Existence of Conflict and Conflict Resolution in University Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

Violence, rampage, crisis and secret cult practices by students; staff conflict; workers' trade disputes and strike actions are some of the turbulent occurrences are often experienced in university education in Nigeria in recent times. They are anti social and anti productivity because they create an atmosphere of tumult, tension and disruption of smooth and congenial functioning of academic activities in universities. This paper discusses conflict in university education indicating its ill effects on teaching and learning in universities in Nigeria. It suggests what can be done to exterminate or reduce conflict situations and proposes the way forward.

Introduction

Conflict connotes disagreement between two or more persons over an interest and implies discord. The discussion in this paper will be based on the following: meaning of conflict; causes of conflict; the danger/evil effect of conflict in universities; conflict management strategies in universities; constraints/problems in conflict management; and conclusion.

Definition or meaning of the concept conflict

Different authors using different phrases define the concept 'conflict', but all definitions convey the same meaning to the reader. It means: disagreement between two or more persons or parties over an interest or thing. If party A is interested in a position and party B is interested in what party A is interested or wants to own it, this interest in one position by the two persons causes a rift, a disagreement, or discord between them. This disagreement results in rivalry.

Cattel (1971) defines conflict as "a state of competing drive and sentiment-structure to gain satisfaction." When this happens two or more parties are involved in the competition to have the interest under contest. Fadipe (2000) defines conflict, as "a form of disagreement in an establishment between two individuals or groups who have cause to interact formally or informally". He adds that when two or more people who work together in an organisation are not in good terms, especially in matters that relate directly or indirectly to their work schedules, there is conflict.

Barthol and Martin (1991) define conflict as "a perceived difference, between two or more parties, which results in mutual opposition." Schmuch and Associates (1970) define conflict as "when one party blocks the goal achievement of another, a conflict state arises".

From all the definitions presented above, it is clear that in conflict there must be a group, an interest, a contest over that interest and a disagreement or opposition, and a discord/or opposition or disharmony in the contest over the singular interest.

Fadipe (2000) quotes Hurton and Hunt (1972) and states that: "Conflict is the process of seeking to obtain reward by eliminating or weakening the competitor" so that he does not win the interest being competed for. Fadipe adds that, conflict involves a struggle or a quarrel, usually between individuals or groups in the process of competing for a reward.

As it can be seen, in the various definitions, conflict coveys one meaning, thus:

> A clash of interest over one goal, by several contestants or two competitors, resulting in disagreement e.g. Obasanjo and Buhari over who should be the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in 2003 general election?

Essang (1997) observes that conflict relates to human relation at all levels. She remarks that when students struggle for seats in a lecture room, where seats are scarce, conflict results because of clash of interests. Cattel (1971) says that conflict is a state of competing drive and sentiment structure. Thus, students in universities are in constant conflict among themselves over competing interests.

General auses of conflict:

A number of factors contribute to the creation of conflict in universities. Bartol and Martin (1991) list the following: task interdependence; scarce resources; goal incompatibility; communication failure; individual differences; poorly designed reward system.

Task interdependence

There are two types of task interdependence:

(a) sequential interdependence is where one individual is dependent on the other e.g. in the university, the Head of Department is heavily dependent on the Dean for information from the Vice Chancellor to get things done.

(b) Reciprocal interdependence in which individuals or work-units are mutually interdependent for example, in a university, lecturers in Educational Management want to rely on Business Management lecturers to give details about some of their course-outlines to enhance teaching and learning. Both of these two interdependent cases can easily lead to conflict,

where there is a tendency to disagree over their relationship because of differences and lack of mutual trust.

Scarce resources

When there are limited resources such as office space, equipment, operating funds, pay allocation and human resource, the likelihood of conflict is great. This is because, those who are to make use of these resources have interests, and their interests do clash, because they will scramble to use them at the same time. An example is the staff in the University of Calabar who refused to vacate offices because they felt, they would not be lucky to have similar comfortable office place.

Goal incompatibility

In a university, some members of a faculty or a department pursue goals that are different from one another. For example, lecturers may be engaged in activities that are at variance with one another, just to interferes or undercut the goals of the other. In doing this, they set the stage for potential conflicts.

Communication failure

Breakdown in communication due to distortion, or lack of information can easily lead to conflict.

