

RETROSPECTIVE VIEW OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: ITS CAUSES, IMPLICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is a multi-dimensional element that is common in any workplace and society at large. The fight to eliminate conflict in the workplace and society is a sure to lose battle- this is speaking on the inevitable propensity with which it is seen. Therefore, this theoretical paper focuses on x-raying the imminent causes of conflicts in the workplace, its implication and how they can be managed to strengthen organizational prosperity. The study find out amongst others that conflict is both constructive- that is, it can lead to organizational growth and destructive- which means it can put the organizational activities to a halt. This finding, in course of reviewing literatures tends to be consistent with other findings. The study recommends amongst others that management should periodically train workers on emotional intelligent courses to reduce personality clash in the workplace. Also the study encourages clear and effective communication amongst organizational actors to avoid communication breakdown.

Keywords: Conflict, conflict management, constructive conflict and destructive conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The existence of conflict is as old as the existence of man and its first prevalence is traceable back to the Garden of Eden. Conflict was observed in the conversation between the first two creatures- Adam and Eve on the issues relating to the eating of the fruit. This exposition is made clearer from the definition of conflict by Baridam & Nwibere (2008), conflict is perceived as processes that begin when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected or is about to negatively affect something the first party cares about. Therefore, it's to be noted that the starting point of every conflict is latent. That is, whatever action been expressed verbally or otherwise are first of all preconceived from the inside.

From the foregoing it is therefore clear that conflict is not a new societal or organizational concept. The prevalence of conflicts in the workplace, and in the society generally is alarming and has created new pronged approaches of avoiding the costly and destructive implications resulting from the relationship dysfunction.

Focusing on conflict in the organization- the workplace, it's obvious that every employee comes into the organization with diverse needs, and sees the organization as a path through which such needs could be satisfied. In a bid to satisfying these needs individuals and groups get engaged in conflict either over distribution of resources, wealth, power or positions (Baridam & Nwibere 2008). It is on this background Zaleznik (1989) opined that because people come together to satisfy a wide array of psychological needs, social relations in general are awash with conflict.

Studies have shown and it's a proven fact that conflict is inevitable. Conflict can occur at any point in time and amongst any group of persons or individuals without alarming warning signs. Burton (1972) trailed this line of thought in his allegorical statement that "conflict, like sex, is an essential creative element in human relationship.

It has been a general thought pattern that whenever conflict is mentioned, it is always associated with the negative outcome, but it is to be noted that conflict produces a dual resultant effects, it can be instrumental to societal and organizational growth. It can also hamper the effectiveness of any system. It is the means to change, the means by which our social values of welfare, security, justice and opportunities for personal development can be achieved.

Therefore, this paper is a clarion call for executives and managers of organization to stop the fight against trying to eliminate conflict in their firms but rather seek pragmatic and workable approaches to adopt in managing conflict to strengthen their human relations in the workplace so as to enhance the growth of their firms.

Causes of Conflict in the Workplace

Literatures have captured spectrum of elements and issues leading to conflict in the workplace. These elements have been categorized with different names by authorities as it best explains their perspectives: to some the causes of conflict are either remote or immediate, while others categorized them under manifest causes of conflict and latent cause of conflict (Baridam & Nwibere 2008). They further revealed that- manifest causes are based on the idea that parties to the conflict have "reasons" which they verbalize for undertaking conflict activities. On the other hand-Latent causes holds that the basic forces that impel people to act in certain ways are objective, structural conditions of which the people may not even be aware, nor verbalize as reasons for their actions. To Kreitner (1990), all these elements are referred to as "conflict triggers". According to him, a conflict trigger is a circumstance that increases the chances of inter-group or interpersonal conflict. However, researches conducted over time on conflict have shown general continuum and common ground in the workplaces where conflict has resulted. Ifabua (2000), enumerate them to include:

Wages: it has been the thinking of employee to see corporate profit as the result of their sweat, therefore, a reasonable percentage of which should accrue to them as remuneration. This has been the reason for many industrial actions of strike and protest by workers most especially when employers ignores and fails to implement collective bargaining agreement reached between union and management. Moreso, Baridam & Nwibere (2008) reposition our attention on this to know that worker-worker conflict could also result from complaint of internal inequity in remuneration. This is one basic issue Fayols' fourteen (14) management principle sort to address.

