

Conflict Management in Kenyan Secondary Schools

Mike A. Iravo (Ph. D)

Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, P.O. Box 62000-00200, Nairobi-Kenya
e-mail: mutiriki@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine conflict management in organizations as experienced in Kenyan secondary schools. Using a descriptive research design we collected data from 43 secondary schools in Machakos County, Kenya. We found that when the management is knowledgeable in conflict resolution, the schools also performed better. In spite of the limitations of our study these results reflect the central role conflict management plays in achieving organizational goals. Ergo we recommend integration of conflict management in leadership development programs for school principals.

Key words: Conflict, Management and Organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict may have either a positive or a negative effect on organizational performance, depending on the nature of the conflict and how it is managed Armstrong (2009). For every organization, an optimal level of conflict exists which is considered highly functional as it helps to generate good performance. When the conflict level is too high (dysfunctional), performance suffers. Consequently, innovation and change may become unmanageable and the organization may not adapt to change in its environment (Beardwell and Claydon, 2007). According to Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (2004) the informal resolution of dissatisfaction is an essential part of effective day-to-day management. Most difficulties can be resolved as they arise but more formal arrangements are necessary when dissatisfaction in the employment relationship becomes unresolved conflict.

For a group to be effective, individual members need to be able to work in a positive conflict environment. If conflict is well managed, it adds to innovation and productivity (Murthy, 2006). Bricoe and Schuler (2004) have offered procedures for turning dysfunctional conflict into functional conflict, stating that too many organizations tend to take a win-lose, competitive approach to conflict or at worst avoid conflict altogether. Such a negative view of conflict ensures that a group is ineffective and the activity within it becomes destructive. However, a positive view of conflict leads to a win-win solution. Within a group, the member can take any one of the three views of conflict: dysfunctional conflict, conflict avoidance and functional conflict.

Some practicing managers view group conflict negatively and thus seek to resolve or eliminate all types of disputes (Dowling *et al*, 2008). These managers contend that conflicts disrupt the organization and prevent optimal performance. As such, conflicts are a clear indication that something is wrong with the organization and that sound principles are not being applied in managing the activities of the organization. Browarys & Price (2008) base their approaches on the principles of authority and unity of command to eliminate conflict. They believe that conflicts could be eliminated or avoided by recruiting the right people, carefully specifying job descriptions, structuring the organization in such a way as to establish a clear chain of command, and establishing clear rules and procedures to meet various contingencies.

Managers who view all conflicts as disruptive make it their task to eliminate them Griffin (2006). The main fear being the emergence of disputes arising from unchecked conflicts even where such conflicts are on a small scale. Instead of permitting heated differences to develop, proactive managers address the problems early before they degenerate to conflicts within groups and between groups (Thomas & Christopher, 2001).

Human resource policies are vital in addressing both individual and group conflict in an organization. Gupta (2008) posits that human resource policies provide guidelines for a wide variety of employment relationship in the organization. To effectively solve conflict an organization, human resource policies need address areas where conflicts may arise such as management of human resources and organizational development, compensation including profit sharing and incentives, working conditions, employee's services and welfare relations. The policies should provide checks and balances in the daily running of an organization at all levels, thereby promoting a spirit of teamwork and loyalty. For the line and top management, the policies should address the process of decision making and provide standards or yardsticks for control. With respect to an organization's goals and objectives, apart from being clearly written, human resource policies should be flexible.

In the Kenyan education system, various legislations serve as guidelines for management and administration of educational institutions. However, it appears that most educational institutions have been less successful in management of conflicts MOE (2002). The Ministry of Education (2002) report indicated that in spite of the government policies put in place, Kenyan educational institutions have continued to report increased cases of conflict. In the recent past, the concern has shifted to the changing nature and increased number of organizational conflicts. Most of these conflicts occurred in secondary schools, middle level colleges and tertiary institutions MOE (2002). Many of the conflicts were characterized by violence and wanton destruction of institutional property. Between 1980 and 2008, the number of conflicts in public secondary schools alone increased from 22 (0.9%) to 300 (7.5%) (MOE, 2008).

The objective of our study was to examine conflict management in public secondary schools in Machakos County. Further we sought to examine how conflict handling techniques were related to conflict awareness among the school principals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

