of values, aims and goals (personality conflict)** This occurs as a result of personal goals of the managers and employees with the goal of the organisation.
- ❖ **Ambiguity of responsibilities** occur because of change in the organizational operations, therefore, there abound to be overlapping, which converts more

responsibilities on one and less on the other without a well defined boundary. The resultant effect is conflict; hence there are no clear cut responsibilities of duty.

- ❖ **Labour - management polarization** This occurs because of differences in perception and requests of both parties.
- ❖ **Communication breakdown**, that is, communication gap
- ❖ **Sequential workflow** occurs when one group has more work to do than the other group.

Adu, Olatundun and Ajayi (2001) identified three sources of conflict and these include:

- ✓ **Lateral conflict** It exists when people who have the same level of authority disagree as to what should be done.
- ✓ **Vertical conflict** This is prominent in the area of bureaucratic set up, that is, how the higher level managers get the lower level managers be involved on how to do specific task.
- ✓ **System conflict** This occurs when various parts of the organisation are not interested in effectiveness of the organisation. This type of conflict can result from imperfect communication or poor motivation.

Adeyemi (2012) identified the following as causes of conflict in any given organisation which includes:

- ✚ Scarce resources
- ✚ Differences in individuals
- ✚ Task interdependence
- ✚ Low formalization
- ✚ Nature of reward system
- ✚ Communication distortions
- ✚ Goal incompatibility.

Other sources of conflict may include:

- Victimization, dismissal and wrongful termination of appointment
- Lock-outs
- Hours of work
- Condition of service
- Parity of treatment with comparable interests
- Minimum wage
- Sexual assault
- Overtime
- Opportunity for self-actualization
- Interpretation of agreement
- Security and continuity of work
- Safety
- Comfort and sanitation (Adu, Olatundun and Ajayi 2001)

How to Manage Conflict in an Organization

According to Rahim (2002), conflict management involves implementing strategies to limit the negative aspects of conflict and to increase the positive aspects of conflict at a level equal to or higher than where the conflict is taking place. More so, the aim of conflict management is to enhance learning and group outcomes. School as an organisation of learning cannot be voided of conflict hence it accommodates people of different functions and working together

as a team for a purpose of achieving educational goal. Gbadamosi (2006) attributes school as a set up organisation to achieve particular objectives. It accommodates personnel from general background and environment working together as a team with an aim to produce a balanced person (students). He stated further that teachers and other workers most times put their differences aside to work in unison to achieve goals of the school.

Based on this Sudhakar I. Prabu <http://www.tpmc.in/lew.html> came up with these under listed ways of managing conflict. These include:-

- **Proactive measure to prevent unwanted situations** Prevention is better than cure. Never wait for the situation to arise in which you will have to address differences because it has become so obvious. Take preventive approach and plan ways and means that will lead to better understanding and awareness among employees on various matters that can lead to differences. Take proactive measures to identify potential areas where employees can develop differences. Develop mechanisms, through which employees can participate and freely express their opinions and differences. Encourage and engage in a collaborative process through which differences can be addressed and resolved at the earliest. Proactive measure that is preventive in nature must be an ongoing process. It is not a onetime solution or situation specific. It must be part of the essential functioning of an organisation.
- **Cold War situations** At times everybody knows what is going under the cover, no one is willing to talk that out in the open. In their own groups and closed doors they are discussing about the issues and differences. But, out in the open, they pretend to be nice and manage to continue to make it appear to be normal and business as usual. This is a time bomb situation nobody knows what is going to happen, if something will happen, when it is going to happen. When you recognize such a situation, instead of wasting time, take measures to reduce tension, take measures to build trust and confidence among the people involved so that they can engage in meaningful discussions. Set up task teams that can look into the issues and differences involved, identify the root cause and propose solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved. When you have a situation in which people know the tension that is building each moment, it is just a matter of time things are going to be out of control. In such a situation, little action can have a greater impact on the outcome of the situation, to reduce tension, create an environment that encourages openness, transparency, expression of opinions, assurance, respect and acceptance for one another. More importantly an environment in which everyone listens to one another and takes effort to understand the other person's view point.
- **Do not play wait and watch.** Do not expect differences to disappear on their own. Do not assume as time goes on things will be taken care of. You may be wasting valuable time for bridging the gap instead of waiting for things to be blown out of proportion.
- **Do not bust the bubble and make things worse.** When you know the tension is mounting each moment, do not act irrationally and bust the bubble that will result in outburst of emotions or leading to a situation in which you lose control of the situation. The goal must be to keep things under control so that differences and issues can be addressed through proper channels and the situation remains within the limits of manageability. You would never want to be in a situation in which things are out of

