

DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract

The dynamics of conflict in human services settings is complex. It involves not only the clients themselves, but also the human services workers. The ability to predict who will cause conflict when and under what conditions has been notoriously unreliable. Conflict is a natural part of interactions and, when effectively addressed, improves interpersonal relationships and can promote organizational growth. Conflict arises where interdependency exists, and conflict resolution is necessary to build positive relationships with others as well as meet one's own needs. Conflicts may be dealt with by competing, where there is a winner and a loser; walking away from the situation; or negotiating a mutually satisfying solution. Curiously, negotiations become most important in conflict situations where the parties are struggling over seemingly divergent interests. The paper presented several perspectives on managing conflicts which is another fact of organizational life. These perspectives enhance our understanding of conflict such that we can establish more effective conflict management processes in the Education System. This paper is therefore seeking to find out strategies for conflict management in Nigerian Education System. Recommendations were made, one of which is that school administrators should endeavour to build a good working relationship among staff and students.

Wherever there are people, there is conflict. The results of conflict can range from minor inconveniences to major losses, even organizational failures. Nigerian education system contains a greater amount of conflict today than in the past, mainly because of the divergent interest among the management, staff and students. Because of this increased conflict problem, the system is badly in need of both management, staff and students who can handle conflict realistically and deal with it in a helpful manner.

Conflict generally is a term with different meanings but in this paper, conflict is defined as mutual hostility in inter-human relationships in educational institutions in Nigeria. Mutual hostility can occur in the form of insults, name-calling, defamation of character or blackmailing, stepping into another's shoes, sarcasm, false accusations, withdrawal of love, and support, withdrawal of services, salaries, fringe benefits or incentives, strikes, sudden transfer, suspension, termination of appointment, demotion, marginalization, deprivation, boycott of classes, violent demonstrations, detention, open violence, or killing, etc. conflict do occur at the level of inter-personal, inter-group, organizational or intra-organizational relationships involving the chief executive (vice chancellor, provost, rector, principal or the headmaster/headmistress) and the rest of staff; the super-ordinate cadre and the

subordinates; the senior and the junior staff; the students/pupils and the school authority ; the school and the community etc. Thus conflict by the definition in this study is not necessarily disagreement, differences or argument. Disagreement, differences, or argument are conflict promoting factors which can become conflicts when hostility characterizes them. It is therefore the task of this paper among other things to:

1. explain the concept of conflict and conflict management;
2. establish the behavioural styles for conflict situations and different styles of managing conflict;
3. examine the qualities of an effective conflict resolution method and strategies for effective conflict management in Nigeria Education System in relation to Primary, Secondary and Tertiary levels.

Concept of Conflict

Fundamental to our focus on basic concepts of conflict is a brief on what conflict is all about. Consensus is achieved by scholars that conflict is an inevitable part or process of social life. It is a continuing reality of social existence. Necessarily, conflict involves two or more parties that have, or perceive incompatibility in either interests and values, or in strategy of achieving the ends desired (Akpuru-Aja, 2009). For sure, conflict is a strain in a relationship that goes emotion. The higher the emotion, the higher the

tendency of evolving conflict intensity. Most standard dictionaries defined "conflict: as a clash between incompatible people, ideas or interests. These conflicts are almost always perceived as negative experiences in our society. But when we view conflict as a negative experience, we may be hurting our chances of dealing with it effectively. In reality, conflicts can serve as opportunities for personal growth if we develop and use positive, constructive conflict resolution skills.

