1-1-2010

Managing Conflict In Organisation-An Overview

Muyiwa Adeyemi

Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

In any organization, effective administration of the resources available is very important and paramount to the attainment of its objectives. The human aspect of the resources is most important and crucial as it is the one responsible for the co-ordination of other factors and more importantly conflict situation among staff cannot be over-emphasized. It is known fact that no two workers are the same, even twins are only alike.

Nwakwo (1987), Craston (2002) and Onanuga and Arikewuyo (2005) describes administration as the careful and systematic arrangements and use of resources (human and material), situation and opportunities for the achievement of specific objectives of a given organization. To this end, it is worthy of note that effective organizational administration is necessary for managing conflict situation in any system, such should be embedded in the day-to-day running of the industry. Conforming to this viewpoint, Peretomode (2001) describes administration as the performance of executive duties, the carryout of policies or decisions to fulfill a purpose, and the controlling of the day-to-day running of an organization. To this extent, among the very important duties of an administrator, is the management of conflict among workers of different categories.

Conflict as a Concept

Researchers the world over have viewed the word conflict from different perspectives. However, they all see the concept as that behaviour by organization members which is expended in opposition to other members. The process is said to being when one party perceives the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his, or merely whenever incompatible activities occur. For a conflict to exist it must be perceived. Robbins(1987), Peretomode (2001) and Adeeyemi (2007) provide additional commonalities among most conflict definitions, these include, the concepts of opposition, scarcity and blockage and the assumption that there are two or more interests or goals appearing to be incompatible.

Also, the existence of conflict in any organization, has been viewed by some schools of thought as either negative or positive to organizational effectiveness. For instance, the traditional view of the concept-conflict is seen in light of violence, destruction and irrationality. On the other hand, the interactionist viewpoint of conflict to a reasonable extent, is seen as a positive situation. Their belief is that any organization totally without conflict is probably static, apathetic and non-responsive to the need for change. They further believe that conflict is functional when it initiates the search for new and better ways of doing things and undermines complacency within an organization. It should be noted that the interactionist approach does not argue that all conflicts are functional. Certainly, there are conflicts that are negative to organizational effectiveness. In such cases, as in the traditional view, management of organizations should endeavour to reduce the conflict. The interactionist view implies a wider role for administration in addressing conflict situation than does the traditional approach. The duty of an administrator, then is expected to be towards the creation of an atmosphere in which conflict is healthy

and not allowed to run into pathological extremes (Robbins, 1987 and Adeyemi,2005).

The views on the relationship between conflict level and organizational effectiveness can be illustrated from the graph presented below:

Situation	Level of Conflict	Type of Conflict	Organization Internal Characteristics	Organizational Outcome
A	Low or Non		Apathetic, Stagnant, Non-responsive to change, Lack of New ideas	Low
B	Optimal	Functional	Viable, Self-Crucial, Innovative	High
C	High	Dysfunctional	Disruptive, Chaotic, Uncooperative	Low

Source: (Organization Theory: Structures, Design and Application. Robbins 1987 adapted by Adeyemi,2005).

Note: that conflict situation B as identified in the table above represents the optimal level. They are from conflict situation A up to but not including B requires the manager to stimulate conflict to achieve full benefits from its functional properties. The conflict situation area to the right of B demands resolution efforts to reduce the conflict level.

Dimensions of Conflict Situations in Organisation

Having ex-rayed the concept-conflict, critical look at its various dimensions in organizational system will expose to the participants, its implications on causes, conflict education programme, and techniques to be adopted in resolving conflict situation when such arises and the challenges it poses to managers.

There are various dimensions of conflict and these include:

1. Intra-Personal Conflict: The intra-personal conflict occurs within individual workers in an organisation. Such conflict situation creates some imbalances in the individuals concerned. Examples of intra-personal conflict are; nature of compatibility of individual goals and aspirations with organizational objectives, the use of time among others.

2. Inter-personal conflict: This conflict situation arises between individuals, they may be two or more. As we know, the organisation bring together various groups of people. They interact and work towards achieving both personal and organizational goals. Individuals through their various interactions are bound to affect the values of one another. In this situation, conflict may arise.

3 Intra-Group Conflict: This conflict situation usually occurs between individuals within a given group.

4 Inter-Group Conflict: This dimension of conflict arises between groups. It should be noted that, it is often difficult to identify the underlying needs and values of the different groups to the conflict situation.

