WORKPLACE CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES SYSTEM

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Abstract

Conflict is a function of misrepresentation of intension, ideas, or thought of what a leader intend to achieve. However, it is difficult to all agree with a leader's thought, idea or opinion. In view of this, it is assumed that conflict on its own makes learning/teaching setting unsuitable, habitually it leads to economic losses on the part of students, management, government and parents, whether it is private or public university. Therefore, there is need for conducting a study into workplace conflict and conflict management. The aim of this paper is to discuss the issues beyond leadership control in the management of conflict in the Nigerian universities system. To effectively examine how conflict management this study is adopting a desk research using mainly secondary data from textbook, internet, journals etc. The study uncovers that conflict is prevalent in human life's and cannot not totally be removed rather its effect can be reduced so as to ensure that it does not impede the activities of the organization and reduce on the job-performance of employees.

In the Nigerian universities today, it is observed that crisis is the order of the day. Ranging from conflict within the council member to conflict with management and even within the management body (Adeyemi & Ademilua, 2012). The list is endless as the conflict can be between management and staff as well as between staff and staff of the university. The crisis which emanated from a minor issue and translated to a major issue as a result of multiple factors inherent in human behaviour, attitude and personalities. These crises sometime become unmanageable or beyond the control of the leaders which eventually leads to conflicts. Majority of these crises might be from the leadership style, approach or insubordination of co-workers among others. In fact,

attitude of some leaders to work, approach to process and behaviour towards implementation of policies and practices are entrenched with a lot of crisis that if not carefully managed can aggravate to major conflict. Olukayode (2015) is of the opinion that conflict simply means a disagreement between two parties. Although, Olukayode (2015); Alabi (2010) postulated that conflict in an organization is a state of friction caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests between people working together. While Gibbons (2007) is of the view that a conflict situation is one that is characterized by the incapability of those concerned to iron out their differences.

On one hand Azamoza (2004) argued that conflict can help strengthened the organisation and enable the organisation to improve its performance. Although, it has been observed that irrespective of the level of management, (Lower, Middle or Top) managers or administrators are bound to face conflict in as much they deal with human being. Therefore, the fear of conflicts should be ignored and focus should be placed on turning weakness to strength in developing the organisation where they work. On the other hand, Olukayode (2015) exposed that politics in the organisation give rise to conflict as employee or group of employees influence the goal and decision making of an organisation to their own selfish interest, usually at the expense of some other employees within the organisation. Therefore, agreeing to the term that conflict is an evitable feature of organizational life. In addition, Osabiya (2015) added that the state of strength of an organisation lies along a continuum that ranges from a conflict free organisation to a conflict ridden organization. Organisation like the universities is not immune from conflict. This is evident in the work of Henry (2009) who posit that in any circumstances where two or more people co-exist to form an organization conflict is anticipated.

However, it is not surprising that conflicts cannot be eliminated but it is a shame that conflict emanated from an origin with an intent to achieve the best or satisfy self-interest (). This study is not interested in what had been done in resolving manners of conflicts but identify the need to fill the gaps in knowledge by discussing in-depth issues relating to workplace conflict management. Likewise, it has been observed that many research might have been carried out in other sectors but when it comes to a sensitive issue such as subject of discussion 'Conflict', less attention had been given to the study by researchers. This paper intend to bridged such gap by recognising the role played by university in the development of the nation economy and individual populace. To this ends, the researcher insinuated that understanding how conflict should be managed in university system with the number of employees working in the institution is imperative.

Research

University is a multifaceted layer constructed by many committees' system as mode of operation. For this reason, it is always difficult to assumed that the workplace

settings especially like university will be free of conflicts. No wonder, Ajala and Oghenekohwo (2002) description of workplace conflict was focused on individual and groups, they emphasise that it is a dispute that occurs when interests, goals or values of different individuals or groups are conflicting with each other in organizations. Likewise, Obi (2012) expressed that workplace conflict is an act of discontentment and contention which either the workers or employers of labour employ to put unnecessary pressure against each other so as to get their demands. In a similar vein Kazimoto (2013) established that workplace conflict is described as the presence of discord that occurs when goals, interests or values of different individuals or groups are incompatible and frustrate each others' attempt to achieve objectives in an organization.

