

Conflict Management in a Dynamic Work Environment: Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights some salient conceptual and theoretical issues in conflict management in a dynamic work environment. The economy and society are dynamic; consequently, their social, economic and political structures have undergone series of changes, which in turn exposes workers to new types of competition and challenges at their differing workplaces. In social relations of production, labour of different skills and categories interact. Under this process, conflict is inevitable. What qualifies conflict as good or bad is the approach adopted in managing it. Poorly and haphazardly managed conflicts could result in damage to an organization and could erupt into crisis if not checked. Alternatively, properly and effectively managed conflicts can result in good to the organization as new ways of doing things will be learned by parties.

Keywords: Conflict management, dynamic work environment

INTRODUCTION

The economy and society are not static but dynamic. Social, economic and political structures have undergone series of changes which “have changed the when and where of work, what of goods and services produced, and the how of organizing work” (HDR, 2015 as cited in Ojo, 2016). This process has exposed workers to new types of competition and challenges to traditional forms of collective organization. Consequently, work environment has been dynamic; and conflict in a changing social, economic, political, cultural, and technological environment is inevitable. Conflict is not all together bad; it sometimes results in putting things in proper perspectives, if managed properly.

One noticeable thing about conflict is that it does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it occurs between parties. At the family level, conflict can occur between husband and wife, and even among siblings. At the workplace, it can occur between co-workers, between employer and employee, between superior and subordinate, between management and the employees and between labour union and the management. Conflict can also occur between the host communities and business organizations, between government and the people and so on. When conflict occurs, destruction of property may follow, and disaffection may likely be created between the parties involved; and some degree of emotional, psychological damage may ensue. In a dynamic work

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environment, innovations and ideas are bound to change; and with this change comes change in values and perceptions of situations. In this scenario, conflict is inevitable. In this article, we seek to identify causes and effects of conflict in an organization, and the probable ways of managing conflict.

Conflict and Its Symptoms

The word conflict defies a universally acceptable definition because it can be seen in different terms from simple disagreements to violent wars. Some use the word crisis and conflict interchangeably. It is however proper for the purpose of this discourse to differentiate between the two terms. Anyim (2006) argues that conflict is the existence of incompatible aims between two groups or persons. Akpan (2006) asserts that conflict is a situation of incompatibility of interests. Umoh (1996) is of the view that all relationship between sets of individuals or groups that involve incompatible objectives is conflictive. Incompatibility as used by these scholars connotes a situation where one party rides on the other party in an attempt to attain its own goals, and where the interests of the two parties are mutually antagonistic. From the foregoing, we can say that, conflict is a state of disagreement, a situation where the interests, needs, goals of persons or groups interfere with those of the other. It is a strong disagreement between people, or groups that often results in angry argument. Crisis, on the other hand is a critical stage of argument or disagreement with a distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome. We can contextually say that conflict engenders crisis.

Symptoms of conflict, according to Tom (2006), can manifest at three levels. These are the perceived level, felt level and behaviour level. At the perceived level parties involved would realize that conflict exists based on observation on the difference in their goals and that there is an opportunity for interference. Consequently, when there is passive or active inference by at least one party, it can be concluded that conflict at the level of expression of behaviour has occurred. At the felt level, parties involved would realize that conflicts would burst due to stress-laden environments, ambiguous routines of responsibilities, multiple boss situations. At the behavioural level, symptoms of conflict include quarrel, false allegation against contending parties, insubordination, loss of interest, poor work performance, poor work attitude, work-to-rule, and warning strike (Kirchoff and Adams, 1982).

As a dynamic process, conflict is sequential in nature. From inception to the end, it takes some processes which include the conflict situation, awareness of the situation, realization of conflict, manifestation of conflict, resolution or suppression of conflict and after affects of conflict situation (Tosi, Rozzi and Carroll, 1986).

Types of Conflict

Various types of conflict have been identified such as family conflict, personal conflict, communal conflict, cultural conflict, religious conflict, racial conflict, ethnic conflict, organizational conflict, occupational conflict, national conflict, armed conflict, social conflict, gender conflict, regional and continental conflict (Akpan 2006; Ekpenyong,

2006). As varied as conflict is, we shall, for the purpose of this discourse limit our discussion to organizational conflict. At the organizational level, different forms of conflict exist. These are: peer conflict, employee–employee conflict, employer–employee conflict, superior-subordinate conflict, management–employees conflict, management–management conflict, union–management conflict, union-employees conflict, union–government conflict.