Concept of Conflict Management

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 (Gaya, 2009). The term "conflict management" is sometimes used synonymously with "conflict regulation". It covers the entire area of handling conflicts positively at different stages, including those efforts made to prevent conflict, by being proactive. It encompasses conflict limitation, containment and litigation. In the words of Burton (2000) in Gaya (2009) conflict management may include "conflict prevention" a term he used to connote containment of conflict through steps introduced to promote conditions in which collaborative and valued relationships control the behaviour of conflict parties. The term "conflict management" is perhaps an admission of the reality that conflict is inevitable, but that not all conflicts can always be

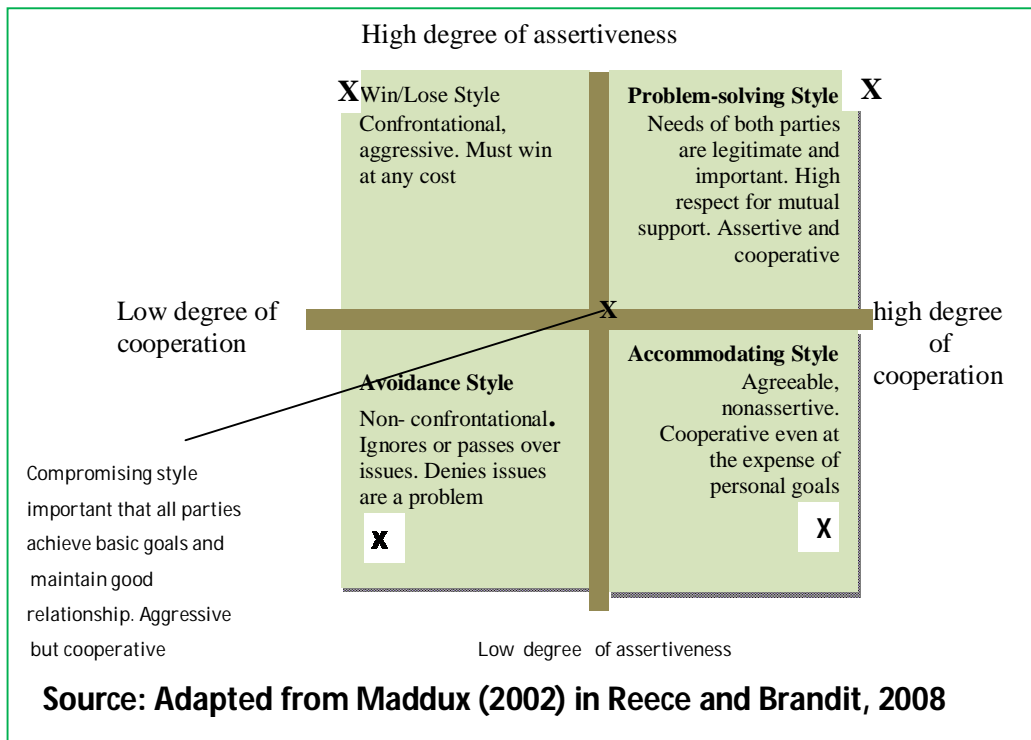
resolved; therefore what practitioners can do is to manage and regulate them.

Behavioural Styles for Conflict Situations

Maddux (2002) in Reece and Brandt (2008) suggested that there are five different behavioural styles that can be used during a conflict situation. These styles are based on the combination of two factors: assertiveness and cooperation. He took the position that different styles may be appropriate in different situations (see figure1).

FIGURE 1

Behavioural Styles for Conflict Situations



Difference Styles of Managing Conflict

Maddux (2002) in Reece and Brandit (2008) noted that people have many different styles of managing conflict: These styles according to him include:

Avoidance Style (Uncooperative/Nonassertive)

This style is appropriate when the conflict is too minor or too great to resolve. Any attempt to resolve the

conflict might result in damaging a relationship or simply wasting time and energy. Avoidance might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue or postponing your response until a more appropriate time.

Accommodating Style (Cooperative/Nonassertive)

This style is appropriate when resolving the conflict is not worth risking damage to the relationship or general disharmony. Individuals who

use this approach relinquish their own concerns to satisfy the concerns of someone else. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or blind obedience to another's point of view.

Win/Lose Style (Uncooperative /Aggressive)

This style may be appropriate when the conflict involves "survival of the fittest", when you must prove your superior position, or when your opinion is the most ethically or professionally correct. This power-oriented position allows you to use whatever means seem appropriate when it is time to stand up for your rights.

