RELATIONSHIPS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN ORGANISATIONS IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

Broadly speaking, a sound organisation is one in which relationships between individuals and groups are more harmonious, highly cooperative than conflictional, and effectively productive in the attainment of organisational goals. No one has ever gained anything out of conflicts. Conflict must be avoided as it leads to negativity and spoils the ambience of the workplace. Acceptably, conflicts play an important role in spoiling relationship among employees at the workplace and must be controlled at the initial stages to expect the best out of individuals. This paper commenced with an introduction of the whole essence of relationships and conflict management as two crucial factors that an organisation depends on for survival. It went ahead to present some common causes of conflicts, signs of conflicts between (among) individuals and groups in an organisation. How to manage conflicts in interpersonal relationship in an organisation was also looked into. Attempt was made to highlight the types of conflicts in an organisation and approaches to conflict management and resolution. How do we improve employees' relationship in an organisation was also vividly discussed. Finally, some recommendations were made. This is with a view that, when they are religiously implemented, organisations and institutions in Nigeria would be better off.

Key words: *Relationships, conflict, management and organisation.*

Introduction

Relationships and conflict management are two crucial factors that an organisation or institution depend on for survival. Imagine the staff of an organisation working together and supporting one another across boundaries in pursuit of common goals. How much would such alignment increase their result, their morale, their operational excellence, and their pace of change? Of course, the potential benefits are enormous; but significant barriers stand in the way. The single greatest drain on an organisation's performance is conflict. It is the same everywhere, when parts of an organisation fight against one another or individuals fight amongst themselves rather than join together in the pursuit of common goals. Conflict arises at the workplace when employees find it difficult to reach mutually acceptable solutions and fight over petty issues. Differences in attitude, mindsets and perceptions give rise to conflicts at the workplace. In fact, Rahim (2001) sees conflict as a process of social interaction including a struggle over power, resources, desires, belief and other preferences. Choudric (2005), on his part, is of the view that when people from diverse backgrounds and experiences work together, conflicts are bound to arise. He, therefore, posited that conflicts are not

productive for organisations and suggested that conflict resolution be sought to ensure peace, understanding and a good relationship.

Indeed, for an organisation or institution to achieve its ultimate goal, it must evolve an effective conflict management strategy that would guarantee a friendly and harmonious working relationship. This way, the organisation will hit the tops.

Common Causes of Conflict

Causes or sources of organisational conflict can be many and varied. The most common causes, as presented by Waitchalla and Radnan (2006), are as follows:

1. Poor communication
2. Scarcity of resources (finance, equipment, facilities, etc.);
3. Different attitudes, values or perceptions;
4. Disagreement about needs, goals, priorities and interest;
5. Poor or Inadequate organisational structure;
6. Lack of teamwork; and
7. Lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities.

Holland, Shechan and Decurr (2007), in a similar vein, maintained that conflict happens, among others, because of environmental changes, personal dislikes, value discrepancies, differences in basic values beliefs or knowledge, different role structures, a need for tension release, differences in goals, diverse economic interests, power or recognition, competition for position, different perceptions, heterogeneity of the workforce and loyalties of groups.

Signs of Conflict between Individuals and Groups in an Organisation

It is true that there are some identifiable signs that would betray the existence of conflicts either between individuals or within groups. Accordingly, Blyton and Turnbull (2004) noted that, in an organisation, leaders and members should be alert to signs of conflict among colleagues, so that they can be proactive in reducing or resolving the conflict

by getting to the root of the matter. They pointed out that the typical signs of conflict among colleagues may include:

i.   Colleagues not speaking to one another or ignoring one another;
ii. Contradicting or bad-mouthing one another;
iii. Deliberately undermining or not co-operating with one another, to the downfall of the team.

Similarly, they further drew the attention of leaders and members of organisations to the fact that they can identify latent conflicts between (among) groups of people in organisation through:

i.   Cliques or factions meeting to discuss issues separately, when they affect the whole organisation;
ii. One group being left out of organising an event which should include everybody;
iii. Groups using threatening slogans or symbols to show that their group is right and the others are wrong.