Universities in Nigeria, especially the private once, that were expected to bail out and engage in best practice that will strive up competition for the public universities are now full of different crisis. For example, between 2002 till date not less than 5 universities had gone through unresolved conflicts and sent their vice-chancellor packing through the Governing council due to differences in goals, interests or values. In an attempt to discuss workplace conflict better, Olukayode (2015) also postulated that, workplace conflict within the context of employment relationship can be regarded as an inevitable clash of interests and resulting disputes of varying intensity between and within any or all of the active actors in organizations. No wonder Adeyemi and Ademilua (2012) shares that it may be difficult to jettisoned conflicts in the university system as many key actors (students, lecturer, no-teaching staff to the management or principal officers) who are involved shares difference views on issues.

Hence, it is easy to assert that workplace conflict is a fact of life, in any organization as long as people will compete for jobs, power, recognition and security (Adomie & Anie, 2005). Therefore, the task of management is not to suppress or resolve all conflicts, but to manage them in order to enhance and not to detract from organizational performance (Obasan, 2011). But it is strange that in the Nigerian university sector, it is not possible that conflict improve performance due to the involvement of human. It is obvious that whenever there is student unrest, it is difficult to analysis the level of student's acquaintance prior to crisis, and after crisis, but it is certain that properties will be vandalised and students time are wasted. Students are delayed to progress in their career especially when the Council and management or management and student engaged in a crisis and the conflict is not well managed.

In another debate by Adeyemi and Ademilua (2012), they posited that conflict management refers to exertion, to regulate or control conflict through a number of events. While Osabiya (2015) refer to conflict management strategies as internal mechanisms used by the several authorities in resolving conflict. Consequently, Obasan (2011) claimed that management is duty bound to resolve conflict properly for the sake of increasing organizational performance and better productivity, because the outcome of such action will result in good communication, good cooperation, time management, and it will increase corporate productivity. Although an effective conflict management

as explained by Uchendu, Anijaobi and Odigwe, (2013) pointed that cooperative atmosphere can be established to promote opportunities and movements towards directed reconciliation, nonaggressive or basic clashing interest. Constructively Uchendu, Anijaobi and Odigwe explained that managed conflict induces a positive performance. While Akanji (2005) posited that poorly managed conflict heats up the environment to bring about disturbance of the entire group and polarization such as psychological and physical injury, reduced productivity on job performance, interference with problem activities, emotional distress and inability to sleep, escalation of differences into antagonistic position, malice and increased hostility amongst others.

However, it is clear from the debate above that conflict has both positive and negative effect on establishment. Therefore, it is imperative that effective conflict management strategy is put in place in an organisation especially in the university (because it runs on a committee system). Likewise, researchers (such as Ajumogobia, 2007; Obi, 2012; Uchendu, Anijaobi & Odigwe, 2013) discussed behaviour in organizations focusing on conflict management, they are of the view that it can be divided into two categories: normative and descriptive. Normative research is concerned with how things should be, whereas descriptive research addresses itself to what is rather than what could or should be. This dual perspective is most apparent in approaches to the issues of conflict and conflict management in organizations. Normative approaches reflect attitudes and beliefs which identify all conflicts as destructive and promote conflict-elimination as the formula for organizational success. Descriptive approaches accept conflict as inevitable and consider its proper management the primary responsibility of all administrators. This paper pertains to the descriptive mode of inquiry in presenting a workplace conflicts and conflict management that can help improve organisation performance. But it goes beyond the domain that suggested that leaders or administrators must take the offensive and seek to manage conflict, and also in advocating that traditional methods of dealing with conflict be replaced by a new and more sophisticated approach. The starting point of this paper is to first understand what workplace conflicts is.

Concept of Workplace Conflict

Workplace conflict has been well-defined in several ways by many authors (such as Albert, 2001; Obasan, 2011; Fajana & Shadare 2012). Obi (2012) define workplace conflict as an act of dissatisfaction and contention which either the employers of labour or workers utilize to put excessive pressure against each other so as to get their demands. This view is consistent with Henry (2009); Ikeda, Veludo and Campomar (2005); Azamoza (2004); Ajala and Oghenekohwo (2002), in their descriptions of workplace conflict, " a dispute that occurs when interests, values or goals of different individuals or groups are conflicting with each other in organizations". On this premise, workplace conflict within the setting of employment relationship can be considered as an unavoidable clash of interests, resulting to intensive

disputes between and within any or all of the active actors in organizations. Thus, it is certain that in the absence of common values in organizations, conflict is bound to occur.

