

Conflict and Conflict Management: It's Role in Work Environment

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of conflict and conflict management in work environment. We say that in every work environment there is always the tendency for conflict to arise as long as people of different background interact. Conflict was found to be a universal phenomenon and so it is inevitable. What happens during the interaction of these people informed the need to investigate conflict and conflict management in work environment and its consequences. The epistemological bases of the discourse derive from the conceptual framework. The paper discusses the meaning of conflict, conflict management as well as possible causes of conflicts in work environment. It also looked at the dark side of conflict explaining the individual behavior under conflict situation. It was found that when we are in conflict, we tend to say things we do not mean and mean things we do not say, and that conflict arises when individual's expectation is negatively affected. We found that conflict is neither bad nor good depending on how it is handled. The paper peeped into available means of managing conflict in work environment which some involved statutory provisions of the Trade Union Dispute Decree 7 of 1976 in the case of Nigeria. It is not healthy not to experience conflict in work environment because it can be beneficial to the organization. The paper concludes that every forms of disaffection which leads to conflict in work environment should be eliminated.

Keywords: conflict, conflict management, work environment, parties to dispute, settlement.

Introduction

There is yet to be known any organization where conflict is not experienced. As long as there are two or three or more people working together in an organization, conflict is bound to arise as a result of interaction between these people. No man is an island to himself. Consequently, as Abieyi (2009:282) has noted, absolutely peaceful and harmonious organization does not exist anywhere, more so, it is not only unrealistic but it could also mean that there is "no real life process" in that organization. This however explains why the interaction of people with different backgrounds, views, values, needs and personality traits within an organizational system is bound to set into motion, a variety of conflicts. This means that conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life in that it is to be expected at any time in any dynamic organization. It is pertinent to state that when conflicts are handled sensibly, it can be beneficial to the organization. No doubt, conflict does have its advantages as well as disadvantages in organization. Conflict where it is well managed can bring about an immense understanding within the workplace so that the behavioral goal would be towards reducing its adverse effect which, otherwise, would be disastrous. The dynamism of conflict in work environment is its enormous capacity to grow or ruin the organization due to its inevitability. This paper examines Conflict and Conflict Management: Its role in work environment. In doing so, the discourse will be based on the conceptual framework, that is, the concept of conflict, and conflict management, and the probable causes of conflicts in work environment and the various methods to resolve or manage conflict as it arises, especially in working environment.

Concept of Conflict

Conflict is not restricted to any one particular location: it has a universal phenomenon. What that simply means is that conflict as a phenomenon is known to human societies all over the world (Ojiji, 2009:116). One definition of conflict says that it is disagreement between two or more parties over the same issue, which has alternative course of action (Freham, 1964). This has to do with the individual perspective on issues that have arisen in the course of interaction as to the necessary course of action to be taken. This calls for compromise between the parties involved in conflict in the work environment. Conflict is the process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party (Nnaindi, Offiong and Tonwe, 2009:339). Conflict results at any time when one's interests are encroached upon or adversely affected.

D.J. Francis, (2009:20) sees conflict as an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence. One common feature with conflict within the existence of humans is that it is inevitable. Human beings exist to

interact and work together in a common setting such as work environment, school environment, markets, church, etc. even within families. For instance, families do experience conflict, especially between husband and wife but when it goes to the dimension where divorce is threaten, then the conflict has assume a higher dimension of crisis. Hence we say the marriage is in crisis requiring intervention in order to prevent a complete breakdown of such marriage. The same thing happens in work environment. When conflict has arisen, there has to be intervention by someone more experienced to settle both parties with conflicting views. According to Edosa and Agbadudu (2004) conflict is simply a disagreement. It is as a result of inability to reach compatibility with another person or to have a meeting of minds. In their views, conflict is natural to arise within and outside the organization but what is crucial to it is the skill to manage it in order to prevent its adverse effect in the work environment. Aibieyi (2009:283) has opined that conflict in an organization ranges from minor disagreement between workers, subordinates with superiors, superior and superior, and worker with management. Conflict varies in dimension and according to Aibieyi (2009) in work environment; there are symptoms of conflicts which could be explained in the following: queries, dismissal, strike actions, demonstrations or protests, etc. the existence of these symptoms is crucial in that they could impact positively and negatively on the organization.