Problem-Solving Style (Assertive /Cooperative)

This style is appropriate when all parties openly discuss the issues and a mutually beneficial solution can be found without anyone making a major concession. Problem solvers attempt to uncover underlying issues that may be at the root of the problem and then focus the discussion toward achieving the most desirable outcome. They seek to replace conflict with collaboration.

Compromising Style (Moderately Aggressive/Moderately Cooperative)

This style is appropriate when no one person or idea is perfect, when there is more than one good way to do something, or when you must give to get what you want. Compromise attempts to find mutually acceptable solutions to the

conflict that partially satisfy both sides. Never use this style when unethical activities are the cause of the conflict.

Qualities of an Effective Conflict Resolution Method

An effective strategy for conflict resolution method according to Reece and Brandit (2008) include:

1. **Clarifies Interest**
 - a. by encouraging both sides to examine the real best interest of their positions.
 - b. by aiding both sides in exploring what interests they have in common.
 - c. by communicating each sides interest to the other without unduly exposing anyone to manipulation.
2. **Builds a Good Working Relationship**
 - a. by giving both sides the chance to deal effectively with their differences.
 - b. by fostering the type of relationship both sides would have wanted if it weren't for the dispute.
 - c. by making it easier for both sides to deal with each other next time.
3. **Generates Good Opinions**
 - a. by spurring both parties to brainstorm many options before evaluating them and choosing which one to use.
 - b. by encouraging both sides to come up with creation of solutions that benefits everyone.

4. **Is seen by Both Sides As Legitimate**
- a. by not causing side to give up more power than the other.
 - b. by not being seen as going against public interest.
 - c. by instilling in both side a sense that the solution will be fair and equitable.
5. **Improves communication**
- a. by encouraging the questioning and testing of underling assumptions.
 - b. by aiding the understanding and discussion of differing perceptions of reality.
 - c. by establishing effective two-way communication between decision makers.
6. **Leads to wise commitments**
- a. by enabling both sides to devise commitments that are realistic, useful, and not likely to lead to future confrontations .
 - b. by positioning both sides with recourse if the agreement breaks down or is not honored.

presented a conceptual framework shown below in figure 2:

Conflict Management Strategies

This section attempts to examine the various strategies aimed at conflict management in Nigerian Education System. Particular emphasis would be given to conflict management strategies such as: dialogue, arbitration, boxing the problem among others. For a comprehensive perception and understanding of the dynamics of conflict, Nye (1973) in Ezegebe (1997)