Connective Factors of Work-place Conflict

Pragmatic research findings have provided insights into connective factors of workplace conflict. Hotepo, Asokere, Abdul – Azeez and Ajemunigbohun (2010) suggested that lack of resources, competition, different expectation, lack of cooperation, interdependence and among others communication problems has the connective factors that have influence to triggered conflicts in the Nigerian higher education sector. The demands which are always dramatized by continued industrial strike action when it involves the government, or management through different unions within the university. Likewise, Obasan (2011) identified unacceptable terms of employment, termination of employee services, poor human relations between management and workers, non – consultation with employees before making key decisions affecting them or that they need to get involved, anti-union posture of management and lack of effective mechanism for prevention of conflict as multiple connecting factors of workplace conflict among others. Today in the Nigeria private universities many staff of the university has been sacked for what they are not suppose to be sacked for, and this had led to conflict in many units of the institution. A Philippian study also piloted in the higher education by Tsevendorj (2008) rated communication failure, values, perception and culture problems as relatively stern sources of conflict. Thus, most higher institutional conflicts have economic and goal illogicality alignments in the workplace.

Classification of Workplace Conflict

Workplace conflicts can be divided into two broad types according to Ogunbameru (2006), he classified workplace conflict into informal and formal conflicts. Ogunbameru postulate that conflict in work-relations is formal when it results directly from a source of grievance and supposedly is wholly expressive in nature but it is informal when it is not based on any systematic organizational problem. In a similar vein, the formal workplace conflict as discussed by Albert (2001) expressed that the underlying sources cannot be directly seen, but can be deduced from unconscious form of protest, unruly behaviour, sabotage or even poor work-attitudes by employees in organizations. If the condition is sufficiently pervasive, it can meaningfully affect employee job description, turnover, focus, and impact on the prosperity of an organization (Kazimoto, 2013). In another debate put forward by Ogunbameru (2006) he expressed that formal workplace conflict should be an organized expression of conflict pronounced through a trade union or other workers' representatives. This type of conflict is highly noticeable, since it is often a cognisant approach or premeditated struggle to obtain adjustment in employment relationship. To sum all, Albert (2001) affirmed that there are two sides to workplace conflict, whether formal or informal, one

is productive and healthy having a problem solving base and the other is destructive and unhealthy. However, the two conflict situations are neither good nor bad, since dissatisfaction and disagreement must occur in work-relations for adjustment to be created to improve total workplace performance. Nonetheless, knowing how the problem exist is not enough to make a conclusive statement on conflict in the workplace, it important to understand how such conflict can be carefully managed.

Management of Workplace Conflict

Based on Rahim (2002) findings, he is of the view that conflict management involves planning effective strategies to decrease the dysfunctions of conflict and develop the constructive functions in order to enhance learning and effectiveness of an organization. The implication of this is that managing conflict essentially suggest avoidance or termination and reduction of the odds of non-productive escalation. As such, conflict management is the technique by which organizations and people handle grievances or disputes so as to find a middle way alternative to increase resolution, work towards consensus and offer genuine promise to decision-making. As perceived by Uchendu, Anijaobi and Odigwe (2013), since conflict is unavoidable in organizations, its management establishes whether it will cause positive or negative effect on the organizational performance. The timely identification and instant explanation of the underlying tension before go out of hand are appropriate to effectual management of conflict in the workplace. Managing workplace conflicts can be through several approaches however four major approaches were observed in the literature and they are discussed as follows:

1.   Integrative approach
Integrative approach is often employed to inspire management to fulfil the needs of stakeholders in resolving conflict. Consequently, conflict management *Integrative* is a greatly disruptive process which can be effected in a number of separate ways in the organzations. Ford (2007) suggested a four-way process which includes assessment and inquiry, design, implementation and evaluation aimed at attaining valuable and objective conflict decision in the workplace. Vigil and King (2000) also opined that the use of integrative style of managing conflict is likely to create higher commitment in individuals and better result for the organisation than teams using non-integrative conflict management. The integrative approach increases the understanding of how to resolve problem and increases resolution.

2.   Collective bargaining
In the same vein, another approach to management of conflict is collective bargaining strategy. The strategy has been advocated as the approach for organising union-management conflict in organizations. This approach is equally good for the conflicts resolution and management, depending on the situation. The approach is internationally

applauded as the legal mechanism by which management and workers settle conflicts arising from employment contracts (Fajana & Shadare, 2012). In practice, negotiation between union and management is a process of meeting demands, discussing, presenting counter demands, bluffing and sometimes threatening all in a bid to reach collective agreement which involves collaborative approach to managing conflict by getting all parties involved. It was also observed that in the Nigeria context today, the faster rates of adoption of collective bargaining strategies have been encouraged even by the positive use of machinery for resolving conflict in some multinational firms in the country as been adopted by the Nigeria Trade Union Amendment Act 2000 (Comboh, 2014).