Any of these conflicts, according to Ugbo (2013), can be classified under four substructures; intra-personal, inter personal, intergroup and inter-organizational. While intra-personal conflict occurs within an individual who has work activity to perform, inter personal conflict occurs between two individuals because of personality differences or blockage of goal attainment of one person by the other. Intergroup conflict happens between formal and informal groups within an organization such as union-management or labour- management conflict; while inter-organizational conflict usually happens between one organization and the other. Any of these substructure conflicts can be either functional or dysfunctional.

Ojo (2016) argues that functional conflict is a healthy, constructive disagreement between two or more persons which can produce new ideas, learning and growth among individuals within an organization. Furthermore, this form of conflict is believed to encourage creativity, promote innovation and lead to increased productivity in an organization. Functional conflict is often cognitive in origin, as it sometimes arises from attempt by someone to challenge old, ineffective policies. Dysfunctional conflict is unhealthy, destructive disagreement between two or more persons which usually takes the focus away from the work to be done and places focus on the conflict and the parties involved. This form of conflict drains productive energy. It is impairing.

Reasons for any of these organizational conflicts may be remote, situational (immediate), and structural (institutional). The remote reasons, as identified by Inyang (2007), are inability of employer and employee to meet collective terms of engagement, the relevance of union members to bring management to their sense of responsibility, inability of management to pay reasonable wage due to economic recession, workers inordinate desire to be used by local politicians to foment trouble for the organization, animalistic instinct in man which often drives him to putting up deviant behaviour, unnecessary bureaucracy which provides a stage for workers to display deviant attitude, and poor communication between labour and management.

The situational (immediate) reasons for organizational conflict include: late payments of workers' salaries and entitlements, delays by management to attend to staff complaints and union matters, management insensitivity in applying company policies to individual staff, that is, selective treatment of staff. Structural (institutional) reasons for organizational conflict include: non-satisfaction in accommodation need of staff, exposure of employee to hazards due to non-provision of safety and protective devices, poor salary structure, frustration in training and development aspiration of employees, absence of credit facilities for improvement in employee's living standard (Inyang, 2007).

When these conditions are present in an organization, feeling of discontentment among employees and union members may swell up conflict. Even when some of these conditions are met, conflict free organization may never be attained for some reasons other than the ones mentioned above.

Why Do Conflicts Arise?

At the organizational and at the level of government, conflict may arise for many reasons. In the traditional theory of conflict management by Kirchoff and Adams (1982), conflict is assumed to be bad and that it is caused by trouble maker, and in that case, it must be subdued. On the contrary, contemporary theory recognizes that conflict between human beings is inevitable and that it emerges as a natural result of choice. The foregoing shows that conflict whether bad or inevitable must occur at some point for one reason or the other. Filley (1975) identifies conditions which could fuel conflict in an organization to include:

Ambiguous jurisdiction: This occurs when two individuals have responsibilities which are interdependent but work limitation and definitions are not effectively specified.

Goal incompatibility and conflict of interest: In this situation, two or more individuals work towards accomplishing different but mutually conflicting goals. Obstructions in accomplishing goals and lack of clarity on how to do a job may initiate conflict.

Communication barriers: Poor communication among members of an organization breeds misunderstanding and eventually leads to conflict situation.

Dependence on one party by another group or individual: When disappointment occurs as a result of dependence of one group on another, frustration sets in and this may fuel conflict situation.

Job differentiation in organization: Within an organization, jobs may be differentiated according to sub- units; the inability of a sub-unit to properly co-ordinate its activity could result in conflict situation.

Association of the parties and specialization: Individuals working in an organization have different ideas, methodologies and experience based on their specializations. In discharging a joint task, disagreement in ideas and methodologies may result in conflict.

Behaviour regulation: Organizations have ethical codes of behaviour to guide and protect employee's relations with one another. This behavioural guide may be perceived differently by some, and this may be a cause of conflict.

Unresolved prior conflict: This creates stress and anxiety and may further intensify existing conflict situation.

De Bono (1985) argues that conflicts arise because people disagree and that people are concerned with fear, force and fairness; and that people disagree, because people see things differently based on their understanding and viewpoints. Consequently, people's styles, principles, values, status, beliefs and slogans as well as relationships and philosophical outlooks differ. This variation in personality could be a source of conflicts in an organization.

