

# Conflict Management and Resolution For The Sustainability Of Educational Institutions In Nigeria

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## Abstract

This paper examines the concept of conflict management and resolution for the sustainability in Nigerian educational institutions. Security and peace are, no doubt, an important aspect of educational management and planning and conflict is unavoidable in the educational sector. To this end, this paper takes a look at the causes of conflict, conflict management and resolution. Some recommendations made among others are that, rigidity should be eliminated during negotiation, internal conflict should not be externalized, dialoguing and bargaining should be used in a fair, honest, equitable and acceptable manner.

## Introduction

Conflict, no doubt, is an important aspect of human management. There is no organization, be it formal or informal, without its own level of conflict. However, conflict is more pronounced and often in formal organization.

Conflict between individuals and groups is a universal phenomenon and the earlier the managers understand this and identify the important areas of conflicts, the better it will enable them use the people in the organization productively, efficiently and effectively to achieve the organization's objectives. Any attempt or failure to identify areas of conflict in an organization could be a great mistake which may eventually be too costly for such organization. Ignoring areas of conflict could adversely affect the work, staff morale, motivation and interpersonal relationship among the staff. Occurrence of this will, no doubt, affect the smooth running of the organization, which could manifest in work stoppage, absenteeism, low turnover and lack of organizational effectiveness (Robbins, 1999).

The Nigerian educational system from primary to the university level as at today has witnessed one form of conflict or the other; many at times on wages and salaries and other conditions of services. These at times have led to closure of schools, leaving students to roam. The resultant effect of this is the subjection of the society to many anti-social vices and indiscipline which are often witnessed in the schools in the form of examination malpractice, cultism, indecent dressing, etc. The Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU) strike of 2013 is a good example.

This paper shall examine the concept of conflict and differentiate such from competition. Also, analysis of conflict from several perspectives shall be attempted as well as potential sources of organizational conflict; some conflict management strategies and the issue of conflict resolution, peace and security shall equally be discussed.

## Conceptual Clarifications

### Concept of Conflict

Conflict has been defined in several ways by many authors. Many at times, managers often-confuse conflicts and competition and assume that the two concepts are the same. Organizational conflict, according to Salau (2002), can be defined as the behavior intended to obstruct the achievement of some other persons' goals. Conflict is therefore a product of incompatibility of goals and it arises from opposing behaviours.

In most cases when people are asked about the concept of conflict, what is often heard are words like war, fight, chaos, oppression, inequality, aggression, crisis, suppression, and host of others. Looking at these words, one would notice that they are all negative words that have negative connotations. This then means that

the word conflict is something one should run away from, avoid and not get involved in. Thomen (2006) defines conflict as the process which begins when one party perceived that the other is trying to frustrate him or her. It involves situation in which differences are expressed by interdependent people in the process of achieving their needs. It also arises when a difference between two or more people necessitates changes in at least one person in order for their engagement to continue and develop. According to Baldrige (2007), conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate the rivals. Duetsch (1993) states that conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur in an action which prevents, obstructs, interferes with, injures, or in some way makes it less likely or less effective for others to have their ways. According to Schmidt and Kochan (2002), conflict simply refers to any perceived opportunity which can exist for interfering with the other's goal attainment. Also, Hocker and Wilmot (1995) define conflict from a communication point of view as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from the other party in achieving their goals.

In Chinese culture, Yusuf (2001) opines that conflict means opportunity for changes". To this end, it is important to note that every conflict sustained might create an opportunity for change and development if the conflict is managed constructively.

Conflict is also seen as a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive threat to their needs, interests or concerns, it also occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motives, perceptions, ideas or desires (Harrey, 1998). However, conflict is more than a mere disagreement; it is a meaningful experience in peoples' lives and a normal experience within the work environment. It is to a large extent, predictable situations that naturally arise in any organization.

Conflict in academic settings is a daily occurrence because a consensus of opinion concerning rules governing the school seldom exists among the participants: administrators, teachers, students, and parents. These parties, particularly administrators and students, see one another as adversaries, not as those working toward a common goal, as is generally the case in other organizations. There is potential for conflict in practically every decision which the administrator must make. Coping efficiently and effectively with potential and bona fide conflicts is possibly one of the most important aspects of the administrator's position (Nebgen, 1978). Conflict presently continues to be a factor in academic life. Schools frequently appear to be centers of tension; on occasion, they are perhaps a manifestation of problems in the community. However, Schofield (1977) states that it is nonetheless essential for administrators to know why they, as school leaders, are so often central in community controversies.

