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Managing Conflicts and Crises in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: Role of Administrators

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Abstract

This paper is theoretical and, it examined the role of an administrator managing conflict in a school environment. Identifying the inevitability of conflict in school setting, it was within the purview of this paper to unearth the various types of conflicts the causes and the methods of handling them. This paper sound the theory of differential association as a theoretical base in order to explain the relationship between at administrator's knowledge of the personalities of individual worker and his ability to manage conflicts. This paper identified and explained management strategies that can be adopted in reducing conflict in school organization. It is recommended that the school managers/administrators should know that conflict in a work place is inevitable and always should try to identify factors responsible for conflict situation among their staff and even among the students.

Keywords: Administrator, Conflict management, School organization, Nigeria

Introduction

An administrator connotes any person responsible for carrying out the running of any form of organization. Example: manager, director, official, head, boss, etc. Okaka (2008) opines that an administrator is a person in a position of

authority or who manages people, practices and policies. In the case of higher institutions of learning, administrators include: the Principal Officers, Deans, Directors, Heads of Departments and Units. The import of all these is that any employee, no matter the level, is an administrator. The point here is that, as long as you have a schedule of duty and a duty post, you are an administrator. In performing a duty, employers and employees acting in concert to achieve an organizational goal must experience disagreements, confrontations, negotiation and agreement. In this light, there exists an inevitability of conflict situations arising from work conditions.

Conflict is wide-spread in human societies (Adeniji 2009). This means that it cannot be ruled out in any human organization, be it schools and colleges, business firms or even social clubs, etc. In their work on inter-community conflict. Aigbepue and Mahmud (2017) opined that conflict is bound to occur because every individual is dependent on other individuals in the organization and once there is interaction, conflict cannot be ruled out. They 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 for it not to degenerate into crisis rather than eliminating it.

According to Adebola (2016), 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. She 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 organizational 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. (Oresajo2019). Furthermore, conflict is the inability of one of these parties i.e managers and workers, to reach agreement on any issue connected with employer-employee interaction, whether or not this ability results in strikes or other forms of protestations. Oresajo (2019) further expressed that 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, our perceptions on almost all things differ. 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.

Studies have shown that in every 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 burst 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 Prabuhttp://www.tpmc.in/lew.html) Bercovitch (2011) observed that school organization is vulnerable to experience conflict among The stakeholders working directly in the organization. The differences may be as result of resources allocation, classroom allocation and/or subject allocations, postings, to mention but a few. Although, conflict is not restricted to schools alone, it can ensue at home or elsewhere, de baseline is that conflict is inevitable whire human beings exit, it cannot be totally ruled out

The Dynamics of Conflicts

In his works, Marx (1967) introduced the concept of dialectics in explaining conflict. This is a view that organizations are made up of not only static structures but of processes, relationships, dynamics, conflicts and contradictions Mars used dialectical terms "Thesis. Antithesis and Synthesis to explain the reasons for conflicts and change in organizations

Thesis: this explains normal situations in relationships between employers and employees, superiors and subordinates, vertical and horizontal interactions. The inevitability of conflict among these actors brings about antagonisms

Antithesis: this represents an attack on normal relationships based on conditions of work and other environmental factors. This attack leads to a better condition of interactions

Synthesis: this is a situation where the actors feel they have been treated better, pay is increased, promotions given, conditions of service made more conducive

It is upon the bedrock of the above postulates that we can properly explain conflicts in any organization. That the dynamics of dialectism is continuous, as such, conflict is unending in every work organization. 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 by administrators.

Types of Conflict

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

1. Conflict within the individual: This arises from uncertainty about organization's expectation or the situation where work conflict with other demands personal to the individual (intra personal).
2. Conflict between individuals: This is usually caused by personality difference, eg. Conflict between the manager and the subordinates (interpersonal).
3. Conflict between individuals and group: This arises from the methods adopted by an individual to conform to the group norms (Intra Group conflict)
4. Conflict between groups 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).

Sources of Conflict

Abam (2014) opined that conflicts are 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 corrupt practices. He stated further that, when conflict is generated, it indicates the dissatisfaction of the oppressed because they too are humans, cannot but continue to fight until they get redress and cease to agitate.

The sources of conflict refer to the root causes of conflict in work organizations. Onukogu (2009) identified some of the causes and these include:

1. Competition for the scarce resources such as human resources, material resources, financial resources and physical resources. Thus, insufficiency of these resources brings about conflict.

