

CONFLICTS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: CAUSES AND MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Conflict can be a serious problem in any organization. It might not bring about the demise of an organization, but it certainly can hurt an organization's performance as well as lead to the loss of many good employees. However, as we shall discover in this study, all conflicts are not bad. Conflict has a positive side as well as a negative side. The focus of this study is on conflict and its management in formal organizations with particular reference to tertiary institutions in Nigeria comprising universities, colleges of Education, Polytechnics, and Colleges of Technology. This paper attempted to review relevant works of experts and scholars in conflict and its management. As a conceptual framework, the paper discussed (a) the meaning and nature of conflict in formal organizations (b) causes/sources of conflict and its consequences, and (c) conflict management as a strategy to curb conflict episodes in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary institutions in Nigeria are bedeviled with conflicts of various types between the staff, students and management. The sources and consequences of conflict are numerous and the way conflicts are resolved, transformed and managed are also different. Spangler (2003) posits that conflict management involves the control but not the resolution of a long-term or deep-rooted conflict. Conflict management as a concept has been widely applied in business and organizational settings to describe the processes and efforts to manage the negative implications and manifestations of conflict. It encompasses all strategies employed to prevent, accommodate or settle conflict situations. Otite and Albert (1999) argued that conflict management may be perceived as a wider concept involving conflict resolution and transformation when necessitated, and it is more of a long-term arrangement involving institutionalized provisions and regulative procedures for dealing with conflicts whenever they occur. Conflict in tertiary institutions is inescapable as it exists at every level of the academic world. Conflict is an unavoidable aspect of modern life. "Why the conflict" and "what causes conflict" have always been heart-rending questions posed by many people. However, Tjosvold (1993) in Kreitner, Kinicki and Buelens (2002) provides some answers to the above questions when he posited that change begets conflict, conflict begets change and challenges us to do better. These major trends conspire to make organizational conflict inevitable. While conflict can be negative and cause deep rifts in the framework of the institution, it can also be used as a tool to take the institution and the people in it from the level of stagnation to a new level of effectiveness. What makes the difference is conflict management ability and strategy of the institutions' administrators. Acquisition of ability and skills to manage conflict is a critical investment in improving how organizations can adapt and take advantage of change. Managing conflict well does not insulate organizations from change nor does it mean that such organizations will always come out on top or get what they want. In the words of Otite and Albert (1999), conflict can hardly be discussed outside the concept of pluralism. Quoting Smootha (1975), Otite and Albert pointed out that both pluralism and conflict are related in complex ways. According to them, recent and current ideas of pluralism regard it as multidisciplinary and multidimensional, and defined in the context of cultural diversity and social segmentation of an encapsulating society. A plural society is thus characterized by co-existing but distinct cultural diversities and compulsory social institutions which determine and guide the individual and group behaviours.

It is worthy of note that tertiary institutions comprising universities, polytechnics, Colleges of Technology and Colleges of Education, occupy important positions in academia and play pivotal roles in the development of the nation through the provision of well groomed manpower. As earlier stated, there cannot be progress without peace. By implication, peace and progress are interwoven and by inference, no meaningful development can take place in a conflict ridden system. Since the inception of higher institutions in Nigeria, they have had to cope with one form of crisis or the other ranging from

students/authority conflicts, staff/ authority conflicts, academic staff union of universities (or COEASU and ASUP) authority conflicts among others (Aduke, 2005).

MEANING AND NATURE OF CONFLICT

Conflict is a term that can be defined and interpreted in several ways. It is based on incompatibility of goals and interest which arises from opposing behaviours. It involves individuals and groups in organizations like tertiary institutions. Most definitions of conflict tend to be associated with negative features and situations which give rise to inefficiency, ineffectiveness or dysfunctional consequences. Many scholars describe conflict as a disagreement between two people or groups. In discussing the term, Iwuozor (2007) defined conflict as a situation in which conditions, practices or the goals of different participants are inherently incompatible. That means it is a type of behaviour when two or more parties are in oppositions as a result of perceived relative deprivation of organizational activities. For example, in a school system comprising students, lecturers, and workers, certain category of people might feel they are not being carried along by the management. This in itself can result in conflict. Thompson (1998) in Rahim (2001) seems to have a divergent view when he defined conflict as the perception of differences of interests among people. He opined that when two or more social entities (individuals, groups and organizations) come in contact with one another in attaining their objectives, their relationships may become incompatible or inconsistent.