Individual differences

Human nature is characterized by differences in personality, experience, knowledge and values. These differences lead to conflict. Some people are good. Others are not so good. The good ones may be selected for higher positions while mediocre staff may be rejected. When this happens, the rejected ones start to begrudge the selected good ones. The rejected ones create conflict situations through sabotage and quarrel, claiming that they were better, but the leader of the University favoured the selected ones for certain reasons. The leader becomes the scapegoat for their inadequacies.

Poorly designed reward system

Reward system can lead to conflict in a university. For example, two Ph.D lecturers are competing for promotion based on the number ofr years on the job and performance, marked by regularity, punctuality and commitment. The two competitors both qualify for promotion based on these criteria. But one of them is promoted by scoring 5 points higher in the interview. The other one is not. Conflict will result.

Conflict in Universities emerges when an individual lecturer or group perceives that his goals are being threatened or hindered by the activities of others (Fadipe 2000). In the case just described, the disappointed lecturer

will be ready to fight it out, to gain his right or reduce the other competitor to submission, through petitioning the Vice Chancellor, to obtain redress and be treated equitably. North (1968) states that conflict of this type frequently occurs between individuals and groups, and between management and unions in universities.

In 1966, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria Universities staged a strike action against National Universiies Commission (NUC), as a result of conflict over pay. The consequence of the strike was devastating. Conflict is not an encouraging phenomenon in organisations.

Effects of conflicts on performance in universities
This section discusses the positive and the negative effects of conflict in universities.

Positive effects
- Some conflicts improve the goal of the group of the organisation and its performance. Such conflicts are regarded as functional and constructive.
- It enhances exposure and discussion of disagreement to help to contribute greatly toward reduction of conflict per day.
- Disagreement that exists and dissatisfaction that is exposed will lead to re-examination of basic assumptions and practices. It brings about drastic change in favour of the organisation.
- It enhances the making of adjustment to improve overall organisational effectiveness (Akpan 2001).
- It highlights problems and need for solution. It facilitates group cohesiveness.
- It promotes change because parties work to resolve problems.
- Conflict can enhance morale and cohesion, because group members work within areas of concern and prevent frustration.
- Conflict stimulates interest, creativity and innovation by encouraging new ideas.

Negative effects of conflict
- Conflict can cause individuals or groups to become hostile and can cause them to withhold information and resources.
- It can interfere with each other's efforts (contestants).
- It can delay projects when members are in disagreement.
- It can cause valued employees to leave the organisation.
- Too much conflict or too frequent occurrences have a detrimental effect on organisational performance.
- Problems are hidden and new ideas are stifled.

- If conflicts are not uncovered and managed, informal groups may set in, and underground networks that distort the truth will arise. They increase destructive tension and personal hostility between conflicting parties. In universities lecturers cluster together to criticize the work of others. This behaviour is counter-productive.

Conflict management strategy or conflict resolution in universities

To be able to resolve conflicts in universities, the first step is to discover or expose the presence of conflict. Vice Chancellors or Deans of Faculties "need to understand the causes of conflict, know how to reduce or resolve conflict, and be able to stimulate it in a positive way when appropriate" (Bartol and Martin 1991). This is very important because of the negative or dysfunctional impact of conflicts. It is expedient to find ways by which conflict can be effectively managed (Fadipe 2000).

Solution strategy or method of reducing and resolving conflict
The following are the methods that leaders in universities could adopt to resolve conflicts change situational factors; and use an interpersonal conflict handling mode (Bartol and Martin 1991).

Change situational factors
One obvious way to reduce conflict is to change the factors in the situation that are causing them. For example, the Dean of Faculty might increase the resources available, if this has been the centre of conflict or reduce interdependence or redesign reward system if these variables are potential conflict variables, or take steps to improve communication system. The constraint in this solution strategy is that it is extremely expensive. It is possible if the faculty is financially equipped and buoyant.

Use an interpersonal conflict handling mode
Deans of Faculties can use the following interpersonal modes to resolve.

Avoidance: This involves ignoring a conflict or suppressing it in the hope that it will die down naturally or go away on its own, or not likely to become too destructive.

Accommodation: This focuses on solving conflicts by allowing the desires of other party to prevail. Here the Dean voluntarily let the other party have his way rather than continue the conflict.

Competition: This involves attempting to win a conflict at the other party's expense. Here one party wins, the other loses.

Compromise: This method aims to solve conflict issues by having each party give up some desired outcomes, in order to get the desired outcome. For example, the Dean of a Faculty tells lecturer A, to forego the contested goal to lecturer B, because the lecturer A will soon be given a better goal. Compromise often involves bargaining by the conflict parties and generally requires a situation that offers both parties the chance to be in a better position or at least, in no worse position after the conflict is resolved. With compromise each party wins some major issues and loses others.