your control and you are a mere spectator. As long as your problem situation is under control it is possible to influence the outcome of the situation.

- **Avoid blame game** Instead of blaming each other or pointing finger at each other, all parties concerned must work towards building consensus, reaching an amicable resolution that will lead to a desirable action. Address real issues and emphasis on what is good for all parties involved and put the interest of organisation a priority.
- **Understand influential players whose opinions influence others in the organization** Deal with them in a manner that establishes understanding, establish common goals that affect everyone involved as well as puts the best interest of the organisation.
- **Build awareness among everyone how individual aspirations affects and impacts on the outcome of the situation** This must be done in such a manner that threatens the self-image and public-image of those individuals. Do not engage in divisive politics, later on it may boomerang on you.
- **Emerging differences** At initial stages do not act based on assumption. Do not take it for granted that employees are bound to have differences in certain areas and start addressing those issues. Take time to collect facts on causes of the differences, before planning and seeking solution. When you act based on assumptions you may try to resolve nonexistent issues and leaving out the real issues untouched. Use existing organizational mechanism to address issues. Strengthen the mechanism where it needs to be in order to win the trust and confidence of all parties involved. If need be, create new mechanisms to address issues. However make sure all parties involved are aware of how it is going to work, how they can get involved and make a useful contribution. The earlier the differences are addressed the easier it is to reach a resolution. The longer it takes to address the differences and reach a resolution, that much efforts and time it will take to built healthy post resolutions work relationships.
- **Reconciliation** This is a process through which differences are being addressed and resolution is being sought. This must be a collaborative process in which everyone works together and build consensus. When everyone involved work together to address differences and agree to seek common ground, and put the best interest of the organisation, the process itself will serve as a tool for building teams. When they reach a resolution they are more likely to work together and make things work.
- **Form committee or a team to address the differences and recommend solutions** In this case, the composition of team itself is very crucial. It is important to give equal representation for all parties involved. Get those people in the committee whose suggestions and recommendations will have value and standing among the employees involved.
- **Do not act like a disciplinarian** When you recognize differences, do not try to dominate the employees and impose your decision on them. Instead engage in a dialogue and initiate process that increases understanding and voluntary acceptance of what is good for the common good of all parties involved.

Resolve issues through corroborative process instead of imposing decision on the others involved.