Magagula (2003) is among those scholars who described conflict as a serious disagreement, struggle, and fight arising out of differences of opinions, wishes, needs, values and interests between and among individuals and groups. Invariably, it implies a struggle between and among individuals or groups over values and claims to scarce resources, status symbols, and power bases. The objective of the individuals or groups engaged in conflict is to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals so that they can enjoy the scarce resources, the status symbols and power bases. Conflict is prevalent within and between social relations such as families, ethnic groups, social institutions and organizations to mention a few. It is also prevalent in situations where the goals, aspirations, interests, and needs of the social groups cannot be achieved simultaneously and the value systems of such groups are at variance.

Conflict can be defined as the existence of non-compatibility or disagreements between two actors (Individuals, groups, organizations or nations) in their interaction over the issues of interests, values, beliefs, emotions, goals, space, positions, scarce resources etc. According to Bhaskaran (2003), conflict is "any situation or process in which two or more social entities are linked by at least one form of antagonistic psychological relation or at least one form of antagonistic interaction". Also, Bhaskaran (2003) beheld conflict as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources, a struggle in which the aims of opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals". Galtung (1992) described conflict as some type of incompatibility in which one goal stands in the way of another. He explained that conflict may take two forms. In the less crystallized form it is an incompatibility between the objective interests of parties in a society. In its crystallized form it is an incompatibility between the subjective goals of action in a society. Attitudes and behaviour are usually assumed to be negative when they are related to conflict. Having been able to give a definitional meaning of conflict, it is imperative to consider the nature as well.

Conflict could be functional or dysfunctional, affective or cognitive, constructive or destructive, positive or negative depending on the issues involved and how it was managed (Chukwusa, 2009). The contrasting types of conflict are synonymous with the exception of affective and cognitive conflicts. However, we shall briefly highlight on the mentioned types of conflict for better understanding. Constructive conflict refers to a conflict which has more benefits than costs. That is, one that pulls people together, strengthens and improves their relationship by redefining it in a more useful way and one that leads to positive change in all the parties involved. It is comparable with destructive conflict which has largely negative results – pushing people apart, destroying relationships and leading to negative changes including escalation of violence, fear and distrust. Destructive conflict exists when there is a threat to the whole group and the goals of the group are being subverted by the conflict (Deutsch, 1973). Destructive conflict diverts energy from the real task, destroys morale, polarizes individuals and groups, deepens differences, obstructs cooperative action, produces irresponsible behaviour, creates suspicion and distrust and decreases productivity (Deutsch, 1973).

Consequences of conflict, whether positive or negative largely dependent upon the type of differences that lead to the disagreement. While disagreements among group members are bound to occur, so long as they focus on substantive issue related differences of opinion, they tend to improve group effectiveness. Conflict theorists call these types of disagreements cognitive conflict (Ratzburg, 2008). As group members gather to make important decisions, they bring along with them different ideas, opinions and perspectives to the table. Cognitive conflict occurs as group members examine, compare and reconcile substantive issue related differences. Without cognitive conflict, group decisions are little more than the decisions of a group's most vocal or influential member. Cognitive conflict is beneficial because it requires groups to engage in activities that are essential to a group's effectiveness. Cognitive conflict focuses attention on assumptions that may underlie a particular issue and which are often ignored. Cognitive conflict improves the quality of group decisions and plays an important role in the promotion of acceptance of a decision among the group members. Cognitive conflict builds understanding and commitment to the group's goals and decisions (Ratzburg, 2008). Whereas cognitive conflict may be seen as useful, some conflicts can also be harmful. Conflict can provoke so much animosity among group members that decision quality actually declines along with the commitment and understanding necessary to get the decision successfully implemented. Such conflicts are called affective conflict, which in the opinion of Ratzburg (2008), lowers group effectiveness by provoking hostility, distrust, cynicism and apathy among group members. Most affective conflict, according to Ratzburg (2008) focuses on personalized anger or resentment usually directed at specific individuals rather than specific ideas. It undermines group effectiveness by preventing groups from engaging in the kinds of activities that are critical to group effectiveness. Affective conflict therefore fosters cynicism, distrust and avoidance thereby obstructing open communication and integration. It breeds apathy and unwillingness to engage in discussions necessary to synthesize group different perspectives (Chukwusa, 2009).

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF CONFLICT IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

It is worthy of note that tertiary institutions comprising universities, polytechnics, Colleges of Technology and Colleges of Education, occupy important position in academia and play pivotal roles in the development of the nation through the provision of well groomed manpower. As earlier stated: "there cannot be progress without peace". By implication, peace and progress are interwoven and by inference, no meaningful development can take place in a conflict ridden system. Since the inception of higher institutions in Nigeria, they have had to cope with one form of crisis or the other ranging from students/authority conflicts, staff/ authority conflicts, academic staff union of universities (or COEASU and ASUP) authority conflicts among others (Aduke, 2005).