Conflict Management

The concept of conflict management leads to the understanding of the processes of conflict management in work environment. Defining conflict management, (Nnamcli. et al. 2009:339) asserted that it is the interventions that alter the level and form of conflict in ways that maximize its benefits and minimize its dysfunctional consequences. The definition, no doubt, refers to positive use of conflict in work environment with a view to achieving a- positive results, and while on the other hand it reduces the negative effect of conflict. Shedrack Gaya Best (2009:95) says that conflict management is the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict. Sometimes conflict management may be used interchangeably in work environment with “conflict regulation”. Every organization has its own methods or clauses in their work policy rules to resolve conflict within the organization which the workforce must strictly adhere to. For example, in the University of Benin, the common method to resolve conflict between superior and subordinates or between subordinates whether teaching or non-teaching staff, is recourse to disciplinary committee for final resolution. The stage begins with query and room for defense before going to disciplinary committee where there is dissatisfaction in the defense of the offender.

Best (2009) noted that conflict management covers the entire area of handling conflicts positively at different stages, including those efforts made to prevent conflict, by being proactive.

According to him, the process encompasses conflict limitation, containment and litigation.

Shedrack Best suggested that perhaps conflict management may be an admission of the reality that conflict is actually inevitable.

Managing conflict in work environment is not left to chance, and it must be managed by a mature mind and experienced than those parties involved in the conflict.

Causes of Conflicts in Work Environment

In Ogunyannwo (2005:175) Daniel Dana has stated with respect to causes of conflict in work environment, that in every relationship, the differences that make us unique individuals are also sources of potential conflict between us. We differ in our values, self-interests, priorities and in many other ways. The greater the differences, the heavier the burden on our ability to manage those differences. The less effectively we manage differences, the more conflict we experience as a result.

What is cardinal in the above assertion is that no matter the friendliness in work environment, conflict still arises because of differences in individual relationship that exist. There is no conflict without cause(s). Consequently, Edosa and Agbadudu (2004:170) have suggested the following probable causes of conflict in work environment:

1. Conflict due to scarce resources which cannot go round everybody. Where it goes round everybody, dissatisfaction or disagreement still arises from the sharing pattern.
2. Conflict due to competition not only for scarce goods and services but also for ideas, attention, recognition, position and status.
3. Conflict due to vertical arrangement of power and authority positions or situation. This is in relation with superior/subordinate relationship or interaction.
4. Conflict based on lateral or cross positioning in reference to staff with equal authority and power.
5. Conflict based on systemic, in which case the different units making up the system are not interacting well. Certain departments or sections in an organization may be found not relating well due to lack of cooperation or a situation where a colleague refused to carry out duty assigned can also generate misunderstanding and conflict.
6. Conflict due to use of power, misunderstanding and/or lack of cooperation.

7. Conflict due to overlapping responsibilities, that is, a situation where there is duplication of workers assignment and a worker does not know what he/she is really to do: also where two persons are assigned the same responsibility at the same time and each one is waiting for the other to do the job.
8. Conflict due to lack of clarity in role play. A staff may not know in exact what constitute his/her role as a schedule.
9. Conflict due to expected desire, a situation where there is a change in what somebody expects.
10. Change in one's position or status can also create a conflict situation, for example, when one is demoted, promoted, upgraded, transferred or one's senior colleague is retired or dismissed, etc (paraphrasing, mine).

Causes of conflict are not restricted to the above listed. In the same vein, Kornhauser (1972) and Aibieyi. (2009) equally listed some causes of conflict in work environment. They include:

1. Conflict due to limited resources - even the most successful companies still find that they have limitation in what they could accomplish.
2. Conflict arising from communication problem develops because all do not have the same information. They take position based on their view of the word and the information and what could be deduced from it.
3. Conflict based on differences in perception - everybody does not see the world the same way consequent upon differences in experience. These differences in view of the world could be a major source of conflict in organization because of value judgment from those views. One of the classic differences in perception involves the value of experience versus the value of education.
4. Conflict due to environment of the organization - organization and environment are interdependent, therefore, elements of the environment can create dilemmas for the organization.
5. Unpleasant job tends to bring about dissatisfaction among workers and this can create room for conflict (paraphrasing, mine).

Causes of conflict in work environment are inexhaustible. The above are just some of them.

The Dark side of Conflict in Work Environment

No one desires to have conflict in his/her domain, however, as ahead} stated, conflict is an inevitable phenomenon since we live in a world of interdependence. Some scholars believe that conflict between management and workers tend to be good when used positively. On the other hand, strikes, and normal operations would be created by conflict (Okojie. 1981). Conflict creates real injury and loss to management, labour and the consumer. People who engage in conflict do experience hostile emotions towards the other party, after the crises have been resolved. Experience shows that when we are in conflict we tend to say things we do not mean and mean things we do not say. Only rarely do we communicate at a deep level whag we really, honestly feel. Our conflicts have the capacity to confuse and hypnotize us and we come to believe that there is no way out other than battle. Conflict possesses a dark, hypnotic, destructive power: the power of attachment when it is time to leave, the power of demonization when it is time to forgive, the power of articulate speed when it is time to be silent or to listen. Conflict alternately strokes and crushes our egos, fuels and exhausts our will, energizes us and freezes us in fear. It speaks to a deep, ancient part of our souls that thirsts for power and delights in revenge (Ogunyannwo, 2005:175). Such is the negative power of conflict but, also, sometimes conflict has the power to generate interesting discussion, critical thinking that leads to more productive decisions in work environment (Aibieyi. 200¹).