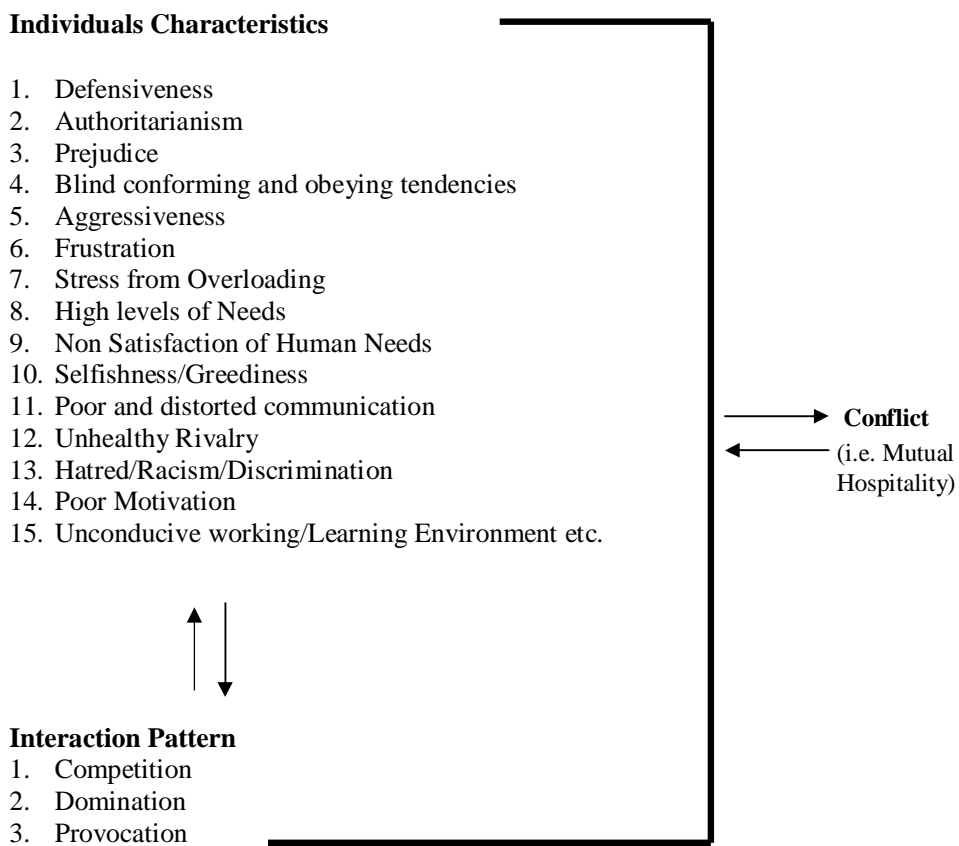


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the Dynamics of Conflict promoting factors.

Nye (1973) in Ezegbe (1997) further stated that conflict promoting factors affect each other, individual characteristics are capable of instigating and intensifying interaction patterns, and vice-versa (thus, the arrows between these two sets of factors). Conflict is produced from combinations of individual characteristics and interaction patterns. Conflict, once begun, tends to

intensify, and add to, the very factors that produce it.

Handy (1978) in Ezegbe (1997) identified the following as effective strategies in conflict management namely (1) Dialogue; (2) Arbitration; (3) Boxing the

Problem (4) Confrontation and (5) Neglect/Silence.

By Dialogue the people or individuals in conflict are brought together to expose and discuss the issues and problems involved in the conflict aimed at gaining a clearer view of factors causing and promoting the conflict. The Educational Administrator takes the initiative to bring the combatants into a meaningful dialogue, face to face to examine and discuss the factors, issues and problems. It gives those in conflict the opportunity to express their feelings, their grievances and views on the matter. A healthy dialogue frees the mind of grudges and bitterness to bury the hatchet and settle the conflict.

Arbitration is a process by which a peace maker, arbitrator or a peace panel settles the conflict through appealing to the conscience of those in conflicts. Dialogue, persuasive speech, exchange of ideas, empathy and good communication can be used to achieve resolution of the conflicts. The arbitration panel or the peace panel is usually appointed by the management to settle the conflict. Members of the panel are usually impartial individuals acceptable to those in conflict. Sometimes, those in conflict are given the option to choose or appoint the arbiter or the arbitrators.

In Boxing the problem factors responsible for the conflict are identified by the Group or the Organization. The

problem is examined carefully through a critical evaluation of it aimed at destroying the problem or exposing the triviality or the issues inherent in the identified problem or problems. The problem can be subjected to a public debate on the matter aimed at destroying or eliminating it through constructive criticism and exposition of its triviality or emptiness.

By Confrontation, the issue and problem can be subjected to a debate between those in conflict or neutral groups in order to expose the problem and convince the combatants of its emptiness.

Neglect or Silence can be used occasionally by the chief executive to prove to those in conflict that the conflict is not important to merit the attention of the Vice Chancellor, rector, provost, Principal or the headmaster. Neglect or Silence involves delaying tactics which can disarm the combatants emotionally as they wait for days or months on end, without any practical action on the part of the chief executive. The build-up emotional anger can dwindle as the delay, neglect or silence continues to end the conflict. This particular strategy, however, should be used with caution because neglected or silenced problems may gather momentum one day to erupt like a volcano which may do more harm than good.