Job/role conflict: Most times conflicts prevail in the workplace as to who should do this and that even when there is a well structured scalar-chain and job description. This is due to the general believe workers hold- that different pay are assigned to different jobs, it is not surprising to find an employee or group of employees holding on to a particular job to safeguard their future in the organization. Schulz and Johnson (1971), Oaklander and Flesman (1964) In Baridam and Nwibere (2008) also stated that an individual's role in an organization can have a major effect on conflict to which he is subjected.

Goal/Conflicting Objectives: the focus of managers is most times on efficiency on the system to maximize profit whereas; to the employees their concern is to meet their needs through the organization. This to a great extent result to conflict as employee may go against such organizational policies and programs in pursuit of the general goal of the organization. Conflict may also occur between line managers of various units whose policies, interest and priorities often differ, though collectively, they are geared towards corporate effectiveness.

Environmental Factors: during an economic recession such as Nigerian current state, when consumers purchase power is seriously weakened down ward, fluctuation in the market, for a firm, represents a threat to job security for workers. Apart from threat of increasing agitation and confrontation by unions, intra-union conflicts may also result if the rank and file believes their leaders are not doing enough to secure their jobs.

Authority and Power: the tussle amongst employee of who should head who in the office is a great element that has hiking the rate of organizational conflict.

Also, consistent with the call of industrial democracy by workers, employees increasingly seek to have more say in decision that affects them, the objective couple with resentment by subordinates of always having others supervising them, are possible sources of work place conflict.

Nature of Work: the socio-technical work environment that characterizes modern organizations often leads to boring jobs, with little control over pace of work due to the individual work and minimal responsibility or group identity. In that context, the probability of non-realistic conflict (Tension release) resulting is quite high. Moreso, in addition to the revealed knowledge by Ifabua on the common issues that result conflict in the typical Nigerian workplace- Kreitner (1990) also identifies; communication breakdown, unrealized expectation, competition for scarce resources, time pressure, personality clash, unreasonable standards, rules, policies, or procedures among others as conflict triggers in the workplace according to his words.

Amongst several conflict triggers mentioned by Ifabua which includes communication breakdown- he added that communication is a complex process beset by barriers, these barriers often provokes conflict. It is easy to misunderstand another person or group of people if two-way communication is hampered in some way.

Still driving home the relevant of effective communication and how its breakdown can result to conflict Mukoro (2013) assert that Communication between management and staff can increase their involvement in organizational activities, as well as, their commitment to the main objectives of the organization. As noted by Ezeocha (1989), a communication network is an important part of decision-making. In a simplified stimulus response situation a message is sent out to the environment based on an expectation about how the environment behaves. When the environment responds, an adjustment can be made if any errors were detected in previous expectations. Communication thus enables people to attempt to create a common understanding between them. Through communication, management can easily secure the agreement and commitment of staff and their representatives to the organization's objectives, plans and policies.

According to Lesley (1978), information is not one-way and should not be conceived as a mere instrument of relaying orders from the management to "passive" workers. Rather, it is something that should be upward, downward and horizontal. Admittedly, in any

organizational setup good communication is essential for raising the level of employee motivation (Clark, Ross & Shackleton, 1993 in Mokuro 2013). In the absence of full and accurate information transmitted through formal channels, uncertainty and rumour may become widespread. Good communication can also significantly reduce feelings of neglect, disempowerment and alienation by increasing a sense of belonging and importance. Communication is an important variable that determines healthy and cordial relationship in workplace.

On a different line of thought Hunger (1976) in support of Kreitner's view expressed that unrealized expectation can cause dissatisfaction when not met, He describes such condition as 'frustration' which is an attitude problem that often cause conflict in the organization. Haven enumerated and discussed much on the likely causes of conflict, a sensible question should be what its implications to individual and organization are.

In addition to Ifabua and Kreitner's opinion of element that causes conflict. There are also some latent causes of conflict which includes organizational structural complexity and cultural differences. Scott and El-Assal (1969) made a contribution to that effect with an illustration that size of student's body was the best predictor of the incidence of student's demonstration and protest in United State Universities during 1964-1965. Large organizations have more conflict because the larger the organization, the greater the absolute number of those with disposition to political activities, and the stronger their mutual support.