To handle the various dimensions of conflict situation identified above, the manager should endeavour to research adequately into the causes of such conflict, to enable him/her address decisively the situation before it escalates and eventually degenerates into crisis situation. This paper therefore, presents some common causes of conflict in organizations. A number of factors can lead to organizational conflict though inexhaustible; it can be categorized as conflict over resources, conflict over psychological needs and conflict involving values. However, some of these causes are discussed as follows:

Causes of Conflict

1. Scarce Resource: When resources are limited, conflict potential in any organization is enhanced. Such scarce or limited resources may include operating funds of organization, office space, machines among others. Writing on this factors, Robbins (1987) and Bartol and Martins(1998), points out that the potential is increased further if, unit members of the available resource pool when other units needs are satisfied

2. Differences in Individuals: Difference in personality, experience and values make conflict likely. The more heterogeneous members of an organization are, the less likely they are to work smoothly and co-operatively together.

3. Task Interdependence: This refers to a situation where individuals or groups depend upon each other for assistance, information, compliance or other co-coordinative activities to accomplish their tasks adequately.

According to Robbins (1987) the linkage between task interdependence and conflict is not direct. He explains that the former raises the intensity of inter unit relations. While Bartol and Martins (1998) identified two types of task interdependence, which is a situation where one individual or work unit is heavily dependent on another, the second form of task interdepence is reciprocal interdependence, which is a situation where individuals or work units are mutually interdependent.

4. Low Formalization: The setting down of rules and regulations reduce conflict in organization. This is because that task expected to be performed by individuals and groups are usually spelt out in clear terms. On the other hand, where formalization is low, there is tendency for jurisdictional misunderstanding to take place.

5. Nature of Reward Systems: The nature of reward system in an organization can lead to conflict situation. Where a reward system encourages competition when cooperation is required for success,

conflict can arise among individual workers or groups.

6. Communication Distortions: Breakdown in communication due to distortion or lack of communication often lead to party dislike, distrusts, or feeling angry towards the other. An obvious case of communication distortions is vertical communication. As information is passed up and down the hierarchy, it is susceptible to ambiguity and breakdown. Also, distortions occur at the horizontal level. Robbins (1987) argued that the less the differing units know about each other's jobs, the less the collaboration that will take place. And this lack of knowledge can lead to unreasonable inter unit demands.

7. Goal Incompatibility: Due to needs, members of organizations, frequently pursue goals that are somewhat different from one another, thereby setting the stage for conflict to occur.

When conflict arises consequent upon factors identified, there are conflict management strategies that can be adopted in resolving the situation. These strategies are discussed below.

Conflict Resolution Strategies

The following conflict resolution, strategies can be applied in conflict situation in schools.

Negotiation

To implement this conflict resolution strategy effectively, manager must take the following points very seriously:

(a) the manager should prepare for a negotiating session;

(b) the parties to the conflict and problems should be kept separately;

(c) the manager must focus on issues;

(d) a win-win outcome must be the interest of managers of organisations (Fisher and Ury, 1996).

First, preparing for a negotiating session is about getting ready physically (neutral, comfortable workspace that is conducive to discussion), and mentally (researching the issues from all sides). Getting prepared puts managers at an advantage from the beginning as such a manager is equipped with objective view of the situation and an unbiased interest. Second, keeping the parties and problems separating, is about focusing on the processes than on people. Third, the manager should focus on and address issues in the area of interest rather than positions. And lastly, working towards a solution where both sides to the conflict situation feel as if they are winners should be the goal of every session. Although, it is not realistic to think that every conflict can be resolved in such an ideal fashion, it is a worthy goal requiring hardwork, creativity and sound strategy to reach.

Competition

This is a win-lose orientation where the desire to cooperate is low and assertiveness is high. In other words, it involves a win situation for a party to the conflict at the expense of the other party. That is, one party wins and the other loses. This strategy is appropriate for use by managers when quick decisions are vital or when there is no popular decision to be found

Accommodation

This strategy involves solving conflicts by allowing the desires of the other part prevail. Essentially, the manager voluntarily lets the other party have his/her way rather than continue the conflict (Bartol and Martin, 1998). This strategy is the antithesis of competition where cooperation is high and assertiveness is low. This strategy is desirable when it is important to appease a party, when the issue is of less importance or when a party is found to be wrong in issue relating to the conflict.