Fear of what might happen in the future could eventually degenerate into a feeling of setback, disgrace, reproof and subsequently conflict. Sense of what is right and what is wrong determines the moral values of individuals. Different sense of moral values exhibited by individuals in an organization could be a cause of conflict. Akpan (2006) on this note, argues that the values or moral preferences of human groups are different, and this could be a source of conflict. Secondly, inherited cultural values and practices of groups may differ so much between one group and another as to make a common mind on their natural affairs difficult, if not impossible to achieve. More so, goals, ambitions, intentions, desires, wants, plans and fears of individual human beings differ within the same country, the same town and the same village, and within the same family: and these possibly would result in the pursuit of incompatible interest that could generate conflict. Whatever may be advanced as reasons for conflict, Turner and Weeds (1983) suggest that organizational conflict involves three elements which have to be appropriately matched through necessary organizational order to resolve the conflict. These elements are power, organizational demands and worth.

Power is the capacities and means that people have at their disposal to get things done. This includes budgetary discretion, information, time, space, staff size. If used efficiently, power creates atmosphere of cooperation and submission. However, the same power can result in conflict when misused, withheld or amassed. Organizational demands are the people's expectations regarding a person's job performance. When these expectations are not fulfilled, people feel disheartened, angry, let down or cheated, and consequently, conflict situation may erupt. Worth refers to a person's self-esteem. People want to prove their worth in the work place. How much praise, motivation and reward received by a person reflect their worth. If individual basic needs are not fulfilled, feeling of worthlessness is likely to set in, and this may result in conflict. Generally, it can be said that conflicts arise from mismatches between power, organizational demands and feeling of worth.

Consequences of Organizational Conflict

Conflict has both positive and negative consequences in an organization whenever it occurs. Filley (1975) on positive effects of conflict, argues that conflict can bring about: Diffusion of more serious conflicts, stimulation of search for new facts or resolutions, increase in group cohesions and performance.

Diffusion of more serious conflicts involves the use of games to moderate the attitudes of people by providing competitive situation which could help to liberate tension in the conflicting parties, as well as having some entertainment value. In a game situation, each player chooses his strategy independent of the other party. The chosen strategy is expected to maximize benefit to the players so that whatever the outcome at the end may be, it will result in a win-win situation for both parties. When this happens, the possibility of future conflict between the parties is foreclosed. Stimulation of a search for new *facts* will occur when two parties in conflict respect the position of negotiators. This will afford the parties opportunities to search for new resolution to

prevent a reoccurrence. Increase in group cohesions and performance happens when each group will attempt to improve on what brought about the conflict. Kirchoff and Adams (1982) argue that conflict has destructive effects on an organization. These include: (a) impediments to smooth working, (b) diminishing output, (c) obstructions in the decision making process, and (d) formation of competing affiliations within the organization. The overall result of such negative effects is a reduction in employees' commitment to organizational goals and organizational efficiency.

Uko (2006) offers a different dimension to effects of conflicts in union-employer's relation, and argues that conflict has both positive and negative effects on both employees and employers. In a poor and dissatisfying work condition, workers have two options available to them which are exit mechanisms and voice mechanisms. Exit mechanism refers to leaving the present job in search for a relatively better one. On the other hand, voice mechanism entails communication between workers and employers for improved conditions and resolution of workers' grievances.

When voice mechanism fails, parties may invoke relevant tools at their disposal to achieve their goals. Labour union may embark on strike action to press home demand of its members. Employer on the other hand may use threat of dismissal, salary cut and reduced benefits to get his way. Either way, some degree of loss and gain may be recorded by the parties. Uko (2006) outlines positive effects of conflict on an organization to include:

Investment and technological progress: When an organization is faced with higher production cost due to union wage advantage, employer could be prompted to reduce cost by using machinery and by seeking improved production techniques which use less labour and more capital to increase units of output produced. This managerial action may inadvertently increase national product if, of course, there is a competitive market for the product of the firm.

Reduction in labour turnover: Collective voice of the union could help in correcting workers' job dissatisfying condition and prevent high labour turnover which could have been recorded if exit mechanism was employed instead.

Security and training: Labour insistence on matters such as promotion and lay-off could enhance workers job security. When workers are assured of job security, they are more willing to pass on their job knowledge and skills to new workers. This enhances labour quality and productivity.