Implications of conflict in the workplace

As pointed out earlier in this paper, the outcome of conflict is multi-dimensional; it is positive or negative, constructive or destructive. Base on this it was championed that rather than for managers to think of eliminating conflict in the workplace, they should seek possible way to manage and channel the strength exerted on conflict for organizational growth.

Constructive Conflict

Substantial literatures have proven that not every conflict is negative and destructive. Baridam & Nweberi (2008) is of the view that creatively managed conflict can shake people out of their mental ruts and give them new frameworks, new assumptions, and new point of view.

Mokoru (2013), holds that when these continuum causing conflict and its manifest exhibitions are properly managed, it help to strengthen Industrial/organizational harmony. Industrial/organizational harmony refers to a friendly and cooperative agreement on working relationships between employers and employees for their mutual benefit (Laden, 2012). According to Puttapalli and Vuram (2012), industrial/organizational harmony is concerned with the relationship between management and employees with respect to the terms and conditions of employment in the work place. In effect, it is a situation where employees and management cooperate willingly in pursuit of the organization's aims and objectives.

Baridam & Nweberi (2008) further revealed that conflict when creatively managed can enhance group performance, because conflict is an antidote to groupthink. Moreso, they maintain that conflict provides the platform by which problems can be aired and tensions released, and foster an environment of self-evaluation and change. Conflict also helps to improve the quality of decision making. Conflict challenges the status quo and, therefore,

further the creation of new ideas, promotes reassessment of group goals and activities, and increases the probability that the group will respond to change (Robbins, 2001).

Additively, there is evidence indicating that conflict can also be positively related to productivity. It was demonstrated that among established groups, performance tended to improve more when there was conflict among members than when there was fairly close agreement (Baridam & Nweberi 2008). Researches have shown similar results: groups composed of members with different interest tend to produce higher quality solutions to a variety of problems than do homogenous groups (Hall and Williams 1966 in Baridam & Nweberi 2008).

Destructive conflict

Conflict in line with the general notion and perception- can be highly destructive to any system and the workplace is not an exception especially conflict at its manifest stage. It's obvious and quite uncomfortable, to be in an environment where two co-workers are continually hostile towards each other. The resultant effect when not properly managed can result to a destructive tendency in the workplace.

Group/system ineffectiveness is one observable tendency of destructive conflict. Wall and Callister (1974) aver that uncontrolled opposition breeds discontent, which acts to dissolve common ties and, eventually, leads to the destruction of group. At the extreme, conflict can bring group functioning to a halt and potentially threaten the group's survival (Robbins, 2001:395).

In addition, Kreitner (1990) posits that the symptoms of dysfunctional conflict include indecision, resistance to change, destructive emotional outburst, apathy, and increased political maneuvering. Among the more undesirable consequences are a retarding communication, reductions in group cohesiveness, and subordination of group goals to the primacy of infighting among members. Schermerborn, Hunt and Osborn, (1982) corroborated by saying destructive conflicts reduces group effectiveness by decreasing work productivity and satisfaction which leads to increase in absenteeism and turnover. These are the onslaught faced by every organization when conflicts are not properly handled.

THE WAY FORWARD!

Conflict management strategies

Due to the disturbing tendencies of destructive conflict on the organizational prosperity and the effective working of any system, overtime, managers and conflict resolution strategists have made attempt to reveal some workable strategies which can be adopted to manage conflict in the workplace.

Bruce (2014), in project management book guide, enumerated five conflict management techniques that are captured in many literatures.

Withdraw/Avoid Conflict Management Technique

Definition: "Retreating from an actual or potential conflict situation; postponing the issue to be better prepared or to be resolved by others."

If you are prone to outbursts of anger, withdraw/avoid can be an excellent technique. By withdrawing, you have the opportunity to come up with better ideas to address the conflict. Temporarily avoiding the conflict also means you have the chance to think through the other person's situation.

While withdrawing and avoiding is valuable in the short term, it can be over used. If you retreat from a conflict situation and fail to follow up, the conflict is likely to become worse over time. Withdrawing and avoiding also works well as a self-management technique.

Smooth/Accommodate Conflict Management

PMBOK Definition: "Emphasizing areas of agreement rather than areas of difference; conceding one's position to the needs of others to maintain harmony and relationships." This approach recognizes the importance of professional relationships to project success. On long term projects, anything over a few weeks, persevering and strengthening the project team becomes very important. After all, project team members are constantly emphasizing differences; making progress on the project becomes very difficult.

