

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

Dr. M. I. Otegbulu

Abstract

The paper made an indepth examination and explanation of the concept conflict. It further exposed the various types of the concept, the causes including favouritism, interdependence and lack of resources. The paper then examined the effects of conflict, agreeing that there are both positive and negative sides to this. Conflict resolution and its mechanisms were then analyzed. The paper concluded by maintaining that for the school system to continue being relevant in its core mandate of societal transformation, effective conflict resolution strategies should be fashioned to handle conflict situations when they arise. Recommendations were then put forward.

At different periods, climes and circumstances, organizations exist in pursuit of certain stated objectives. Such objectives of course portend growth and well being for both organization and constituting individual members. As these individuals interact, there must arise at certain times misunderstanding in terms of beliefs, convictions, interests and of course perceptions. These divergencies constitute conflict. In all organizations such as schools, churches, political parties and corporate entities, conflict is never and can never be a strange phenomenon. It is infact part of organizational life and part of our everyday existence.

Conflict constitute the exposed struggle between at least two individuals who perceive incompatible goals or interference from others in achieving their goals (Hybels and Weaver, 2001). Thomas (1992) and Slabbert (2004) agree that conflict is the process that begins when one party perceives that the other has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect something that he or she cares about. According to Aula and Siira (2010), conflict is part of human consciousness in all aspects of life. One cannot avoid conflict when in the school, at home, at the office or even when watching television. Aula and Siira contend that conflict is inevitable and even desirable; concluding that to work in an organization is to be in conflict.

Conflict is when two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory in nature and have not been aligned or agreed about yet, including: within oneself, when one is not living according to ones values; when values and perspectives are threatened; or discomfort from fear of the unknown or from lack of fulfillment. Conflict is inevitable and often good, for example, good teams always go through a “form, storm, norm and perform” period. Getting the most out of diversity means often contradictory values, perspectives and opinions (Mcnamara in Ramani and Zhimin, 2010).

In explaining conflict from its nature as perceived in the different behavioural disciplines, Babalola, Oni and Ayeni (2006) reveal that;

1. The anthropologists perceive conflict as arising from cultural and societal differences. It is believed that conflict arises due to differences in the people’s language, religion and culture.
2. The economists believe that conflict occurs because there are disagreements in the formula for allocation of scarce resources (for production purposes).
3. The sociologists and political scientists believe that conflict is engendered from class system which includes the lower, the middle and upper classes, or sometimes, the haves and the have nots or in egalitarian terms, the proliferates and the bourgeois.
4. Psychologists and psychiatrists analyze conflict in terms of personalities. The disorderliness is perceived as personal and intra-psychic. Personal conflict goes on throughout life.

Conflict may connote animality, violence, destruction, barbarization, loss of civilized control and irrationality. Alternatively, conflict may connote adventure, novelty, clarification, creation, growth and dialectical rationality (Beins, Nerne and chin in Aguba, 2009).

From the foregoing, it is very clear that conflict is a permanent feature of organizational life. It is also clear that organizational conflict portends both positive and negative outcomes for both organizations and individuals; It is therefore imperative and appropriate conflict resolution mechanisms should be available so that organizational conflict do not escalate as this would be not only dangerous, but destructive for both organization and individual members.

Types of Conflict

Organizational conflict is a pervasive phenomenon. In the secondary school system, conflict could occur between and amongst staff members, between staff and students and even between staff, students and community members. Gamble and Gamble in Ojebode (2006), recognizes two distinct types of conflict. They include; cooperative and competitive conflict.

Cooperative conflict occurs when the people involved decide to resolve their differences in a way that satisfies both of them. To do this, the people involved in the conflict are not insulted or demeaned. Communication is free, open and everyone is treated with dignity. Most conflicts escalate because people do not cooperate.

In competitive conflict however, the aim is to win at the expense of the other person. In fact each person or group acts as a combatant, puts his or her feet down and refuses to yield. This type of conflict is so common in educational institutions in Nigeria. In the secondary system in Enugu state and elsewhere, it is either that some teachers are refusing blatantly to subordinate to the authority of the principal, or students are protesting for one reason or the other, better still the principal is insisting on having his way at all times. Of course conflict is the result.

Contributing, Oku, Emenalo and Okeke (2008: 187-188), identify the following types of conflict.

1. **Role Conflict:** In this case, a person conforms to two or more contradictory sets of roles at the same time. Conformity to one role would prevent the execution of another.
2. **Personality Conflict:** A person who holds a principle (eg democratic principle) finds himself operating another principle (eg autocratic principle).
3. **Role-Personality Conflict:** A person's role expectation is at variance with his need disposition. For example a principal is expected to use school equipment to improve the lot of the school, but if he sells them in order to enrich himself, he will be experiencing role-personality conflict.
4. **Cognitive Conflict:** Centres on differences in perspectives or judgments about issues. Legitimate differences of opinion can be expressed, better ideas can be developed and problems can be solved when this type of conflict occurs. It is constructive in nature.
5. **Affective Conflict:** This has to do with a person's emotion and it is directed against other people. It can lead to anger, bitterness, goal displacement and lower quality decision. It is destructive in nature.
6. **Intrapersonal Conflict:** This is the type of conflict that occurs within a person. Examples of intrapersonal conflict include choice of partner, moral question or a decision to abandon a bad practice, use of time, taking a vital decision etc.
7. **Intragroup Conflict:** Conflict between people within the same group.
8. **Intergroup Conflict:** Conflict between organizations, families or institutions.
9. **Intranational Conflict:** Internal conflict between small groups within the country.
10. **International Conflict:** Conflict between two or more nations. This could be for ideological reasons, territorial claims, natural resources or other interests (Wenger and Daniel, 2003).