Collaboration

This involves striving to address a conflict situation by devising solutions that allow both parties to the conflict achieve their desired outcomes. This strategy is believed to be the acne of negotiation whereby parties to the conflict win. This strategy is when both assertiveness and cooperation are high and the concerns are both vitally and equally important. Collaboration always involve a high level of creativity in developing solutions that suit the needs of both parties to the conflict.

Avoiding

This is a conflict resolution strategy that involves neither assertiveness nor cooperation. It involves ignoring or suppressing a conflict in the people that it will either fizzle away or not become too disruptive. Such a strategy is usually reserved for issues too trivial to waste time over or used as an initial strategy to allow parties "cool down" or when others may resolve the conflict more effectively (Fisher and Ury, 1996).

Sharing

This is a compromise where medium assertiveness and cooperation are prominent. This has been linked to a zero-sum strategy.

Managers of organizations should be well equipped in the performance of resolving conflicts in their establishments as this will bring about work cooperation that will lead to attainment of organizational goals. In this regard, conflict resolution programmes that will provide education to managers of organizations must be put in place. The rationale for this includes the following:

(i) The problem-solving processes of conflict resolution (negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making) can improve the organizational climate.

(ii) Conflict resolution training strategies reduce violence, vandalism, chronic absence and suspension.

(iii) Training in negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making encourages a high level of citizenship activity.

(iv) Conflict resolution training increases skills in listening, critical thinking and problem solving skills basic to all learning.

(v) Conflict resolution education emphasizes seeing other points of view and resolving differences peacefully – skills that assist one to live in a multicultural world.

Conclusions and the Challenges of Managing Conflict in Organisations

As earlier pointed out, conflict in the workplace is of interest to most people; how it works, how to avoid it, and how to deal with it when it occurs. It is indeed the rate organization that does not have to face the issue of conflict and how to harness it so that it produces positive results rather than destruction.

The managers of organisations need to be aware that conflict in an organization can either be positive or negative to the effectiveness of the system and the attainment of its goals. However, management of organisation should seek to reduce conflict and thus create an environment in which conflict is healthy but not allowed to run to pathological extremes. Organisational leaders should take caution and care to identify whether a conflict situations is "substantive" in nature or a "personalized" one. The first is about decisions, ideas, directions and actions; while the second is often called a personality conflict. In this form, the two parties to the conflict simply "don't like each other much". By identifying and understanding the nature of the conflict, such can be effectively tackled using the conflict resolution strategies identified earlier. The focus of a good manager in any conflict should be to solve the problem and he should endeavour to be open and not out to injure the value(s) of any of the parties to the conflict.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided to assist managers of organisations in addressing conflict situation for the effectiveness of the system.

(i) Managers of organizations should map out a plan for how conflict management will be institutionalized in the system.

(ii) They should adopt mediation as an option for resolving all conflicts that occur in organisation.

(iii) They should evaluate their conflict management activities to determine if they are meeting the set goals and objectives.

(iv) They should develop partnership with workers in the organization to explore ways in which conflict management concepts and skills can be infused into their activities.

(v) Lastly, managers should regularly be conscious of the conflict situation level of the organisation and the extent of response among workers to its management.

References

A Trainign Manual for Trainers in Conflict Resolution and Facilitative Mediation. Foundation for Democratic Development FDD/USAID/OTI Initiative.

Adeyemi, 'Muyiwa (2005).

Arikewuyo, M. O. and Onanuga, P. A. (2005). Efficiency in School Administration. In Erinoso; Arikewuyo, M. O. & Ogunkoya, B. J. (Eds) *Issues in School Organisation*. African Cultural Institute, Lagos.

Bartol, K. M. and Martin, D. C. (1998). *Management* Irwin, McGraw-Hill, New York.

Fisher, I. and Ury, W. (1996). *Creating Safe and Drug-Free Schools*: An Action Guide. September.

Granston, N. C. (2002). "School-Based Management. Leaders and Leadership: Change and Challenges for Principals". *International Studies in Educational Administration*. 30(1).

Nwakwo, J. I. (1987). "School Administration and Human Learning in School". In EE   Ezewu (Ed.) *Social Psychological Factors of Human Learning in School*.   Onitsha: Leadway Books Ltd.

Peretomode, V. F. (2001). *Educational Administration and Applied Concepts and   Theoretical Perspectives for Students and Practitioners*. Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.

Robbins, S. P. (1987) *Organization Theory: Structure, design and Applications*. 2nd   Edition. Prentice Hall Inc. USA.

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]