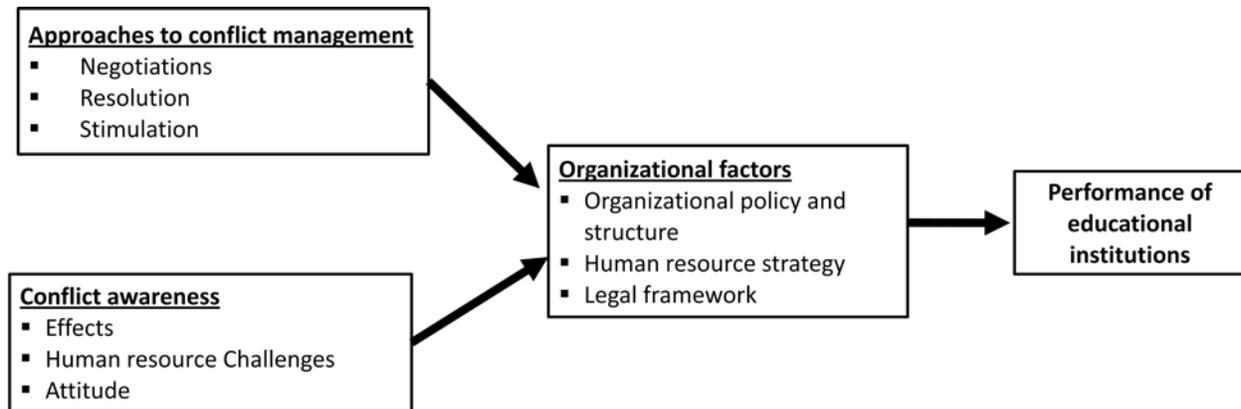
Inter-group conflict may arise in situations where conflicting goals, task dependency, dissimilar work orientations, competition for limited resources, and competitive reward systems exist (Adler, 2008). Once conflict has surfaced, it goes through certain stages, covering a wide range of behaviours such as accommodating or avoiding it. This brings about change which can occur within and between groups. Some changes have positive effects and others have negative effects.

Interpersonal conflicts resulting from personality variables such as dislikes, distrust, or prejudice usually hinder group performance (Nzuve, 2007). When interpersonal conflict occurs, people are more concerned with gaining advantage over others than with task performance. Since the value of conflict can be determined by how it is managed, managers should know its sources and consequences so that they can find ways of managing it. Brown (2002) posits that the role of conflict management in organizational performance depends on contingent circumstances. Contingency theory recognizes the influence of given solution on organizational behaviour patterns.

Our study adopted models proposed by Muhammad *et al*, (2009) and Adler (2008). The conceptualized model is presented in figure 1 below. The conceptual model proposes a

mechanism where conflict awareness and conflict handling techniques impact on performance via organizational factors.

FIGURE 1
Conceptual model



RESEARCH METHODS

The Sample

Data was collected from public secondary schools in Machakos County in the Eastern Province of Kenya. The choice of this region was appropriate since it had experienced the highest occurrence of conflicts among public secondary schools in Kenya. Moreover given the region's proximity to Nairobi, the metropolitan capital City, the diversity of the students' population reflected typical public secondary schools in Kenya. The region has a sizeable number of provincial secondary schools that admit students from across the Nation and there is greater diversity among the principals heading the schools. It was thus our opinion that Machakos County was a fair representation of the rest of the country. A random sample of 43 principals representing 30% of the total population of public secondary school principals in Machakos County was selected.

Data collection

Data were gathered through the administration of a questionnaire to a cross-section of respondents drawn from various categories of school organizations. The questionnaire required the respondents to give their approaches, attitudes and effects of conflict in their respective secondary schools. They also compared the relationship between the management of conflict and the performance of their school organizations and came up with recommendations for improving conflict management in their respective public secondary schools. It was important to find out whether they linked organizational performance to prudent management of conflict. The questionnaire further required them to reflect on the extent of conflict in their respective secondary schools.

The survey instrument was pre-tested to improve its validity and relevance to the objectives of the study. The questionnaires were scrutinized for errors and omissions, ambiguity, legibility and relevance. The questionnaires' content, structure and sequence were appropriately amended to remove any ambiguities and to enhance content validity.

The study used a descriptive research design. The descriptive design was adopted because descriptive studies are not only useful for fact finding but often result in the formulation of important principles of knowledge and solution to significant problems (Orodho, 2003). Kombo and Tromp (2007) further observe that descriptive approach is designed to obtain information concerning the current phenomenon and wherever possible to draw valid conclusions from facts discussed.

The data collected was validated, screened and then coded. During the screening and validation process, the questions were checked for accuracy, missing values and errors. After going through all the questionnaires, uniform categories of responses were identified, classified and entered into appropriate categories. Swift and Piff (2005) observe that in any study, it is imperative that an appropriate analytical technique be adopted that brings out the quantitative meaning of the data. In this study, we considered the measurement scale of the variables, nature of data, number of variables involved, relationship between variables and the sample size.

Quantitative data was characterized using descriptive statistics to meaningfully describe the distribution of scores. The types of statistics or indices used depended on type of variables in this study and the scale of measurement used (for example ratio, interval, ordinal and normal).