Managerial performance: When firms are faced with strong union and higher wage demands, they may be forced to adopt better personnel and production methods to meet union demands so as to still make profit. Collective bargaining provides a potential avenue of communication through which the union can suggest to management ways of enhancing profitability.

Despite the perceived positive effects of conflicts, it is obvious that during conflicts, parties in conflict suffer adversely, and this impacts negatively on the organization. During conflict, production may cease and this eventually may affect sales and subsequently profit. Employees may sacrifice income and labour turnover if

the action persists for long. In the long run, the effect could be felt by the society in the form of unemployment. Increasing rate of unemployment may produce other vices inimical to the society at large.

Response Styles to Conflict

People perceive and appreciate an event or a situation in different ways; and so respond differently. Turner and Weed (1983) categorize three groups of people based on response styles, namely: addressers, concealers and attackers.

Addressers: These are people who are willing to take initiatives and risks to resolve conflicts by getting their opponents to agree with them on issues. Addressers can be first steppers or confronters. First steppers are those who believe that some trust has to be established to settle conflicts. They offer to make a gesture of peace and agreeableness or sympathy with the other person's view in exchange for similar response. Confronters on the other hand, are those that think that things are so bad that they have nothing to lose by confrontation. They might be confronting because of their authority and vantage position which reduce their vulnerability to lose.

Concealers: These are those in conflict who take no risk and so say nothing. They conceal their feelings and views. Concealers can be feeling swallows, subject changers and avoiders. Concealers swallow their feelings and smile even when the situation is causing them pain and distress. They consider the approval of other people important and feel that it is dangerous to offend them by revealing their true feelings. Subject-changers find the real issue too difficult to handle. They change the topic by finding something on which there can be feud between them and the conflicting party. This response style usually does not solve the problem; rather, it can create problems for the people and for the organization in which such people are working. Avoiders often go out of their way to avoid conflicts.

Attackers: These are those who don't keep their feelings to themselves. They vent their anger on anybody even when those ones are not the source of their distress. Attackers are of two types: the up-front attackers or behind-the-back attackers. Up-front attackers are the angry people who attack openly while behind-the-back attackers vent their anger and criticism behind the party in conflict. Behind-the-back attackers are difficult to handle because the target person is not sure of the source of criticism.

Conflict Management Techniques

The fact that conflict is inevitable in every sphere of human endeavour means that there should be means of reducing its negative impact while promoting the positive effects. The process of doing this is known as conflict management. Rahim (2002) conceptualizes conflict management as the process of limiting the negative aspect of conflict with the goal of improving learning in an organization. Best (2005) argues that the aim of conflict management is to reduce or mitigate the negative and destructive capacities of conflict. Akpan (2006) explains conflict management as an attempt to control or regulate conflict through a number of measures. The conceptualizations suggest that a variety of measures

can be adopted to manage conflict with a view to enhancing learning and effectiveness or performance in organizational setting. While various conflict management techniques exist, no singular technique works for every organization at all times. Organizations and forms of conflict vary, so in adopting a technique to manage conflict, its effectiveness to maximizing the positive outcomes of conflict should be considered. One of the earliest models on conflict management by Follet (1940) shows that conflict was managed by individuals in three ways namely, domination, compromise and integration. Khun and Poole (2000) establish distributive and integrative model as a system of group conflict management. In the distributive model, conflict is approached as a distribution of a fixed amount of positive outcomes or resources, where one side will end up winning and the other losing. The integrative model views conflict as a chance to integrate the needs and concerns of both groups and make the best outcomes possible.

DeChurch and Marks (2001) in what they refer to as meta-taxonomy model in conflict management, argue that other conflict management styles have two inherent dimensions in them; activeness and agreeableness. Activeness is said to measure the extent to which conflict behaviours make a responsive and direct rather than inert and indirect impression. High activeness is characterized by openly discussing differences of opinion while fully going after their own interest. On the other hand, agreeableness measures the extent to which conflict behaviours make a pleasant and relaxed rather than unpleasant and tense impression. High agreeableness is characterized by attempts to satisfy all parties involved in conflict. Rahim (2002), like Dechurch and Marks (2001), creates conflict styles based on two dimensions - concern for self and concern for others. Within the concern for self and concern for others framework, Rahim (2002) identifies five approaches to conflict management namely, integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and comprising.