Areas of agreement to emphasize will vary depending on the context. You can look at shared commitment to the project and how disagreement impacts others on the team. You may also want to reference areas of agreement that surfaced during other stages of the project. Successfully using smoothing and accommodating requires understanding of the parties in conflict. For example, are the parties truly upset about a work package being one day late? Or is there a deeper source of conflict? As a manager, nobody expects you to have the capabilities of a therapist (though that level of empathy is certainly helpful).

Compromise/Reconcile Conflict Management

Definition: "Searching for solutions that bring some degree of satisfaction to all parties in order to temporarily or partially resolve the conflict." The compromise technique recognizes that some conflicts cannot be fully solved. For example, you may have an ambitious developer who is interested in learning the Sales force interface deeply and asks to go on a week-long training session. Based on your analysis of the schedule, that type of training would cause significant problems for the schedule. A compromise solution in that case would be to arrange a different training arrangement such as a briefing with an expert from Sales force and a \$100 budget to buy books about the technology. In this situation, the developer obtains partial satisfaction and the manager largely maintains the project schedule.

The compromise and reconcile technique does have some drawbacks. To successfully use this method, the manager needs to understand the needs of the person or stakeholder. The manager also has to be willing to make changes to their project. For compromise to be successful, each party needs to benefit and sacrifice part of their objectives.

Force/Direct Conflict Management

Definition: "Pushing one's viewpoint at the expense of others; offering only win-lose solutions, usually enforced through a power position to resolve an emergency." This technique is what Baridam & Nwibere captured as Smoothing technique. From time to time, managers have to take a stand and apply their power. For example, a project manager in a construction environment may force staff to complete safety training and wear company

assigned safety equipment. In that context, safety procedures protect the individual and the team.

As the PMBOK definition above suggests, applying force to resolve conflicts comes at a cost. Specifically, the project manager is likely to harm relationships with the project team by using this method. Abuse or overuse of this technique tends to cause more conflict in the long term. Use the force/direct conflict management technique only when absolutely required.

Collaborate/Problem Solve Conflict Management

Definition: “Incorporating multiple viewpoints and insights from differing perspectives; requires a cooperative attitude and open dialogue that typically leads to consensus and commitment.” The collaboration and problem solving approach to conflict is the most productive technique in my view. This technique has two major benefits; the conflict itself is solved and the project team is strengthened as a by-product of working to solve the problem. This technique is most likely to be successful in situations where the project team already has a high level of trust.

Among conflict management techniques, collaboration has one major disadvantage. Of all the techniques covered in this article, creative problem solving takes the most time and energy. If interpersonal skills are not your strength, you may find this technique very challenging.

DISCUSSION

Despite the disturbing issues associated with conflict as revealed by literatures. This study still maintains that conflict is one of the basic ingredients in the effective operation of an organization. Supporting this position Baridam & Nwibere (2008) added that studies of professional- systems analysts and research and development scientists- support the constructive value of conflict. They further posit that an investigation of 22 teams of system analysts found that more incompatible groups were likely to be more productive. Interestingly, research and development scientists have been found to be most productive when there is a certain amount of intellectual conflict (Pelz and Andrews, 1966). This claim however does not eliminate the fact that conflict expressed violently, that is, conflict at the manifest stage when not managed properly can negatively affect the organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of conclusion and findings derived from review of related literatures in this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Given the propensity for periodic conflict in human relationship in the workplace, open, consistent and courteous communication is encouraged in the workplace as it sets the stage for industrial harmony and the realization of the organization's objectives. All staff and management should be instructed in the existing links of communication: who to report to, who to give instructions to, where to get what from and who is to be given what. The place of effective communication cannot be over emphasized. Be very clear and straightforward what you expect from the other person. Don't always expect the other person to understand everything on his own.

2. Management should set or decide an equitable wage/ remuneration packages for its workers and do well to respect, implement agreement reached through collective bargaining.
3. Management should periodically organize workshops to train their workers on emotional intelligence as this would aid to curtail inter-individual conflict resulting from personality clash in the workplace.
4. To reduce the propensity of employer-employee conflict in the workplace, employee should make demands that are realistic and employers on the other hand should be considerate in formulating its organizational policies. That is to say, management should consider the cultural practice and value system inherent in the environment where the business is located before formulating its organizational policies.

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