Collaboration: This is an attempt to resolve conflict by devising solutions that allow both parties to achieve their desired outcomes.   In this circumstance both parties win, at least their major issues. Collaboration frequently involves considerable creativity in developing solutions that suit the needs of both parties in the conflict.

Stimulating conflict: Another method of reducing conflict situation is to stimulate conflict. Lack of conflict can lead to apathy, lethargy, and low performance in organisations. Stimulation needs to be initiated by the Dean of Faculty in a positive way. This should be done with caution to prevent the amount of conflict from reaching a destructive stagethis can be done by:

  (a) Adding individuals with diverse backgrounds to a group;
  (b) Communication information that will cause faculty members to engage in constructive dialogue about the potential need for change; and
  (c) Encouraging internal competition.

Other contributors to conflict-management or resolution

Apart from the prescriptions adopted by Bartol and Martin (1991) the following contributors have also presented clues on how conflicts can be managed or resolved. Fisch (1961) proposed "Functional Team Work" as a way of resolving conflict. He suggested three areas to be considered (i) Process (ii) Resources (iii) Human Relationships - Functions. He suggested a managerial authority - having top general management coordinating and encouraging teamwork as means of resolving conflict.   He advocated participatory efforts of the team in decision-making instead of adopting superior-subordinate roles, which is the principal source of conflict identified in the discussion.

    Fisch's suggested conflict-resolution-formula that is applicable to university management of personnel. The Dean of Faculty or Head of Department can apply this conflict solution formula but with caution, in

order not to reduce it to lack of the will to maintain discipline. Nwankwo (1982) has emphasized that parties affected in a decision be allowed to have a say in it. He pointed out that school democracy utilizes processes such as students' council, staff union, staff meetings, committees and clubs. These meetings can easily diffuse tension and allay fears, as troubled issues are resolved amicably. In doing this, it is to be emphasized that the welfare of staff is secondary, while, the goal of the faculty is paramount. Where group or individual interest conflicts with that of the faculty or department, the interest of the faculty or department must take precedence.

It is suggested that very sound and competent professional lecturers be appointed to monitor and expose conflict tendencies and report to the Head of Department or to the Dean of Faculty for immediate action to stem the potential conflict. The experience and knowledge of these professionals and their skill in monitoring conflict tendencies can enhance reduction of conflict occurrence in the faculty or in the departments.

One of the important methods for minimizing conflict is dialogue. It is a desirable method because conflict is resolved by the parties face to face. Fadipe (2002) presents a discussion of dialogue and says that it can take the form of collective bargaining; mediation, conciliation, adjudication

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Collective bargaining

This constitutes an internal mechanism for managing and resolving conflicts in organisation e.g. a Faculty. It is one of the most desirable methods for conflict-resolution because it makes provision for face-to-face meeting of the affected parties.

Mediation

This is an external intervention. Under this technique a third party intervenes with a view to resolving the conflicts, which failed to be settled through collective bargaining. Mediation could be an initiative of one of the parties or by observers.

Conflict between lecturers and Vice Chancellors on Dean, requires mediation approach. Usually the government appoints a negotiating team mandating it to invite the two parties-lecturers and the Dean or Vice Chancellor, to a round table talk on disagreement, in order to resolve the conflict, according to the acceptable terms on both parties in the conflict.

Conciliation

This is another external mechanism. Conciliation has three forms namely "Good Offices", "Injury" and "Mediation".

In good offices, the third party makes provision for the needed facilities such as neutral meeting ground, needed information and environment that would enhance negotiation. In injury technique, the third party is found

playing critical role e.g. gathering necessary information, simplifying ambiguities and letting the parties become aware of them.

In mediation proper the third party takes active part in the process of negotiation. This involves making suggestions, proposing solutions and persuading the parties concerned to accept the proposals presented for resolution.

Adjudication

This technique is an external strategy for conflict resolution. Failure to reach settlement by the parties in conflict, the last resort is to go to adjudication court for conflict resolution. This is done to arrive at legal settlement. This is particularly seen when trade unions and university authorities are unable to reach any settlement or resolution. Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) can seek redress in court when issues over lecturers' pay and allowances cannot be resolved. Under this strategy the court is the final arbiter and whatever it says is binding on the parties.

Akpan (2001) tendered the following methods for managing or resolving conflicts in organisations.