Causes of Conflict

It is impossible to separate conflicts from organizations. Organizational members come from different backgrounds, think so differently and communicate so uniquely. These make conflict a high probability. It becomes imperative therefore to determine the causes of conflict. It is important to state that many conflicts are either avoidable or unnecessary.

Findings indicate that most conflict arise out of simple miscommunication, misunderstandings, unintended meanings, irrelevant differences, poor choices, ineffective styles, unclear roles and responsibilities, false expectations, different standards, fluctuating economic and political conditions, or personal misfortune. These, very often have nothing to do with the issues that are the basis of the conflict and can easily be corrected with learning and dialogue (Elangovan, 1998).

In a study in Oshun State, Okotoni and Okotoni (2003), found that the following are the causes of conflict within the secondary school system. They are arranged in their order of importance.

1. Unimpressive conditions of service
2. Partial implementation of the minimum wage salaries approved by the Federal Government for workers.
3. Forceful and compulsory retirement/retrenchment of workers.
4. Administrative incompetence of principals.
5. Misappropriation and embezzlement of school funds.
6. Indiscipline (on the part of both staff and students).
7. Negligence of duty.
8. Personality clashes
9. Inferiority / Superiority complex.
10. Favouritism
11. Role conflicts
12. Misunderstanding of motives
13. Youthful exuberance

In their own investigation, Hotepo, Asokere, Abdul-Azeez and Ajemunigbohun found the following in order of importance as causes of organizational conflict:

1. Lack of resources
2. Different expectations
3. Competition
4. Lack of cooperation
5. Salary comparison
6. Interdependence
7. Communication problems.

Aguba (2009), listed the following as causes of conflict in schools;

1. **Principals Leadership style:** According to Igbo (2002), any principal that is authoritarian in his/her leadership style is likely to issue draconian orders that are inimical to the growth, happiness and mutual cooperation of his/her subordinates (teachers and other workers) of course, conflict is the result.
2. **Stress:** This is a major cause of conflict in schools. Teaching is a 24hours business that requires both mental and physical energies. Some teachers who are overworked in terms of work load could easily get stressed and vent their anger at the slightest provocation. Conflict is the result.
3. **Lack of Professional Training:** Mgbodile (1997), opines that lack of professional training could engender conflict between principals and teachers. Teachers and principals who lack sound

professional nurturing are bound to be continuously enmeshed in conflict situations due to lack of proper knowledge of role expectations and work schedule.

4. **Poor Communication:** Obi (1997), identifies poor communication system as a source of conflict in schools. Communication in any organization has the capacity of motivating or influencing behaviour. This is because as people interact with others to work or solve problems, ideas, attitudes and feelings are exchanged and understood. If communication in any organization is distorted and poorly conveyed, work may be paralyzed, frustration may set in and finally, conflict situations may arise. To this end, teachers whose duties and work schedules are not clearly stated and conveyed to are likely to be prone to frustration and by implication, crisis situation.
5. **Poor Motivation:** Obi (1997), posits that motivation is the perceptions, methods and activities used by the management for the purpose of providing a climate that is conducive to the satisfaction of the various needs of the employees so that they may become satisfied, dedicated and effective task performers. Okoro (1998), maintains that teachers are overworked and underpaid. A situation of this nature is sure to attract conflict, as a hungry man is an angry man. The incessant strike actions involving teachers is a case in point.

Effects of Conflict in Organizations

Many believe that conflict is always a negative phenomenon. This standpoint is misplaced, as conflict could be both positive and negative depending on how it is handled. On the positive side, conflict;

1. Builds cooperation
2. Enhances organizational innovativeness and productivity
3. Engenders individual developments
4. Improves decision making both at individual and organizational levels
5. Conflict management and resolution skills are improved. On the negative side however conflict;
6. Interferes with organization operations
7. Engenders lack of cooperation
8. Enhances the wastage of resources
9. Engenders low productivity
10. Impedes cohesion in organizations including the schools.

Conflict Resolution in Secondary Schools

Education is the greatest instrument for positive change. Any society desirous of development must therefore not only ensure quality education for its citizenry, but ensure a conducive atmosphere for such to thrive. It is therefore imperative that whenever conflicts arise in the school organization, it must be handled immediately and with tact in order to reap its full benefits. Instead of its destructive outcome.