Conflicts within the Nigerian tertiary institutions have produced gradual disruption and perhaps eventual paralysis of academic activities in campuses. It has been observed that currently tertiary institutions in Nigeria do not have a uniform academic calendar and resumption date. For instance, in 2003 a whole session (two semesters) was wasted due to six months ASUU strike. In 2010 there was a repeat of the scenario when the Achuzie lead ASUU went on indefinite strike that lasted for months. These scenarios did not augur well for the students and other stakeholders in the education industry as it took the plea of well meaning Nigerians for ASUU and government to shift grounds and call off the strike action. Apart from ASUU, other academic and non-academic staff unions in the other levels of the tertiary institutions like ASUP (in the Polytechnics), COEASU (in the Colleges of Education), NASU, SSANU and SATHRAI were not left out in the incessant strike actions. COEASU and ASUP have gone on strike to pressurize the government to approve their agitation for 65 years retirement age for their members. The non-academic staff union and student union bodies are also involved in the conflict situations that mar the activities of tertiary institutions (Chukwusa, 2009).

Efah and Mensa-Bonsu (2003) remarked that conflict is a common occurrence in academic and other institutions. Conflict is classified into destructive and constructive conflicts on the basis of the conflict process. According to Deutsch (1973) a conflict clearly has destructive consequences if its participants are dissatisfied with the outcomes and they feel they have lost as a result of the conflict. Similarly, a conflict has productive consequences if the participants are satisfied with their outcomes and feel that they have not lost as a result of the conflict. Destructive conflicts tend to escalate a cyclic conflict and violence and may develop conflict helix. However, Deutsch's explanation points out that conflict can be

transformed into productive, if it is dealt with in a cooperative rather than in a competitive way. Cooperative behaviour springs out when the conflicting parties understand the nature and dynamics of conflict, dispels the misconception of conflict as complex, violent, destructive, threatening, humiliating and dangerous; and develops the knowledge, skills and the ways of dealing with conflicts.

In his analysis of conflict and sources of conflict, Chowdhury (2003) reiterated that feelings of injustice or deprivation give rise to conflict. These feelings may have some real basis or it may be only because of some false or imaginary ideas. Sometimes false ego gives rise to conflict. Conflicts are also created or imposed upon by interested persons or groups for some ulterior motives to make some gain out of it. Peretomode (1997) subscribed to the view of other scholars that conflict is inevitable in group relationships. He argued and posited that conflict management is an important aspect of organizational behaviour which is the field of study that considers the behaviour of the individuals and the small group as units of analysis in organization as people interact to achieve individual, group and organizational goals.

In discussing the sources or causes of organizational conflict, this paper focuses attention on interpersonal and inter-group conflicts. There are several sources of conflict which scholars have categorized according to their perception or conflict situations before them. Whereas Reitz (1977) classified sources of conflict into four factors which include personal, interdependence, differences in goals and differences in perceptions, Peretomode (1997) classified sources of conflict into two broad categories as structural and non-structural factors. By structural factors, Peretomode meant conflict that arises from the structure and design features in the organization and its interrelated parts. Therefore structural sources of conflict include work interdependence, mutual dependence on limited resources, differences in unit orientations and goals, differences in performance criteria and reward systems, differences in status, and jurisdictional ambiguities. By non-structural factors, Peretomode meant sources of conflict within the organization that are not a consequence of the design of the organization. In other words, the non-structural factors could be referred to as personal or behavioural sources of conflict and they include personal traits, differences in background, differences in values, poor communication skills, differences in perceptions, differing view points, emotions and attitudes.

- *Power and Status Differences* gives birth to conflict when one individual has questionable influence over another. People might engage in conflict to increase their power or status in organization.
- *Goal Differences* sometimes occur because people are pursuing different goals. This conflict situation in individual work units are a natural part of any organization.
- *Communication Breakdown* may be derived from differences in speaking styles, writing styles and non-verbal communication styles.

Faulty communication leads to misperception and misunderstanding that can lead to long-standing conflict.

Having seen the views of some scholars on sources of conflict in formal organizations, other areas of conflict include the politics of appointing principal officers like Provosts, Rectors, Vice Chancellors, Bursars, Registrars and Librarians. Personality traits which encapsulate resistance to change also contribute to conflict issues. Sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination are not excluded from sources of conflict in tertiary institutions. Delay in promotion of personnel, non-payment of approved allowances, and inappropriate implementation of approved academic programmes, arbitrariness and highhandedness of administrators result in staff/authority conflict, cheating and denial of rights, and over-ambition on the part of some people without consideration for others.