Integration involves openness, exchanging information, looking for alternatives, and examining differences to solve the problem in a manner that is acceptable to both parties. It involves a high level of concern for self and for others. Obliging style is associated with attempting to minimize the differences by placing a high concern on others and a low concern on self. In dominating style, one party goes all out to win his or her objectives and as a result, often ignores the needs and expectations of the other party. It involves a low level of concern for others and a high level of concern for self. In using dominating style one should make decisions that are in line with the organizations goals.

When avoiding, a party fails to satisfy one's own concern as well as the concern of the other party. It is often used by people who are not willing to accept blames, rather would place them on others. Compromising involves a moderate amount of concern for self and for others, whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision. That is, compromising favours solutions that involve the least pain for parties concerned. De Bono (1985) suggests that when there are two parties in conflict, four options are available to them, these are fight, negotiate, problem

solve, and design. Fighting is harmful as it involves the use of tactics, strategy, losing and winning ground and exposure of weak points. Fighting could result in litigations and may not be recommended. Negotiation involves settlement with the other party and this may bring in third party who will help prepare common ground for negotiation. Problem solve involves identifying and removing the cause of the conflict so as to make the situation normal again. Design is creating a situation to make conflict situation normal and to create avenue to forestall a reoccurrence in the future. Thomas and Kilman (1974) identify five approaches to handling conflict to include: (i) forcing or competing, (ii) collaborating or problem solving or problem confronting, (iii) compromising, (iv) withdrawing or avoiding, and (v) smoothing or accommodating.

In forcing or competing, an individual firmly pursues his or her own concern despite the resistance of the other; or he or she will view a matter from one viewpoint ignoring other alternatives. Though this approach may provide quick resolution to a conflict, it may negatively affect relationship with the opponent in the long run. Collaborating involves identifying the underlying concerns of the opponents which meet the concerns of the parties involved. This approach leads to win-win outcome and reinforces mutual trust and respect. However, commitment from all parties is essential for a mutually acceptable solution. Compromising may be necessary when force or competition does not work. It may provide a temporary solution while still working on a win-win solution. Withdrawing is appropriate when the issue is trivial and not worth the effort required by the other three. When more parties are involved withdrawing may be viewed as a sign of cowardice. Smoothing is appropriate when one accepts that he or she is at fault. This approach may offend supporters of the party that gave in. Tosi, Rizzon, and Carroll (1986) argue that after identifying the causes of conflict in an organization, suitable organizational arrangements should be put in place to forestall conflict. These arrangements include: (a) establishing super ordinate goals, (b) reducing vagueness, (c) minimizing authority and domain related disputes, (d) improving policies, procedures and rules, (e) re-apportioning existing resources or adding new ones, and (f) altering communications, movement of personnel and changing reward systems.

Moreover, managers should initiate structural changes needed, which may be reallocation or merging of specialized units, shouldering liaison functions and acting as integrator to resolve conflict. As varied as conflict management approaches are, one cannot say which is the most effective. What may be effective in one organization may not be so in another organization. While a combination of approaches is recommended, it is important that since conflict is a product of personal differences, parties in a conflict should reassess their positions and justify their actions vis-à-vis the goals of the organization.

CONCLUSION

It is unrealistic to expect a conflict free society with differing and dynamic work environment. It is clear that conflict cannot be disassociated from human beings who

are in relationship socially, economically, religiously and politically, starting from the family, groups and to organizations. There is no good conflict neither is there any bad conflict. What qualifies conflict as good or bad is the approach adopted in managing it. Poorly and haphazardly managed conflicts could result in damage to an organization and could erupt into crisis if not checked. Alternatively, properly and effectively managed conflicts can result in good to the organization as new ways of doing things will be learned by parties.

Based on the above expositions, for effective conflict management in an organization, we suggest to employees, employers, managers, union leaders and supervisors and others in positions of authority in any organization, as follows:

- i. Get better acquainted with your work environment
- ii. Avoid hear say, seek for clarification on issues of utmost relevance to your job
- iii. Develop, or improve upon, a listening attitude
- iv. Learn from others (both superior and subordinate)
- v. Make yourself accessible and approachable
- vi. Delegate authority appropriately and demand feedback
- vii. Learn to accept your mistakes and be willing to learn from them
- viii. Appraise and reward performance
- ix. Avoid vindictive attitude towards others. See others as partners in organizational building and not as rivals
- x. Keep the line of communication open
- xi. Develop or maintain a life of integrity.

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