- **Do not appear to be deliberately inactive and insensitive** When you are in a situation where both parties recognize the difference and willing to seek a resolution, watch out for the ways in which you conduct yourself. You do not want to be perceived as deliberately avoiding action or being overly insensitive. Such conduct may result in provoking people to reach negatively.
- **Be genuine in bringing a resolution** If either party is not genuine about reaching a resolution, there is no point to keep on discussing about issues. At some point in time it will become obvious, you cannot hide this from the other for very long. If everyone involved in the reconciliatory proceed genuinely seeking a solution, it will have profound impact on the outcome of the process.
- **Do not manipulate others to do what you want** Never use reconciliatory process as a tool to buy time or squeezing the other to do what you want to do. You may succeed in the short-term, on the long-term you may lose. It is important to build trust and understanding during the reconciliatory process, without listening and understanding each other's concerns one cannot reach a resolution that will lead to desirable action.
- **Do not force your decision on the others** instead enhance understanding and awareness to reach decision based on mutual consent. When they are part of the decision making, the more likely to own the decision they have reached. Unless proper mechanisms are not built, through which each parties express their concerns and issues, the effort to bring a resolution is unlikely to happen. The mechanisms should create a free and fair environment in which all parties involved are able to share their concerns openly, listen to one another's concerns, bridge and build better understanding among every one. Common ground will emerge when everyone involved in the process seeks and focuses on what is best for the organisation.
- Explore how an individual or group expectations and aspirations can be met through seeking what is good for the organisation. Organisation is the middle ground which bridges individuals, not meeting the expectations and aspirations of certain individuals.
- **Reaching Resolution** When differences are being identified and recognized that may lead to undesirable situations, the means through which the differences are to be resolved also important by identifying and recognizing a resolution that will lead to desirable action. A resolution that both parties arrived through the reconciliatory process both parties own it. Unless all parties involved do not own the resolution they have reached, they are not likely to act based on the resolution.
- **Walk the Talk Resolution** is a start and not an end. Action must follow the resolution. If resolutions are not backed up with action, it will lead to lack of trust and shatter confidence. All parties must walk the talk to build more trust, understanding, and confidence in each other. At times post resolution situation can be very uncomfortable. The management must take initiative to ensure that employees feel

comfortable. Employees must not be made to feel they are being targeted because of their actions in the pre-resolution period (Sudhakar I. Prabu <http://www.tpmc.in/lew.html>).

Ositoye, Adebayo, Alade and Omolade (2012) came up with five steps of managing conflict. These are:

- **Anticipate**, that is taking time to obtain information that can lead to conflict;
- **Prevent**, that is develop strategies before the conflict occurs;
- **Identify**, that is if it is interpersonal or procedural, move to quickly manage it;
- **Manage**, remember that conflict is emotional and;
- **Resolve**, react, without blame, and you will learn through dialogue.

Nnam (2013) claims that conflict could yield both positive and negative results, but the former outweighs the latter when juxtaposed. Therefore, this is no gainsaying that effective conflict management results in minimizing disruptions arising from the existence of a conflict and proffers a solution that is satisfactory and acceptable for an organization's progress. More so, conflict is indispensable, inevitable, normal, and an integral aspect of social life in any organization; 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-over of (positive) social change in organization.

Ekundayo (2012) opines 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 a process of reducing tension and the negative effects of conflict by the application of a number of measures aimed at fostering an understanding of the conflict situation by the parties involved. Thus, every strategies, methods and techniques stated above are applicable to managing conflicts in schools by the school managers or administrators. Since schools are organizations responsible for the nurturing and grooming the heart of the younger generations by imparting rightful knowledge that is tenable and acceptable to the entire societies, in doing this human resources (teaching and non-teaching staff) are involved in the impartation of knowledge and in the course of performing their civic responsibilities. Conflicting situation do arise which will call for the attention of the school managers/administrators to look inward for possible to solution to the conflict situation.

Conclusion

Conflict cannot be totally averted or eradicated in any given organisation, in the sense that, we are bound to agree and disagree at one point or the other, but can only be subjected to considerable control by the administrators and managers of the various organisations, be it educational, such as schools and colleges, by taking into consideration those methods, strategies and techniques that match up with the nature of conflict at their disposals. Notably, conflict may bring about mutual understanding among parties that are involved in one disagreement or the other. Conflict is not in most cases a destructive as people perceived it to be at times.

Recommendations

This study recommends the under listed below as part of measures to ameliorate conflicts in Nigeria schools.

- The school managers/administrators should identify the actual courses and nature of the conflict among entire staff of the school before applying the available conflict techniques, strategies and methods at their disposals.

- The school managers/administrators should endeavour to meet with the parties involved in the conflict situation at the different point in time and thereafter bring the parties together for the total reconciliations.
- The school managers/administrators should be very careful while reconciling the conflicting parties, so that their actions may not be seen to be biased in their judgments.
- The school managers/administrators should always endeavour to avoid ambiguity while communicating with the staff at the staff briefing and/or at the staff meetings.
- The school managers/administrators should display good sense of leadership spirit and styles among the entire staff of the school at all times.

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