RESULTS

Approaches used in Conflict Management

Our study sought to identify the most popular conflict management techniques among the selected school principals. Table 1 presents a summary of our findings. We found that 92.7% (i.e. 38 out of 41) of the respondents used stimulation techniques to manage conflicts within their institutions. Such strategies included transferring of individual with divergent views, suspension or expulsion, and use of incentives (kind of bribes) to suppress conflict. We found this very disappointing and tantamount to escapism as it offered only a temporal solution to the problem. This approach though preeminent is very unstable in the long run

TABLE 1
Frequency of Use of Conflict Management Techniques

Approach	Frequency	Percent
Resolution	17	41.5
Negotiation	16	39.1
Stimulation	38	92.7

Further our findings indicate that 41.5% of the respondents employed conflict resolution techniques to manage conflict. Such a process is all-inclusive and the personnel feel that their contribution to the solution of a conflict is acknowledged. In addition, 75.6% of the respondents reported frequently or always negotiating with staff to reach a compromise.

Thirty-nine percent of the respondents used negotiation technique strategies. The study findings indicated that 20 (49.7%) of the study respondents rarely or never used collaborative process in order to have joint gains with their personnel. Most of the study respondents were non-committal with regard to use of an all-inclusive negotiation strategies as conflict handling

techniques. For example, it is important to note that 13 (31.7%) of the respondents said that they always used splitting the difference (putting to vote) when there is an impasse in any conflict. In fact, 9 (21.7%) admitted that they frequently used splitting the difference when an impasse arises. This is an escape route and its benefits are always short-lived.

Some approaches to conflict resolution may promote a search for solutions whereas others may lead to deadlock. For example, self-awareness and care are essential to an effective approach to conflict management. The more one is aware of his/her own biases and "hot buttons," the more likely one is prepared mentally, emotionally and physically to respond in a preferred way to any conflict in an educational institution.

Human Resource Challenges Facing Institutions in Conflict Management

Having inquired about the use of conflict resolution in schools, we went on to determine the human resources challenges encountered in schools. As seen in table 2, absenteeism was reported to be a major challenge in most schools. Peer influence was also reported to be a major contributor (82.9%) of conflicts within schools. Peer influence appeared to be linked to other problems associated with conflicts in schools.

TABLE 2
Human resource challenges in schools

Problem Encountered	Frequency	Percent
Insubordination	25	60.9
Absenteeism	38	92.7
Friction and infighting	30	73.2
Drunkenness	19	46.3
Stealing	29	70.7
Drug abuse	23	56.1
Rudeness	30	73.2
Dissatisfaction	27	65.9
Peer group influence	34	82.9

The results shown in table 3 indicate that suspension and expulsion were the most common forms of disciplinary action employed by school principals in dealing with cases of indiscipline and conflict. The use of corporal punishment together with Guiding and counseling were moderately popular methods that the principals used but the use of experts was not as popular when dealing with indiscipline.

TABLE 3:
Methods applied to deal with indiscipline in schools

Disciplinary measure	Frequency	Percent
Suspension	38	92.7
Expulsion or sack	34	82.9
Guidance & counseling	27	65.9
Use discipline committees	31	75.6
Use Experts or specialists	11	26.8
Use corporal punishment	27	65.9

Shown in table 4 below is the frequency distributed of respondents reported capacity to deal with conflicts. The results indicate that the capacity to deal with conflict situations in schools is quite low and raise concern among Kenyan education policy makers in order to minimize conflicts within schools.

TABLE 4
Frequency distribution of capacity to deal with conflict

Capacity	Frequency	Percent
Trained personnel in conflict resolution	8	19.5
Resources and sourcing policies	8	19.5
Conflict resolution policies	8	19.5
Hiring and firing policies	7	17.1
Personnel development policies	8	19.5
Compensation and rewarding structures	10	24.4
Allocation and delegation of duties policies	10	24.4
Industrial relations policies	10	24.4
Management policies	12	29.3

The school principals reportedly felt various groups within the school community required attention in order to manage conflicts within and across the groups. The level of attention needed differed and table 5 presents a summary of the results.

TABLE 5
Need for attention among school community members

Require a lot of attention	Frequency	Percent
Teaching staff	25	61.0
Non-teaching staff	15	36.6
Students personnel	39	95.1

Attitude of the School CEOs towards Conflict Management

One of our objectives in carrying out this research was to discover school principals' attitude towards conflict management. We found that 93% of the schools had experienced some form of conflict in the past. Most of these were negative conflicts. We also found that most of the school

heads were unaware that conflict can be positive and consequentially had a very negative attitude towards conflict at the work place. However, a majority (78%) of the principals acknowledged the need to resolve conflicts amicably in order to improve group productivity. Research has also shown that task related conflict could be beneficial to the organization when ideas are exchanged amongst the group members (Ford, 2007). Other benefits include improved group learning and enhanced accuracy in assessment situation (Jones *et al*, 2000), development of new ideas (Adomi & Anie, 2005) and better quality decisions (Simons & Peterson, 2000). Conflict may therefore be a productive force that could improve organizational learning and contribute to organizational innovation and productivity.