It is generally believed that in work environment, conflict is neither good nor bad. However, in any work environment where there is no conflict at all, it is advocated that it should be stimulated for the good, growth and development of that organization cum work environment. This of course, will eliminate dormancy of the individual mind of becoming concur members which can be destructive.

Conflict Management or Resolution

There are different ways of managing conflict in work environment. The common methods or ways are as articulated below:

- (i) Cooperation is one of the ways to manage conflict in work environment. This is where antagonists cease confrontation and adopt cooperation. In this way every disputant decides to open up and relax or release tension,
- (ii) Another way is for one party to decide to make concession: to give and take; to compromise.
- (iii) There may be counseling of both sides, that is, meeting each of the sides separately and cooling nerves and tempers. Separate meetings can also offer one the opportunity of understanding the real issues involved in the dispute or conflict,
- (iv) One may, in addition to the above, resort to the power approach where one use power to suppress one of the sides (Edosa and Agbadudu, 2004).

Some scholars talk about domination as a way of managing conflict; a situation where the most powerful exercises domineering power over the other party to claim victory. This may be an easy way to resolve or manage conflict, but as it is noted in the long-run consequences of that domination may be disastrous as the dissatisfied party may resort to other means to fight back.

Statutory Means of Managing Conflict

In consonance with Trade Dispute Act of 1976, conflict may be resolved in the following ways:

1. Mediation;
2. Conciliation;
3. Arbitration, and
4. National Industrial Court (NIC).

Mediation - Parties to conflict may resort to mediation in the event of inability to reach agreement on their own or settle under an agreed procedure in keeping with sections 3 and 5 of the Industrial act or where no such agreement exist both parties must meet within 7 days under a mediator appointed by the parties to look into the issue involved, and if within the stipulated 7 days the parties are not able to reach agreement to settle, the aggrieved parties have the responsibility to inform the Minister of Labour and Productivity. When the Minister is satisfied that the mediator has failed to resolve the issue after 14 days, he may decide to appoint a Conciliator or on the other hand may chose to refer the matter to National Industrial Court or Industrial Arbitration Panel.

Conciliation - under this procedure efforts are made to reduce hostility by making enquiries into the cause and circumstance of the conflict with a view to bringing about settlement with the parties involved. Once the Conciliator reaches settlement with the parties within 7 days, he in this way under obligation, forwards the terms of settlement to the Minister signed by both parties. In view of that, the terms become binding on the parties, that is, the workers and the employers. A breach of the terms thereafter becomes an offence punishable with a fine of #200 in the case of an employer's union. In continuity of an effort to resolve the dispute, if the conciliator fails to achieve settlement, he report back to the Minister for further necessary action.

Arbitration - at this stage it becomes pertinent for arbitration panel to step into the conflict -dispute. Section 9(1) (a) under the Trade Dispute Decree No. 7 of 1976 gives the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP) 21 days within which the dispute referred to it must be resolved and make award. It is necessary to state that all issues in which conciliator fails to reach settlement are referred to Arbitration Panel to handle. This is the policy practice in Nigeria.

National industrial court (NIC) - is the next stage of the dispute resolution as stipulated by Labour or trade union laws. National Industrial Court was established by Trade Union Dispute Decree No. 7 of 1976 to adjudicate in dispute referred to it by the Minister of Labour and Productivity whence any of the parties files an objection to the rule or decision by the Arbitration Panel within 7 days in which case the Minister again refers the dispute to National Industrial Court whose award or decision shall be binding on both parties. Should there be any appeal to the Federal Court of Appeal it is allowed only on the grounds of human rights (Aibieyi, 2009).

Conclusion

Efforts have been made by the authors to examine the roles of conflict and conflict management in work environment. It reveals that conflict is a universal phenomenon experienced all over the world. In view of its inevitability, managers or leaders must ensure that it is handled positively with a view to harnessing its benefits to the organization. It is in this vein that the authors have said that an organization where no conflict is experienced, it is not healthy for the organization, and in fact, it should be stimulated. Effort should also be made to eliminate every forms of disaffection in work environment which leads to conflict but should conflict results, it must be handled with maturity with a view to resolving the issues at stake.

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