How to Manage Conflicts in Interpersonal Relationship in an Organisation

Conflicts play an important role in spoiling relationship among employees at their workplace and must be controlled at the initial stages to expect the best out of individuals. In the light of this, Al-Saba'a (2012) presented a guide on how to manage conflicts in interpersonal relationship at the workplace as follows:

i.   For individuals, the organisation should always come first and all other personal interest must take a backseat. Do not take things to heart at the workplace as no one is working for himself or herself. You might not like someone else's style of working but remember, ultimately, the organisation must benefit out of it.
ii. An individual ought to respect his/her colleagues. Treat your fellow workers as members of your extended family. Ignoring minor issues helps in avoiding conflicts in interpersonal

relationship. Try to understand your colleagues' point of view as well.

iii. Avoid lobbying at the workplace. An individual should keep his personal and professional life separate. Do not favour anyone just because you like the individual concerned or you know him personally. At work, every employee, irrespective of his family background and relation with the management, should be treated as one. Ignoring or bad-mouthing someone just because you do not like him is simply not acceptable. Such things give rise to unnecessary stress and, eventually, employees fight and spoil relationships amongst themselves. You need people around who can give you suggestions and help you when required. You can't work alone.

iv. Think before you speak. Do not hurt anyone. There are several other ways to express your displeasure at work. Do not overreact at the workplace. Stay calm and composed.

v. Avoid being arrogant. Be polite to everyone. Greet people and do enquire about their well-being. A simple smile goes a long way in managing conflicts and strengthening interpersonal relationships at the workplace.

vi. Evaluate issues carefully. Do not jump to conclusions. It is always better to sort out differences amiably rather than fighting and spoiling relationships. Voice your concerns in an open platform and try to reach a mutually acceptable conclusion. Do not always see your own personal interests.

vii. Learn to control your emotions.

viii. Finally, communicating effectively reduces the chances of errors and eventually manages conflicts among employees at the workplace.

Types of Conflicts

There are divergent views as to how many types of conflict exist in an organisation.

Abu-Asaker (2008) maintained that there are five basic types of conflict. These are:

i.   Intergroup conflict
ii.   Intra-organisational conflict
iii.   Interpersonal conflict
iv.   Intrapersonal conflict and
v.   Intragroup conflict

On the contrary, Choudrie (2005) posited that there are two forms of conflict that exist within work psychology literature; and these are affective and substantive conflict. According to Dechurch and Marks (2001), substantive conflict involves differences of opinion among group members about the content of the tasks being performed. Thus, this type of conflict occurs when group members disagree on the recognition and solution to a problem, including differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions. This type of conflict has been found to have positive effect on outcomes especially because it permits members to bring a variety of perspectives on a task. Affective conflict, on the other hand, deals with interpersonal relationships or incompatibilities not directly related to achieving groups' function.

Notwithstanding, opinions given by the above mentioned authors, Jones, George and Hill (2000), posited that there are four main forms of conflict that exist within organisations. These are interpersonal conflict, which has to do with conflict between (among) individual members of an organisation and occurs as a result of differences in their goals or values. The second form of conflict described by these authors is intra-group conflict which is the conflict that occurs within groups, teams or departments. The third conflict opined by these authors is the inter-group conflict. This form of conflict arises between (among) groups, teams and departments. The fourth type of conflict is known as inter-organisational conflict and occurs across organisations.

Approaches to Conflict Management/ Resolution in an Organisation

The success of an organisation depends on the ability to recognise conflict and the very

way of conflict management. Conflict management implies integration of all factors which can contribute to conflict resolution or its prevention. Those factors are improvement of communication and practising discipline in the organisation as well as having in mind the life phases of parties included (Whetten & Cameron, 2007). Different authors know about various approaches to conflict management but, in this paper, we shall make do with the following:

Collective bargaining

Especially in a workplace situation, it is necessary to have agreed mechanisms in place for groups of people who may be antagonistic (e.g. management and workers) to collectively discuss and resolve issues. This process is often called "collective bargaining", because representatives of each group come together with a mandate to work out a solution collectively. Experience has shown that this is far better than avoidance or withdrawal, and puts democratic processes in place to achieve "integrative problem solving", where people or groups who must find ways of co-operating in the same organisation, do so within their own agreed rules and procedures.

Conciliation

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines conciliation as "the act to make somebody less angry or more friendly, especially by being kind and pleasant". Here, a neutral person agreeable to all parties is selected to serve as a conciliator. The conciliator serves as a go between. This is usually attempted before the more serious step of a strike by workers or a lock-out by management is taken. And it has been found useful to involve a facilitator in the conciliation process.