3.   Accommodation strategy
The avoidance strategy is also called conflict avoidance. It is however, very difficult for institutions to be silent about conflicts, while individuals can be advice or take a personal decision to partially or totally avoid conflicts by accommodating other parties with their differences. However, in an earlier work carried out by Thomas (1976), he pointed that avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition and collaboration can also be used to manage conflicts. Thomas in his findings concluded that any organization using these methods to resolve conflict is sitting on a keg of gun-powder. Although the accommodation strategy is of the view that no amount of sacrifice is too much to allow peace to reign. It is a palliative approach which includes conciliation and submission.   In the compromise strategy, in order to settle the conflictual problem, parties involved to the conflict are willing to give up something. While the competitive strategy involves win-lose method and survival of the fittest without taking other party into consideration. The last approach is collaboration which Thomas term as a win-win approach whereby there is willingness on the part of the parties involved to satisfy each other demands in preparation to settle the conflict. But for the collaboration strategy, it provides a short term solution to conflict situations. Because there should be a reflectiveness of cooperative and assertive in behaviours that all other approaches depend majorly on the structure of the organization.

4.   Resolution of conflict
In the provision of the Trade Dispute Act CAP 18, 2004 and Trade Disputes Amendment Decree, 1988, No. 39 was another conflict management approach for resolving conflict. Under these acts and degree, the award and sanctions of the National Industrial Court is final and binding on the employees and employers from the date of the award. These acts and degree translate to a high level of comportment for all parties involved in dispute to personally resolve issues before it get out of control. Trade Dispute Act also provides five steps for legal management of conflicts in an organization. These includes voluntary settlements of conflict using internal mechanism of complaint resolving procedures and the external mechanism involving appointment

of conciliator, mediator, reference of disputes to industrial arbitration panel, National Industrial Court and the constitution of a Board of Inquiry if such is considered essential.

Conclusion

This study suggested that the usual way of using force to stop crises or conflict is only necessary as an emergent measure. Which means that management of conflicts and crises can stem down the tide of these evils or worsen them. Therefore, it is imperative that the management should go beyond the use of force to bring lasting solution and peace to a societal conflict or crises. Likewise, it has been generally acknowledged that conflict is somewhat unavoidable and is not always or necessarily bad for an organization. If properly managed, conflict can lead to the development of new ideas because in the mist of adversity the organisation must also strive and derive a means of managing the situation on ground while the operation continues. Management must create internal cohesiveness among groups for smooth ruling of the organisation. Therefore, the key for organizational success is to spot, recognize and manage conflict efficiently for the good of the organization, rather than to simply avoiding it. No crisis is too small to handle and it must be resolved easily and enough especially at the initial stage.

Recommendation

For better resolution of crises and conflict in Nigeria, the following should be adhered to:

Peacekeepers or mediators are not there to allot blames or worsen the condition. They are peace makers and should see their mission so. Legitimate parties involved representation is crucial. For a better resolution, there is need to permit good representation of the groups, societies or communities involved in a conflict. This according to Ahtisaari (2009) allowing parties involved to participate in the discussion will provide both parties with first-hand information of the problems involved as well as give recognition to the groups concerned rather than granting attention or listening to rumour, fake news or side talks. Likewise, the concerned parties must give full support and show commitment to resolving issues at the round table meeting by their willingness to find a peaceful solution. The parties concerned must be prepared to compromise as well as reach a concession to accommodate a give and take affair in the conflicts or crises. Evidences reveals that, at the end of discussion on conflicting issues, usually there is no side completely right or wrong, the more reason why room should be given to dialogue. As such, sacrifice(s) still need to be made by each of the parties involved. Forcing one party or the other to embrace and implement the resolutions than they themselves will means steering up more conflicts. Likewise, peacekeepers or mediators must equally have a good focus. At the end mediators should see their

mission to be more of prevention of the re-occurrence of the problem that caused the crisis and conflict and lay good foundation for reconciliation.

Limitation
However, the present study is not without some limitations as the scope of the research centred mainly on the workplace conflict and its resolution without collection of primary date. The restrictive nature of the study has posed threat to the generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the study has made an important contribution to the understanding of the relationship between workplace conflict and conflict management.

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