Gray and Starke (1999) say, the terms conflict and competition are mistakenly used interchangeably perhaps the most widely accepted view at present is that competition takes place when individuals or groups have incompatible goals; but do not interfere with each other as they both try to attain their respective goals. Competing is a style in which one's own needs are advocated over the needs of others. It relies on an aggressive style of communication, low regard for future relationships and exercises of coercive power. Conflict on the other hand occurs when individuals or groups have incompatible goals and they interfere with each other as they try to attain respective objectives.

### **Conflict Resolution**

According to Wikipedia, the free Encyclopaedia (2012), resolution simply refers to the action of solving a problem or dealing with a problem or dealing with a disagreement in a satisfactory way. This is in line with the focus of our discussion here today especially when we relate the concept of 'conflict resolution' to any action that might be initiated to strike compromises when misunderstandings arise in any form in the course of managing our educational systems.

It needs to be emphasized that all over the world today people, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and corporate institutions usually apply the tenets of internal or external resolution for the curious purpose of attaining maximum peace. This goes a long way in enhancing peaceful co-existence to guarantee security. Given the fact that education is a critical socio-economic sub-sector, the Nigerian National Security can be more effectively, efficiently and sustainably strengthened to guarantee justice, equity and fairness if major stake holders in our educational systems imbibe the culture of resolving internal and external

quarrels amicably.

### **Concept of Educational Management**

Educational Management is a field of study and practice that is primarily concerned with the operation of educational organizations. The opinion that educational management has to be centrally concerned with the purpose or aims of education is paramount. According to Okwori (2012) Educational management is the art of being able to handle carefully, without being wasteful, what goes on in the process of educating people so that nothing goes out of hand.... This is an attempt to use carefully (that is, to manage or economize) available scarce resources through co-operative efforts when establishing institutions of learning, enrolling learners, attracting best staff, conducting teaching, learning and research, as well as graduating learners at all levels of education in an efficient and effective manner. Educational management refers essentially to the following activities-planning, organizing, staffing, directing, co-coordinating and budgeting.

Okwori's classical articulation of the main activities involved in educational management makes the definition to stand the test of time in the sense that, these activities go a long way in accentuating the mandate and core values of management and by extension, leadership in educational institutions. This therefore adds tremendous value and credence to the conceptual clarification of this key variable of our discourse. Educational management is all about planning and implementation because; the two processes on which the others are built go a long way in informing educational managers of the need to ensure that things are under control. To effectively and efficiently do this entails a systematic arrangement of adequately harnessing educational agencies like: - Ministries, Governing Boards or Councils, Legislative Committees, Parents Teachers Associations and Schools.

### **Sources of Organizational Conflict**

Conflict is inevitable and it keeps occurring. Every individual encounters at least two or three conflicts everyday either at home or at work. There are numerous sources of conflict within the formal organization. Parts of the sources include conflict over resources, conflict over psychological needs and conflict involving values.

#### **Conflict over Resources:**

This occurs when two or more people want the same thing and it is not enough to go round. In such cases, the parties might often be seen attacking the sources and the heat of the conflict will be focused on it. When the resources are made available, the conflict is resolved. The most obvious manifestation of this problem comes when the annual budget is set. Each department typically submits a request for its needs for the next fiscal year, and top management adjusts the request based on its knowledge of the total organization. Department heads often see 'their requests cutback because the resources for the total organization are limited (Walton and Dutton, 1969).

Added to the basic problem of limited resources is the conflict over psychological needs. This is a conflict that cannot be seen but which affects the psyche of the individuals and its productive capacity. Youths, for example, have many needs. Such needs include love, security, belongingness, friendship, etc., a student whose seat is taken away might not necessarily want another seat elsewhere because he or she might want to sit close to a friend for protection. Even if another seat is provided for him or her in another place, the conflict might occur between him or her and another student if he or she insists on the choice of where to sit.

In the same vein, the potential for conflict is likely to be high where groups or individual perceive and interpret the same phenomenon differently. In the secondary school system, for example, attention needs to be focused on the point of contact between the teacher and the students. The psychology of learning suggests that students will not learn well unless they are actively involved in the process and so accept responsibilities for their learning activities. If otherwise, they will complain and they need to be listened to else they will find some other way to attract attention to themselves (Geoffery, 2007).

However, conflict involving values are the most difficult to understand and resolve. Values are our beliefs and what we are often not prepared to negotiate. When people in conflict talk about transparency, honesty, equality and fairness, they are talking about different values but, conflict is more likely to be resolved when the parties understand and respect each other's values. It is therefore important and necessary to understand the source of conflict before it is resolved.

Adeyemi (2010) observes that most violent conflict in Nigeria educational institutions have been traced to communication gap between the students and the school authority. When there is delay by school management in meeting students' demand or failure of the school authority to involve students in decisions making, this could lead to conflict and in fact had led to breakdown of laws and orders in the past.