> Submission of grievances by staff to authorities for discussion. The grievance could be channelled through trade union. In the University, such grievance should be channelled through ASUU leader.

When employees begin to exhibit significant changes in behaviour such as absenteeism, lateness to work, request for transfer to other departments, resignation and frequent occurrence of indiscipline, the Head of Department (HOD) should find out why the changes are occurring.

In this strategy a suggestion box is provided and staff members are encouraged to write out grievances. Anonymity is encouraged, so that, there is no fear about victimization, when a grievance is written. The HOD will take steps to settle the grievance in the open or secretly.

This strategy demands that the HOD should keep the door of his office open for easy access to have audience with him/her on maters that affect the department or individuals. Psychologists could be engaged to counsel personnel to have a good understanding of what is going on around them.

Constraints in conflict resolution or management

Master-servant position:

Conflicts are usually between employer and employee, a kind of master-servant relation. The master is the employer who is more domineering than the servant (employee). It is therefore difficult for the servant to win a favour in a conflict.

Inter- governmental relation

Almost all Nigerian universities are supervised by the National Universities Commission (NUC). The universities are under NUC cannot take independent decisions concerning conflict resolution because the final clearance must be obtained from NUC. A Vice Chancellor could be asked to rescind the decision that was not cleared by NUC before implementing it.

A Vice Chancellor could do it with the best of intention but, in the eyes of NUC, he could be looked upon as a saboteur or working at cross-purposes with a government organ. An example can be cited of the Federal Government forcing a Vice Chancellor to resign in 1991 after 18 months of appointment. As a result of that crisis in the University, Fadipe (2002) observes as follows: "The inter governmental relation between the educational institutions and their supervising agencies, limits the degree of freedom in the capacity of the school management". This is a constraint to conflict management between a government organ and the university personnel.

Politics

This factor is akin to the one just discussed above. Educational institutions are controlled by the government of the day. Whoever controls the government has the last say in matter relating to education. For example, appointment of headship of a university is influenced by the government's whims and politicised (Fadipe 2000). In this type of appointment the Vice Chancellor so appointed "may not be the most qualified, he may even lack the wherewithal in educational management and particularly conflict management strategies" (Fadipe 2000).

*Pressure group role in conflict resolution***:**

Pressure groups such as the ASUU see conflict with NUC and management as a weapon to win their rights. This makes them to stick to their demands during crisis until their fears are allayed and their grievances settled. In this regard they deliberately toe a hard line position. This posture by the staff of universities makes effective conflict resolution or management difficult.

The influence of politics cause decisions on conflict resolution, especially those that affect persons who are loyal to the government, to be jettisoned. Because of the political power that the government uses decision makers become cautious, afraid to make effective decision on conflict resolution because the government could take a hard line position against the party injured, instead of sympathizing with it. This was the case in the 1996 ASUU-Federal Government imbroglio with its adverse consequences on the university system. In that crises much loss was incurred in terms of productivity.

An additional effect was the loss of interest in teaching and learning, exhibited by university lecturers across the country. Government

intervention in matters purely academic constitutes a great hindrance to effective management of conflicts in universities. It has even caused lecturers to seek greener pasture elsewhere beyond the shores of Nigeria. The government's use of the big stick does not help maters in conflict resolution.

Legality

When conflict cannot be resolved amicably within an organisation the parties are tempted to seek redress in the law court. The power of courts to place injunction is a barrier to conflict settlement. Injunctions could hinder the needed harmonies that work toward goal attainment.

Conclusion

Conflict is a drawback in teaching and learning activities in universities. Since its major characteristic is a clash of interest-groups, Vice Chancellors, Dean of Faculties, Heads of Department should watch out and quickly resolve situations that cause clash of interests among the staff and students. This implies that as soon as tendencies towards conflict are noticed, a committee should be set up to look into what is causing the fire and take immediate steps to resolve it, so that conflict will not go beyond manageable dimension.

Conflict management committees are recommended to serve in each department to forestall conflict situations and settle conflict matters in each department.

Vice Chancellors should adopt an open door policy in their administration, to enable Deans, HOD's, lecturers and even students to have dialogue with them. Frequent discussions with these essential groups of people, working with and under Vice Chancellors, will create an atmosphere of industrial harmony that would result in the achievement of university goals. The Vice Chancellor, Deans of Faculties, Head of Departments should suppress tendencies that result in conflicts. Doing this maximises the effort of workers and promotes optimum productivity in Universities.

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