2. Differences in work characteristics: Conflict in most organizations persists between management staff and line staff because it is virtually impossible to define precisely the responsibility and authority relationships between the two.
3. Divergence of values, aims and goals (personality conflict): This occurs as a result of personal goals of the managers, employees and students with the goal of the organization.
4. Ambiguity of responsibilities occurs because of change in the organizational operations, therefore, there is bound to be overlapping, which confers 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.
5. Labour - management polarization: This occurs because of differences in perception and requests of both parties.
6. Communication breakdown, that is, communication gap.
7. Sequential workflow occurs when one group has more work to do than the other group.

In a related study, Adu, Olatundun and Ajayi (2011) identified three sources of conflict and these include:

1. Lateral conflict: It exists when people who have the same level of authority disagree as to what should be done.
2. Vertical conflict: This is prominent in the area of bureaucratic set up, that is, how the higher level managers get the lower level managers to be involved on how to do specific task.
3. System conflict: This occurs when various parts of the organization are not interested in effectiveness of the organization. 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 include: scarce resources, differences in Individuals, task interdependence, low formalization, nature of reward system, communication distortions, and goal incompatibility. Other sources of conflict may include: victimization, dismissal and wrongful termination of appointment, lock- outs, hours of work, condition of service, disparity of treatment with comparable interests, minimum

wage, sexual assault, overtime, opportunity for selfactualization, security and continuity of work safety, comfort and sanitation (Adu, Olatundun and Ajayi 2001).

The Major Issue: The Role of an Administrator in Conflict Management

Studies have indicated various roles of an administrator in conflict management. Some of these studies will be highlighted but other areas that have been neglected by researchers and scholars shall be brought in here to unearth the basic understanding of how an administrator should play his roles in conflict situations.

Conflict management involves implementing strategies to limit the negative aspects of conflict and to increase the positive aspects of it at a level equal to or higher than where the conflict is taking place. (Rahim2002) More so, the aim of conflict management in tertiary institution is to enhance learning and group outcomes. School as an organization of learning cannot be voided of conflict since it accommodates people of different functions and working together as a team for a purpose of achieving educational goal.

A school is made up of personnel from diverse backgrounds and environments working together as a team with an aim of producing students. Tinuola (2006) believed that teachers and other workers most times put their differences aside to work in unison to achieve goals of the school. Okere (2015) claimed that for effective management of conflict in an organization, an administrator must understand systems and their functions.

This paper, therefore, explains how an administrator‟s understanding of functionalities (Merton, 1969) may provide the required knowledge of conflict management in a school environment.

Merton's Model of Conflict Management

Merton (1968) developed a model of Differential Association to enable an administrator manage conflicts. His model identifies the diverse individuals in a work place, their attributes and how these attributes generate conflict.

R. k. Merton‟s Model

1. Conformist: There are individuals in every organization who conform to basic rules. They accept both the means and the rewarding goals. For instance, in a tertiary institution of learning, additional certificates and diligence in duties are

basic for promotion. The conformists will always strive to have more certificates and perform their duties as stipulated.

2. Ritualists: These set of individuals may conform to the means but will reject the goal. They may conform to the rules but will reject acquiring additional certificates that may give them promotions. They do their jobs well but refuse to go to school. They may remain as lecturer 1, do their jobs but refuse to acquire Masters Degree to enable them move to Senior Lecturers.
3. Retreatists: These set of individuals reject both the means and the goals. They are seen as never do wells. They reject academic improvement and promotion at the same time. They are mostly dissatisfied, angry and can frustrate the efforts of the manager.
4. Rebellion: These individuals accept and reject the means, accept and reject the goals at the same time. They will accept having additional qualifications but will lead protest on why it is not needed. They will also accept the means of getting promotion but at the same time question criteria and timing. These individuals are difficult to manage as they are hardly satisfied.

In the light of the above, Sudhakar came up with these under listed ways of managing conflict. They include:

1. Proactive measure to prevent unwanted situations: 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 exhibit present 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 organization.
2. Cold War situations: At times, everybody knows what is going under the cover, no one is willing to talk out in the open. In their own groups and closed doors, they discuss 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, how will it happen and the effect of the result when the uncertain eventually happen?

3. Do not play wait-and-watch: Do not expect differences to disappear on their own. Do not assume that 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.
4. Do not bust the bubble and make things worse: When you know 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.
5. 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 organization a priority.
6. 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 organization.
7. Build awareness on how individual aspirations affect and impact on the outcome of the situation. This must be done in such a manner that does not threaten the self-image and public-image of those individuals.
8. Do not engage in divisive politics; later on it may boomerang on you. 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 non-existent 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 useful contributions. 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 effort and time it will take to build healthy postresolutions work relationships.

9. 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 builds consensus. When everyone involved work together to address differences and agrees to seek common ground, and put forward the best interest of the organization, 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.
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. Do not appear to be deliberately inactive and insensitive when you are in a situation where both parties recognize the difference and are 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 react negatively.
13. Be sincere in bringing a resolution. If either party is not sincere 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 reconciliation proceeds genuinely seeking a solution, it will have profound impact on the outcome of the process.