Also, a cursory look at Nigerian educational environment further shows that there are many other internal and external factors influencing conflicts, riots and demonstrations in our schools. These include:-

- Non-involvement of students in the decision making process in tertiary institutions.
- Academic stress which manifests in overcrowded hostels, lecture halls and hostels, inadequacy of financial aid and poor sanitary conditions.
- Welfare challenges brought about by inadequacy of basic amenities.
- Values of tertiary students which are generationally at variance with those of the adults who are in charge of administration of the campuses.
- Inadequacy of funding of education in Nigeria leading to the deterioration of facilities. Many universities are unable to maintain basic facilities like laboratories, libraries and accommodation.
- Academic staff members are not left out in the management or revenue allocation crisis thereby necessitating the quitting of the scene by many lecturers for greener pastures and subsequent brain drain to warrant students' riots and demonstrations.
- Sometimes, certain government programmes or policy pronouncements like an early plan to commercialize universities spark off students' riots and demonstration.
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- Frequent increase of petroleum products price and the plan to fully deregulate the petroleum downstream sector.
- Suspension and expulsion of students from school.

### **Conflict Resolution Techniques for Sustaining Peace and Security in Education**

Conflict is a normal part of any healthy relationship. After all, two people cannot be expected to agree on everything all the time. Learning how to deal with conflict rather than avoiding it is important. When conflict is mismanaged, it can cause great harm to a relationship but when handled with care, conflict could provide an opportunity to strengthen the bond between two people. Adoption of the following techniques in conflict resolution could lead to, sustained peace and security in Nigeria educational institution.

However, before explaining these techniques, it is pertinent at this juncture to explain what is meant by conflict resolution. Conflict resolution is the ability of the individual or the society to device means of settling a seemingly opposing contentious view among its members. It is equally a method of finding out what the differences is all about. To this end, the following are some ways of resolving conflicts.

#### **1. Compromise:**

This is perhaps the most widely used of all techniques. It involves giving each of the parties in the conflict some of what they want. This is most easily seen in labour management conflicts. In this situation, both parties will shift grounds and agree on a common way forward (give and take).

The main advantage of compromise is that it allows a solution to major conflicts. In many instances, it is almost impossible to resolve a conflict unless each party sees that the other is giving up something. The motivation to reciprocate ('You give' 'I give') may be the only way to move the parties toward a solution. The tendency of people to exaggerate their demands in the hope of getting what they really wanted all along is one of the big problems with compromise as a conflict resolution technique.

#### **2. Confrontation:**

This technique requires the opposing parties to openly state their views to each other but in an attempt to do that, certain facts may not be revealed because one person does not want to hurt the other's feelings. The fact is that the problem cannot be solved until it is crown. Once the real reason for the conflict has been brought out, the reasons it came into being and the ways it can be resolved are analyzed.

### **3. Consensus:**

As a conflict resolution technique, consensus requires the conflicting parties to work together, to find the best solution to their problem. While this may sound impracticable, there are situations where consensus will be appreciated. However, in using consensus the following must be noted:

- i. Do not vote because voting tends to suppress analysis of the problem and generally results in poorer decisions. It also creates a win-lose atmosphere.
- ii. Do not horse trade” that is, I will accept your view on point X if you will accept mine on point Y. Instead, each party is required to decide the most reasonable position on which both X and Y is.
- iii. Each person must be encouraged to speak; some of the most helpful comments are made by individuals who are not aggressive.
- iv. Reach a consensus. It is not necessary to have unanimity. It is important, however, that each party in the conflict feels that he or she can live with the decision that is reached.

In short, consensus is a positive conflict resolution technique because it moves the parties away from the win/lose mentality and it also takes advantage of the diverse resources available within the group.

### **4. Mediation**

This process sometimes called conciliation; is a means by which a third party, the mediator attempts to reconcile the differences between the contesting parties. The mediator may try to maintain constructive discussion, search for common area of agreement and suggest compromises. However, the mediator’s decisions are not binding and need not be accepted by the contesting parties.

### **5. Integration:**

This technique requires the conflicting parties to collaborate in order to resolve the conflict. It requires both parties to have the attitude that, although they may be in conflict, they will strive to develop collaboratively a solution that satisfies the needs of both parties. Thus, the needs of the parties will be integrated by the solution. With this method too, the win-lose mentality is often so strong that the opposing integrative solution is impossible (Mankelov and Carlson, 2013).