Improving Conflict Management in Schools

The role of school management in personnel conflict cannot be underestimated. We inquired from principals the kind of interventions they would prefer in order to resolve and manage conflicts within their institutions. Table 6 below reveals some of the more popular recommendations proposed by the respondents.

TABLE 6
Recommendations to resolve school organization conflict

Intervention	Frequency	Percent
Proper communication	5	12.2
Encourage participative discussion	4	9.8
Elimination of mistrust	1	2.4
Amicable conflict resolution measures	4	9.8
Teachers and support staff should be obedient	3	7.3
Encourage transparency	2	4.8
Teachers be trained on conflict management	4	9.8
Encourage students practice high level of maturity	1	2.4
Student leaders to take control in absence of teachers	3	7.3
Train principals on conflict management	7	17.1
Democratization of all elective posts to reduce conflicts	4	9.8
Draw a clear distinction of roles of each organization	3	7.3
Total	41	100

CONCLUSION

If school principals were to view conflict from a positive perspective, then it would possible to leverage these conflicts to improve cohesion and productivity within Kenyan secondary schools. The building of such synergy and cohesion among school members requires ability to diagnose and manage the conflicts in their nascent stages before they blow out of proportion. School principals ought to be encouraged to be alert and sensitive to sources of conflict and be well prepared to deal with conflict situations. As illustrated in table 6, communication and training in conflict management are essential in effective management of conflicts. When a school opens communication channels and appropriate leadership training provided, conflicts situations can be contained and prevented from degenerating into unmanageable, full-blown conflicts that destroys productivity and unity among the school members.

REFERENCES

- Adler, N. J. (2008). *International dimensions of organizational behavior, 5th Ed.* Mason, Thomson southern Western.
- Adomi, E. E. and Anie, S. O. (2005). *Conflict management in Nigerian University*. Journal of Library Management. Vol. 2, 520-530
- Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (2004). *Discipline at Work: ACAS Advisory Handbook 1*, London: ACAS
- Armstrong, M. (2009). *A handbook of Personnel Management Practice, 10th Ed.* Kogan Page Limited, London.
- Beardwell, J. and Claydon, T. (2007). *Human Resource Management: A contemporary Approach*. Pearson Education, Harlow.
- Bricoe, D. R. And Schuler, R. S. (2004). *International human resource management*. 2nd edition. Routledge, London.
- Browarys, M. and Price, R. (2008). *Understanding cross cultural management*. Pearson Education, Harlow.
- Brown, L. D. (2002). *Managing Conflict of Organizational Interface*. Addison-Wesley Publishers, Massachusetts.
- Dowling, P. J., Festing, M. and Engle, A. D. (2008). *International Human Resource Management*. 5th edition. Thomson Learning, London.
- Griffin, W. R. (2006). *Management*. AITBS Publishers. India.
- Gupta, C. B. (2008). *Human Resource Management*. 9th Ed. Sultan Chand & Sons, New Delhi.
- Ford, J. (2007). *Organisational conflict management*. www.mediate.com/pfriendly.cfm?id=1250.
- Fraenken, J. R and Wallen, N. E. (2000). *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*. McGraw Hill, London.
- Jones, G. R., Gorge, J. M. and Hill, C. W. L. (2000). *Contemporary Management*. McGraw-Hill, Boston.
- Kombo, D. K. and Tromp, D. L. A. (2007). *Proposal and Thesis Writing-An Introduction*. Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi.
- Ministry of Education (2002). *Report on School Unrest*. JKF, Nairobi

- Ministry of Education (2008). *Report on School Unrest, Machakos*. Nairobi.
- Muhammad, A. K., Hassan, A. and Kashif, R. (2009). Impact of Task Conflict on Employee's Performance of Financial Institutions. *European Journal of Scientific Research*. Vol.27 no.4, pg. 479-487.
- Murthy, R. P. (2006). *Management Science and Industrial Management*. Pragon International Publishers, New Delhi.
- Nzuve, N. M. S. (2007). *Management of Human Resources: A Kenyan Perspective*. 3rd Ed. Tech & Bro Associates Publishers, Nairobi
- Orodho, A. J. (2003). *Essentials of educational and Social Sciences Research Method*. Masola Publishers, Nairobi.
- Simons, T. I. and Peterson, R. S. (2000). Task Conflict and Relationship Conflict on Top Management Teams: The Pivotal Role of Intra-group trust. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol. 85(14), 109-111
- Swift, L. and Piff, S. (2005). *Quantitative methods for Business Management and Finance*. 2nd edition. Machmillan, Palgrave.
- Thomas, G. C. and Christopher, G. W. (2001). *Organization Development and Change*. Seventh Edition. Southern –Western College Publishers, Thomas Learning.