Other strategies that can contribute to conflict resolution or

tension reduction according to Ezegebe (1997) include the following:

- (1) Effective catharsis;
- (2) Super-ordinate goals;
- (3) Empathy;
- (4) Grit Theory;
- (5) Culture of Civility;
- (6) Synergy;
- (7) An Address by an influential person;
- (8) Satisfaction of Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs;
- (9) Prayer
- (10) Separation. Device, etc.

Catharsis, according to psychologists, refers to emotional release accomplished by some behavior. In conflict situations involving aggressiveness, catharsis is strongly recommended to avert it. To this end, Lorenz (1966) recommended the involvement of aggressive individuals in sporting activities such as football games, Table-Tennis, Lawn-Tennis, Athletics which can let off steam of in-built aggressiveness in an individual. To this end, bullies in schools should be involved in sports and games in order to affect catharsis in them to make them friendly.

Super-ordinate Goals: According to Sheriff (1959), "a super-ordinate goal is one which is compelling to the groups in conflict and requires joint effort for its accomplishment. It creates a condition of inter-dependence and co-operation between conflicting groups. For example, two Hostels or Houses in conflict can be made to pursue super-ordinate goals in the form of fetching water for cooking food for their super or fencing their open premises for their

security. More compelling goals are strongly recommended.

Empathy involves putting oneself into the feeling of others. Thus empathy reduces aggressiveness in individuals. According to Feshbach and Feshbach (1969) boys who are high in empathy are less aggressive than boys who are lower in empathy. "Ability to sense the distress of another person decreases the tendency to injure him". Participation in relevant simulation games, drama or opera is very effective.

The Grit Theory: This theory was formulated by Osgood (1962). It is referred to as "Graduated reciprocation in Tension-reduction". In a conflict between two Groups over sharing or even distribution of leadership positions in an educational institution, the Grit theory would recommend for example that if group A has the Principal, Group B will have the vice Principal and where Group A has the Dean of Studies, Group B will have the Bursar etc., in a group reciprocal relationship in order to reduce tension and thereby resolve the conflict over one group monopolizing all the leadership positions and marginalizing the other. Step by step, each group surrenders some power positions to her opponent as compensation.

Culture of Civility: Demands tolerance or accommodation for different behaviours by others. The manager of conflict should endeavour through teaching, lectures or preaching educate

those in conflict that they are unique individuals to complement and serve one another through inter-personal on inter-human acceptance, recognition and co-operation for achievement of the organizational goals.

Synergy: Refers to a combined action which is greater than the sum of separate actions. According to Benedict (1970), individual's actions in a society with high synergy benefits the person and the society as a whole, while a society with low synergy engages in actions that benefit the individual to the disadvantage of the masses. High synergy therefore, provides for humanitarian services such as unemployment insurance, Medicare at low cost to benefit the staff in an organization, or Nations Medical plan to benefit the masses. In an Educational Institution, for example, a conducive teaching and learning environment reduces tension among the staff, or the distribution of essential commodities to staff at cheap price reduces tension and conflict in an organization. Further, occasional distribution of some harvest produces from the school farm to staff can reduce tension among staff.

An Address by an Influential Person: Conflict can be resolved by inviting a highly respected person or an influential person in a community to talk or appeal to those in conflict to bury the hatchet.

The Satisfaction of Human Needs: Abraham Maslow (1943) proposes the

satisfaction of a hierarchy of human needs in sequential order for effective management of human conflict in an organization. Five human needs are identified, starting with the satisfaction of the psychological needs at the base as illustrated in figure 3:

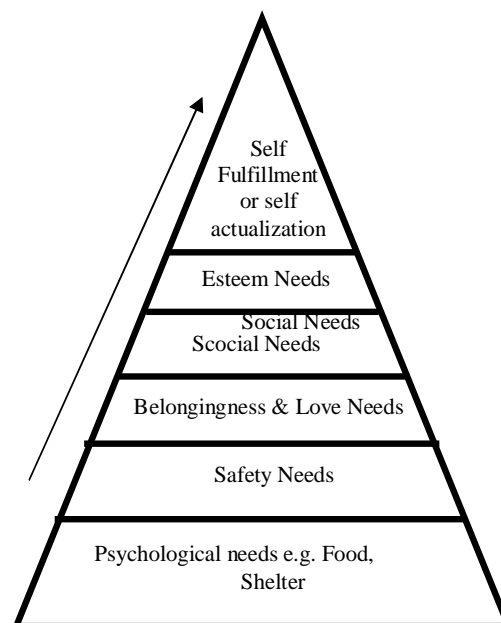


Figure 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In an educational institution as in every organization, the chief executive/the management should aim at satisfying this hierarchy of human needs in order to reduce tension and effectively resolve human conflict that may result from non-satisfaction of these needs.

Prayer is an indispensable strategy in the management of conflict. Through prayer the problem is taken to our father-in-heaven who is in charge of every human situation. God is always there to affect a lasting solution to any conflict if you take it to the Lord in Prayer.

Separation Device can be used when further human relationships cause more harm than good. The Separation Device can be in the form of transfer of staff in conflict to other towns as an intervening or modifying measure to change the environment of conflict. This is a temporary measure to reduce the tension for sometime until a lasting solution is discovered.

In the School and Community Conflicts, effort should be made to establish positive channels of communication and co-operation through reciprocal relationships between the two in social serves to each other. Effective use of the P.T.A., involvement of some indigenes in the school as labourers, cooks; security men etc, involving the establishment of social fields, interest fields, Business fields, Opinion fields, Public Education fields, health fields, Religious fields, Exhibition fields, etc. promote cordial relationships between the school and the community. Further, the community should provide adequate resources and security to the school. The use of intimidation rituals, violence and

victimization should be avoided in order to achieve lasting solutions to conflicts.

The use of non-violence means in the management of conflict is strongly recommended because of its human/humane face and lasting effectiveness. Our Lord Jesus Christ, Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. successfully used and recommended non-violence in the management of conflict.

Educational Administrators as managers of conflict, should be as wise as the serpent in monitoring the trend of a conflict or crisis in order to be able to detect in time, the root, the smoke, the pulse and size. This will enable the manager to counteract, control, detect or stop the conflict before its violent eruption. In the case of violent conflict characterized by fighting, threat to life, destruction of life and property, the conflict manager should be fast to take intervention decisions in the form of temporary closure of institution, mobilization of security agents or invitation of the police to pacify the school environment to be conducive enough for a further effort through dialogue for a lasting and final settlement of the conflict.

Conclusion

In the process of human existence, we are bound to encounter one type of conflict or the other, whether we like it or not. The important thing is not to grumble over conflicts, but to find ways

and means of managing or resolving conflicts. When conflicts are left unresolved, they will gradually but surely precipitate us into an unpalatable situation or condition. Understanding the multipurpose nature of conflict is vital for system maintenance and preservation. Not surprisingly, basic concepts of conflict are an expanse. It is not limited to conflict bound processes but also problem solving processes such as conflict resolution, conflict management, post confidence building measures. Together, they serve as analytical and problem solving tools required to achieve a security friendly environment for satisfying needs in Nigerian education system as well as achieving education for all.

Recommendations

In the light of the above discussion the following recommendations are therefore, made:

1. Institutions in Nigerian education system should explore the possibility of building a good working relationship among management, staff and students. This is to promote peaceful co-existence in the school environment.
2. Various institutions' administrators should endeavour to enhance good administration. Good administration not only reduces tension but enables the decision makers to take required decisions in order to carry the staff and students along.

3. There should be effective communication system. The importance of communication in conflict prevention and management cannot be over-emphasized when one takes into cognizance that most conflicts originate from perceptions, assumptions, stereotypes, and attitudes which the conflict parties put out of proportion.
4. Government should encourage the introduction and adoption of the use of early warning system. In this regard, the police and other security agencies should be adequately trained and equipped to prevent and respond to outbreak of violent conflicts.

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