Ultimately, arbitration, mediation and negotiation are other methods and procedures for addressing conflict. According to Salau (2002), arbitration is a method of settling differences between two parties by the use of an impartial third party called an arbitrator who is accepted to both sides and whose decision is binding and legally enforceable on the contesting parties. The arbitral procedure consists of the company and the union submitting their disagreement to the arbitrator. After hearing all the evidences, the arbitrator issues a decision. It is based not on what is believed to be wise and fair, but upon how the arbitrator understands the language of the contract to be applied to the case at hand. Thus, an arbitrator like a judge issues a decision based on evidence before him or her. There is no doubt that the extensive use of this type of arbitration has helped to reduce the number of strikes even in our school system.

### **6. Collective Agreement**

The Trade Disputes Act states that a collective agreement is any agreement in writing for the settlement of disputes and relating to terms of work concluded between an employer or representative of employers in an organisation on one hand and one or more trade unions representing workers on the other hand. Where this exists, such a collective agreement shall be deposited with the Minister in charge of labour matters. In the case of a collective agreement entered into before the date of commencement of the trade dispute acts, such deposits shall be within thirty days of the date of the commencement of the act, then within fourteen days of its execution.

The question of the legal status of a collective agreement has received judicial determination in a number of cases. A consensus of judicial opinions has it that a collective agreement is devoid of ordinary legal effect (Salau, 2002).

#### **Effects of Conflict on the Security of Educational Institutions**

Conflict in Nigerian educational institutions is displayed through strike actions in which industrial relations refer to the series of effort highlighted by coordinated temporary stoppage of official duties by workers to protest any form of unfair treatment or to demand for the institutionalization of better conditions of service.

Workers, all over the world and over the years, have discovered the effectiveness of strike in settling industrial disputes and so, hardly does a year pass without one form of strike or the other by one trade union or another. The situation is particularly common in Nigeria where governments at various levels seemed to have perfected many styles of denying workers of their legitimate rights. The resultant effect of this is incessant or endless strikes.

Nigerian teachers and students at all levels are the worst hit. Governments give so many reasons for breaching the agreement reached with the teacher thereby violating their rights and denying them of issues covered by collective agreement freely entered into by the government and in-house union of our various institution of learning. A particular case in-point is the ongoing ASUU strike in public university system in Nigeria.

As there is no action without proportional reaction, conflict has negatively and maximally impacted on students' lives thus, sending bad signals to the nation's security.

One of the most easily visible negative effects of strike on students is the demonstrated capability of the phenomenon in lowering the quality of products of our public schools. There is no doubt that the quality of graduates at the various levels of the nation's school system has continuously been denuded over the years. It is no longer news that most graduates can no longer function as expected. There are teachers who do not know what and how to teach just as there are doctors who are not better than quacks (Selekere, 2000). This is simply due to persistent strike actions embarked upon by lecturers at various tertiary institutions. This no doubt is dangerous and poses a security threat to the nation because many of these half-baked graduates are often used as bad boys as they are willing hands.

Another area of conflict which is threatening the security of this nation is the situation where many students were forced out of school because they are intellectually dehydrated and emotionally frustrated from pursuing intellectualism as a result of persistent teachers' strike. Some of them abandoned schooling totally and forever and eventually become hoodlums in the society.

News had it that as a result of long strike actions, some students were lured into various forms of criminalities like political hooliganism, rape, cultism and the like. It is no longer surprising that criminal groups like Boko Haram, kidnapers and armed robbers have at their command level many 'ungraduated graduates' of various institutions are out of schools as a result of persistent strikes.

Constant conflict accompanied by strike actions by Nigerian teachers have made Nigerian educational certificate not to be reckoned with globally. Hence, graduate teachers are usually subjected to series of examination before they are employed and in the course of this, some get frustrated, abandoned teaching jobs and join bad gang where they think they can make quick money. This is a serious threat to national security. In short, if conflicts at the various levels of the nation's educational system are not resolved, attainment of peace and security of this great nation may be a mirage.

## **Conclusion**

Conflict triggers strong emotions and can lead to hurt feelings, disappointment and discomfort. When handled in an unhealthy manner, it can cause irreparable rifts, resentments and break-ups. But when conflict is resolved in a healthy way, it increases the understanding of one another, builds trust and strengthens relationships. Hence, educational managers should know that conflict is inevitable, but could have positive effects on the organization if handled carefully and with immediate attention.

## **Recommendations**

For the sustenance of peace and security in Nigerian educational system through conflict management and resolution, the following must be strictly followed:

- i. Educational managers should cultivate the habit of respect and due regard to human right.
- ii. Dialoguing and bargaining should be used in a fair, honest, equitable and acceptable manner.
- iii. Education at all levels must be well funded.
- iv. Parties involved in conflict should not be punished for demanding their rights.
- v. There is the need to keep communication channels open between employers and employees at all times.
- vi. Trade and student unionism should not be banned in as much as justice is done.

- vii. Rigidity should be eliminated during negotiation. A give and take approach will promote industrial peace.

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