The principal is the chief executive officer of the secondary school organization. He/she is responsible for the overall organization, control and maintenance of standards in the school. It is also in large part the duty of the principal to ensure that the stated objectives of secondary education as specified in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004), is achieved.

The principal is not just the chief accounting officer of the school, he is incharge of a community of a variety of staff and students, who look up to him for direction (Iravo, 2002). Kochhar (2005) emphasizes the importance of the principal whom he notes is the key cornerstone in the arch of the school management, having the steering wheel in his hands. Kochhar maintains that the principal should be a group leader who knows how to involve people, arrange conditions and initiate processes that bring out the best in each participant (the school personnel ie teaching, non-teaching staff) and the students. Kochhar in Ramani and Zhimin (2010 : 246), asserts that;

The school is as great as the principal is because everything in the school; the plant, the staff, the curriculum, methods and techniques of teaching, among other human relationship, bear the imprint of his/her personality and the way conflict resolutions are handled. Schools do not become great because of magnificent buildings but because of magnificent principals who are keen on the role of management in conflict resolution.

The above postulation reveals that the principals place in handling conflicts in the school system cannot be ignored. To be effective therefore the principal needs; drive, energy, vision, personality and above all sound knowledge of conflict resolution techniques. In the words of Griffin in Ramani and Zhimin (246-247);

A principal's public and professional reputation will depend more on the standard of stability in his school than on any other single factor. Good stability brings good results in every field of school endeavour. A principal who lets any form of conflict out of his hands is risking trouble. Should any form of mass conflict occur, the wise principal will resist the temptation to find a scapegoat, be it the Ministry of Education, the Board of Governors, Politicians, Parents and staff, but will instead take a long hard look at his own conflict management and resolution methods. If his school becomes unstable in any way, then it implies that foundations of management in conflict resolution were not established in the school, and the blame for this is his/hers.

It is clear that any school's reputation largely depends on the principal who can make or mar the school. The principal stimulates teamwork, coordinates the effort of staff, plans what to be done, directs the finding of solutions to common problems of the school and evaluates performance to determine success or failure. Fisher (2000) identified some conflict resolution strategies to include;

1. **Win-Lose Approach**

In the win-lose approach to conflict resolution, one side loses while the other wins. It is also called the "fixed pie", and involves; competition, dominance and aggression. One side in the conflict is forced to capitulate. This could be done through socially acceptable mechanisms including majority vote, authority of the leader or the determination of a judge. On the other hand, it could involve secret strategies, threat, innuendo-whatever works is acceptable, the end justifying the means.

In this approach there is a victor who is superior and a vanquished who withdraws in shame, but who prepares very carefully for the next round. On the long run, everyone loses.

2. **Lose-Lose Strategy**

This involves smoothing over conflict by reaching the simplest of compromises. Each party gets some and loses some of what it wants and resigns itself to partial satisfaction. Neither party is aware that by confronting the conflict fully and cooperatively, they might create a more satisfying solution and outcome. The parties realistically use the approach to divide limited resources thereby forestalling a win-lose escalation and outcome.

3. **The Win-Win Approach**

In agreement with Fisher (2006), Kapusuzoglu (2010), posits that this approach is a conscious and systematic attempt to maximize the goals of both parties through collaborative problem solving. The conflict is seen as a problem to be solved rather than a war to be won. The important distinction is we (both parties) versus the problem, rather than (one party) versus they (the other party). This method focuses on the needs and constraints of both parties rather than emphasizing strategies designed to conquer. The parties work toward common and superordinate goals ie goals that can only be attained by both parties pulling together. There is emphasis on the quality of the long term relationships between the parties, rather than short term accommodations. Communication is open and direct. Threat and coercion are proscribed. The win-win approach requires a very high degree of patience and skill in human relations and problem solving.

Conclusion

Conflict has become an inescapable fact of human existence. It pervades both individual and organizational life. The school as an indispensable agent of socialization, must through its manager(s) involve very workable conflict resolution strategies. This will certainly position it (the school) in order to effectively achieve its core mandate of knowledge dissemination and societal transformation.

Recommendations

1. School administrators should always adopt democratic style of governance. In this wise, both staff and students should always be given the opportunity to openly air their views on matters agitating their minds.
2. Seminars, workshops and conferences on conflict should be organized as often as possible for the school community. This exposes everyone to a deeper understanding of conflict and conflict resolution mechanisms.
3. Conflict and conflict resolution should be included in the secondary school curriculum, including the programme of teacher education.
4. Governments should as a matter of utmost importance take workers welfare more serious to avoid incessant strike actions.
5. There should be clear job specifications for all school staff.
6. Management and other staff should ensure strict adherence to probity, transparency and accountability.
7. Favouritism and discrimination should as much as possible be eliminated from the various schools.
8. Adequate infrastructure should be provided in the various schools to make the school environments more conducive to teaching and learning.
9. Both management and teachers should take care of students' feelings and emotions. Use of verbal abuse as much as possible should be checked as it creates a sense of dislike in the students.

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Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Secondary Schools in Nigeria

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