These conflicts, as earlier said mentioned usually lead to disruption of academic activities and university calendars hence the need to search for a proper conflict management strategies in Nigerian tertiary institutions to stem the tide.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Spangler (2003) opined that conflict management involves the control but not resolution of a long-term or deep-rooted conflict. This is the approach taken when complete resolution seems to be impossible yet something needs to be done. In cases of resolution-resistant or even intractable conflict, it is possible to manage the situation in ways that make it more constructive and less destructive. In propounding a theory toward managing organizational conflict, Rahim (2002) asserted that the management of organizational conflict involves the diagnosis of and intervention in affective and substantive conflicts.

Conflict management is often considered to be distinct from conflict resolution. The latter refers to resolving the dispute or disagreement to the approval of one or both parties involved, whereas the former concerns an ongoing process that may never have a resolution neither is it considered as conflict transformation which seeks to reframe the positions of the conflict parties. In other words, there is a difference between resolving a conflict and managing a conflict. Resolving a conflict ends the dispute by satisfying the interests of both parties. Although, Otite and Albert (1999) affirmed that in some respects the concepts of conflict resolution, conflict transformation and conflict management overlap both in content and in practice, managing a conflict contains specialized interaction that prevents a dispute from becoming a destructive battle. Managing a conflict attends to the personal issues so as to allow for a constructive relationship even though the objective issues may not be resolvable. Therefore, the goal of conflict management is to intervene in ways that make the ongoing conflict more beneficial and less damaging to both parties. Conflict management could also be described as the process of planning to avoid conflict where possible and organizing to resolve conflict where it does happen, as rapidly and smoothly as possible. Peretomode (1997) viewed conflict as a phenomenon that is inevitable in every organization and cannot be eliminated entirely and since school managers or administrators must live with conflict whether interpersonal or inter-group, the best attitude an effective and efficient Chief Executive should have towards it, is to recognize its inevitabilities in the workplace and develop an understanding of the ways of managing, minimizing and resolving it. An uncontrolled conflict may lead to organizational chaos. Consequently, the management of conflict involves evolving ways to balance conflict and cooperation within the organization.

Conflict management strategy is an operational plan to achieve a conflict goal. It is the label for the variety of ways by which people handle grievances in an organization by standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Nevertheless, there is no single solution to conflicts. Each one of them is unique and has to be handled differently. Although there are some general rules or approaches to a conflict, the College also adopts some methods which inferentially are deduced from the general rules. Such methods include panel and committee decisions, application of policies and guidelines (otherwise referred to as reading of riot acts).

CONCLUSION

This paper has extensively diagnosed the causes and consequences of conflict in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This paper seeks to re-emphasize the need to adopt a pragmatic approach to conflict issues and be ready to accept functional conflict as an agent of change in organization as a system. It also seeks to disabuse the insinuations that conflict is entirely bad and should be eliminated or avoided. The paper viewed conflict in the light of the contemporary theory that conflict should be managed strategically to elicit new ideas capable of introducing organizational competitive advantage through the process of inter-personal and inter-group interactions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is worthy to note that no single conflict management strategy can be recommended for adoption in all situations. This is due to the fact that the appropriateness of a strategy is contingent on the type and size of organization. Albeit, in order to minimize the incidence of intergroup conflicts in the tertiary institutions, the educational statutory agencies (NUC, NCCE, NBTE) are urged to train the administrators on the acquisition and appropriate utilization of conflict management strategies/skills. The intended training could be by way of regular seminars, workshops and conferences on the subject matter. Also award in cash or kind could be given to the most peaceful institution to serve as incentive and encouragement to institutions pursuing peaceful coexistence in their academic communities. In the same vein a drastic measure should be taken against the most turbulent institution to serve a deterrent to other institutions that find it difficult to strangle the evil consequences of conflict in their academic environment. The paper suggests the establishment of a Conflict Management Committee to promote conflict prevention and to implement a conflict management process to deal with conflict as it arises.

The administrators of the institutions could on their part organize seminars, workshops and conferences on conflict and its management strategies for the representatives of the various groups and people in the academic communities at intervals. The emphasis should be on maintenance of cordial

relationship among the rank and files in the workplace, capacity building and management of diversity in the world of work. It is also our humble recommendation that conflict management skill should be a prerequisite parameter for appointing chief executives and/or managers of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

The appointment of principal officers must strictly follow laid down procedures which should not be politicized or mocked at in any way.

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