It is also worthy to note that three methods of resolving situations that have reached the stage of open conflict are often used by many different organisations. It is important to understand these methods, so that people can decide which methods will work best for them in their specific conflict situation.

Negotiation

This is the process where mandated representatives of groups in a conflict situation meet together in order to resolve their differences and to reach agreement. It is a deliberate process, conducted by representatives of groups, designed to reconcile differences and to reach agreements by consensus. The outcome is often dependent on the power relationship between (among) the groups. Negotiation often involves compromise—one group may win one of their demands and give in on another.

Mediation

When negotiations fail or get stuck, parties often call in an independent mediator. This person or group will try to facilitate settlement of the conflict. The mediator plays an active part in the process, advises both or all groups, acts as intermediary and suggests possible solutions. In contrast to arbitration, mediators act only in an advisory capacity. That is, they have no decision-making powers and cannot impose a settlement on the conflicting parties. Skilled mediators are able to gain trust and confidence from the conflicting groups or individuals.

Arbitration

This means the appointment of an independent person to act as an adjudicator (or judge) in a dispute, to decide on the terms of a settlement. Both parties in a conflict have to agree about who the arbitrator should be; and that the decision of the arbitrator will be binding on them all. Arbitration differs from mediation and negotiation in that it does not promote the continuation of collective bargaining. The arbitrator listens to and investigates demands and counter-demands and takes over the role of a decision-maker. People or organisations can agree on having either a single arbitrator or a panel of arbitrators whom they respect and whose decision they will accept as final, in order to resolve the conflict.

Dominance

It occurs when the cooperation is extremely low and the persistence in satisfying

of personal interest is high. By this strategy, conflict is resolved in a way to satisfy the needs of one party while damaging the other party involved in the conflict.

Integration

Here, cooperation is high as well as the persistence in satisfying of one's own needs, so there is to be sought appropriate solution for all parties involved in the conflict.

Compromise

There is an equal wish for medium level cooperation and persistence in satisfying one's personal needs, so the conflict is resolved and each party involved in conflict gives up the part of the value. They find a middle course.

Avoidance

This is when the cooperation as well as persistence in satisfying one's personal needs is very low. In that case, conflict resolution is by the withdrawal of a party or by repression.

Cooperativeness

Here, the readiness for cooperation is extremely high and the conflict is resolved by putting the other party's interest before its own.

How do you improve employees' relationship in an organisation?

The essential ingredient to improving employees' relationship in an organisation is the presence of communication. Lack of communication in any system brews discontent. Therefore, in order to improve employees' relationship in the face of conflict, communication surfaces as to understanding themselves (Kaimoto, 2013). This view was supported by Spaho (2013) when he noted that poor communication in an organisation has severally led to organisational conflict and ruined relationships.

Most importantly, when there are difficulties in communication, conflict occurs between employees at work; and it turns to break personal and professional relationships and reduces effectiveness, because it produces tension and distracts team members from performing the task (Putman, 2006). Furthermore, Tarska, Semegine (2011)

confirmed that if conflicts occur and are not managed properly through communication, it will lead to delays of work, disinterest and lack of action and, in extreme cases, it might lead to complete breakdown of the group or individual relationships.

Emphasising the important role communication plays in improving employees' relationships in organisations, Friedman, Tidd, Currall and Tsai (2000) posited that communication helps in establishing a healthy relationship among employees at work. They, therefore, advised that it is imperative to explore the buffering role of communication in conflict management as a means of enhancing employee relationship at the workplace in order to provide empirical basis for the aforementioned assertions and to provide a framework for managing conflict and improving relationships among employees in organisations.

Recommendations

In order to promote good working relationships and enhance effective management of conflict in organisations in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

1. Information should be shared by keeping people in the organisation up-to-date with current issues.
2. Express positive expectations about on another.
3. Empower one another by publicly crediting colleagues who have performed well and encouraging each other to achieve results.
4. There should be team building by promoting good morale and protecting the organisation's reputation with outsiders.
5. Resolve potential conflict by bringing differences of opinion into the open and facilitating resolution of conflicts.
6. Finally, there should be effective communication in the organisation.

Conclusion

Every organisation encounters conflicts on daily basis. Conflicts cannot be avoided, but

it is possible to manage them in a way that we recognize them on time. It is necessary to continuously track the organisational signals which point to their existence.

Indeed, organisational conflicts can be minimised when individuals and group relationships are promoted. Mechanism for improving relationships and reducing conflict have all been vividly discussed there.

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