14. Do not manipulate others to do what you want. Never use reconciliatory process as a tool to buy time or squeeze the other to do what you want to do. You may succeed in the short- term; in 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.
15. 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 party 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 organization.
16. Explore how an individual or group expectations and aspirations can be met through seeking what is good for the organization. Organization is the middle ground which bridges individuals, not meeting the expectations and aspirations of certain individuals. - Reaching Resolution. When differences are identified and recognized that may lead to undesirable situations, the means through which the differences are to be resolved are also important by identifying and recognizing a resolution that will lead to desirable action. A resolution that both parties arrived at through the reconciliatory process, will be owned both party. Unless all parties involved do not own the resolution they have reached, they are not likely to act based on the resolution.
17. 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. 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 1. Prabu http://www.tpmc.in/lew.html).

Ositoye, Adebayo, Alade and Omolade (2012) came up with four steps of managing conflict; these are:

1. Anticipate: that is taking time to obtain information that can lead to conflict, Prevent, that is developing strategies before the conflict occurs.
2. Identify: if it is interpersonal or procedural, move quickly to manage it, remember that conflict is emotional.
3. Resolve: react, without blame, and you will learn through dialogue.
4. When blames are apportioned to individuals or group of person, the main purpose of such is to resolve conflict and must be accepted in good faith.

Bateman and Snell (2002) advocated five basic approaches to managing conflict, which are:

1. **Avoidance:** when the parties to conflict react by withdrawing, suppressing, or de- emphasizing the conflict. This could be as a result of indifference or by the desire to evade overt demonstration of indifference.
2. **Accommodation:** A party to a conflict may seek to appease the opponent and then become willing to be self-sacrificing. This is called accommodation - a willingness of one party to a conflict to place his/her interest to be inferior to the opponent‟s
3. **Compromise:** This refers to where each party to the conflict must give up something in order to allow sharing to occur, resulting in a compound outcome. In compromise, Mammud (2008) saw no clear winner or loser. Rather, there is rationing of the object of the conflict or where it is not divisible, one party rewards the other by yielding something of substitute and acceptable value.
4. **Forcing:** This is a highly competitive response in which parties to conflict focus strictly on their wishes and are unwilling to recognize the other‟s concern. This is also known as competition. Robbin (1989) identified competition to be a management approach to conflict where one party competes (fights on) and dominates. This „win-lose‟ struggle frequently utilizes the formal authority of a mutual superior as the dominant (such as law Courts, arbitration, mediation etc). It is a rule-regulated approach.
5. **Collaboration:** This is a system of managing conflict where each party to conflict each desires to satisfy fully the concern of other parties in order to have cooperation and a mutually beneficial outcome. This method puts into view the

similarities and dissimilarities of the parties to the conflict. It is a "win-win" approach to managing conflict as parties desire to satisfy fully the concern of everyone.

In line with the above, Ekundayo (2012) opined that managers should preoccupy themselves with the task of managing conflict rather than detesting it. Perhaps, against this background, Odoh (2006) defined 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, all 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 right knowledge that is tenable and acceptable to the society, human resources (teaching and non-teaching staff) are involved in the impartation of knowledge and civic responsibilities. Conflicting situations do arise which will call for the attention of the school administrators to look inward for possible solutions to the conflict situation.

Conclusion

It is the submission of this paper that conflict cannot be totally eradicated among groups and in any work organization. This is because we are bound to agree and disagree at one point or the other, but can only be subjected to a considerable control by the administrators and managers of the various organizations, be it educational, such as schools and colleges, by taking into consideration those methods, strategies and techniques that match up with the nature of conflicts within the organizations. It is, therefore, pertinent to understand that conflict may bring about mutual understanding among parties that are involved in one disagreement or the other. Conflict is not, in most cases, as destructive as most administrators feel it is.

Recommendations

On the whole, this paper advocates the following recommendations that may help school administrators reduce incidence and effects of conflicts in Nigeria schools

- School administrators should make deliberate efforts at identifying the actual causes and nature of the conflict among staff of the school before applying the available conflict management techniques, strategies and methods

- Administrators need to make it a priority to meet with the parties involved in the conflict situation at the different points in time and thereafter bring the parties together for total reconciliation
- It is important for administrators to be seen as not partial while reconciling the conflicting parties, so that their actions may not be seen to be biased in their judgments
- Properly trained administrators should always use clear terms to avoid ambiguity while communicating with the staff at the staff briefing and/or at the staff meetings.
- School administrator must display good sense of management / leadership spirit and styles among the entire staff of the school at all times.

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