CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND INDUSTRIAL HARMONY: THE NEXUS

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Abstract
Conflict is a state of disagreement between individuals, groups or organizations. Conflict management refers to the long term management of intractable conflict. Conflict schools of thought includes; the traditional school of thought, the human relations school of thought and the international school of thought. Although conflict is a perception issue, it consist of the following processes; potential opposition or incompatibility, cognition and personification, intentions, behaviour and outcomes. Conflicts have sources and it can be managed. Conflict well managed can bring about industrial harmony and productivity.

Key words: Conflicts, management, resolution, Negotiat
The Conflict Process

According to Robins and Timothy (2007), the conflict process consists of five stages viz:

Stage I: Potential Opposition or incompatibility
Stage II: Cognition and Personification
Stage III: Intentions
Stage IV: Behaviour
Stage V: Outcomes

Stage I: Potential Opposition or Incompatibility: These are conditions that create opportunities for conflict to arise. These conditions include; communication, structure, and personal variables (Feigenhaum, 1991; Argyris, 1993; and Robins, 2004).

Stage II: Cognition and Personification: That a conflict is perceived does not mean that it is personalized. In other words, A maybe aware that B and A are in serious disagreement, but it may not make A tense or anxious, and it may have no effect whatsoever on A’s affection towards B (Pickley, 1990). It is at the felt level when individuals become emotionally involved that parties experience anxiety, tensions, frustration or hostility.

Stage III: Intentions: Intentions intervene between people’s perceptions and outcomes and their overt behaviour. These intentions are decisions to act in given way (Thomas, 1992). Conflict handling intentions include; competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating and compromising.
Stage IV: Behaviour: This stage includes the statements, actions and reactions made by the conflicting parties. These conflict behaviour are overt attempts to implement each party’s intentions. At this stage, conflict intensity is in a continuum ranging from overt efforts to destroy the other party, aggressive physical attacks, threats and ultimatums, assertive verbal attacks, overt questioning or challenging of others to minor disagreements or misunderstandings (Robins, 1974; Glasi, 1982).

Stage V: Outcomes: The results of the conflict may be improvement in the group’s performance or it may hinder group performance.

Types of Conflict

According to Jehn (1995), also corroborated by Robins and Timothy (2007), there are three types of conflict namely; task conflict, relationship conflict and process conflict.

Task Conflict: This relates to the contents and goals of work. Low-to-moderate levels of task conflict consistently demonstrate a positive effect on group performance because it stimulates discussion of ideas that help groups perform better (Jehn, 1995).

Relationship Conflict: This focuses on interpersonal relationship. Yang and Mossholder (2004), found that friction and inter-personal hostilities characterize relationship conflict which consequently decreases mutual understanding and hinders the completion of organizational goals.

Process Conflict: This relates to how work is carried out. For process conflict to be productive, it must be kept low. Intense arguments about who should do what become dysfunctional when they create uncertainty about task roles; increase the time to complete tasks, and lead to members working at cross purposes (Yang & Mossholder, 2004).

Furthermore, Putman and Poole (1987), also corroborated by Jones, George and Hill (2004), are of the view that there are four types of conflict namely, interpersonal conflict, intragroup conflict intergroup conflict and interorganisational conflict.

Interpersonal Conflict: This is the conflict between individual members of an organization, and it occurs because of individual differences in goals and values.

Intragroup Conflict: This is the conflict that arises within a group, team, or department.

Intergroup Conflict: This is the conflict that occurs between groups, teams or departments.

Interorganisational Conflict: This is the conflict that arises across organizations. Sometimes, interorganizational conflict may arise when a manager in one organization feel that another manager of a certain organization is not behaving ethically and his actions are threatening the wellbeing of some stakeholder groups of his organization (Jones et al, op. cit).
Sources of Conflict

Different factors can give rise to organizational conflict. In the opinion of Walton and Dutton (1969), also supported by Robins (1990; 2003), the following are the common sources of organizational conflict: mutual task dependence, one-way task dependence, high horizontal differentiation, low formalization, dependence on common scarce resources, differences in evaluation criteria and reward systems, participative decision making, heterogeneity of members, status incongruence, role dissatisfaction and communication distortions.

Mutual Task Dependence: This is the extent to which two units in an organization depend upon each other for assistance, information, compliance, or other coordinative activities to complete their respective tasks effectively and efficiently. This interaction between units could lead to conflict occasionally, but it could also lead to friendly relations (Wall, 1995).

One-Way Task Dependence: This is a situation where one unit in an organization is unilaterally dependent on another unit of the same organization. This relationship can lead to conflict when one department’s uncompleted work is left for the next department to complete, with the dependent unit in no position to retaliate (Howard & Aldrich, 1979).

High Horizontal Differentiation: This presupposes that the greater the difference between units in an organization, the greater the likelihood of conflict. However, high differentiation does not automatically lead to conflict, other factors such as inter dependence of tasks and rewards can stimulate the latent potential for conflict (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969).

Low Formalization: High formalization in organizations establishes standardized ways of doing things and interaction among units and groups. On the other hand, where formalization is low, the potential for jurisdictional disputes and conflicts will be high. Rules and regulations have the potentials of reducing conflict by minimizing ambiguity (Robins, 1990).

Dependence on Common Scarce Resources: This is a situation where two or more units depends on a common pool of scarce resources such as physical office space, equipments, operating funds, capital budget allocations, or centralized staff services such as a common typing pool. Indeed, conflict potential is increased if a unit member perceive that their individual needs cannot be met from the available resource pool when other units’ needs are met (Pondy, 1967).

Differences in Evaluation Criteria and Reward System: The more the evaluations and rewards of Management emphasize the separate performance of each unit, group, or department rather than their combined performance, the greater the conflict (Akinmayowa; 2005).

Participative Decision Making: Research evidence shows that joint decision making where those who will be affected by a decision are made part of the decision-making body, enhances conflict (Meyer, 1962; George & Eliezer, 1970).
Heterogeneity of Members: The more diverse organization members are, the less likely they are to work harmoniously together. Personal diversities such as background, values, education, age, and social patterns lowers the likelihood of interpersonal relationship between unit members and in turn decreases the amount of collaboration between their respective units (Ronald & Corwin, 1969).

Status Incongruence: Conflict potential is stimulated where incongruencies occurs in status gradings or from alterations in the status hierarchy (Petzinger, 1995).

Role Dissatisfaction: Role dissatisfaction can come from a number of sources, one of which is status incongruence. This is a situation where an employee feels that he/she deserves a promotion to reflect his/her record of accomplishments she suffers from both role dissatisfaction and perceived status incongruence. When employees accept a role, they bring to it a set of hopes and aspirations. When their expectations are not met, these individuals may display their frustrations in a number of directions one of which is conflict (Robins, 1990; Wall, 1995).

Communication Distortion: Communication extremes can be sources of conflict. Inadequate or unclear communications stimulate conflict, so too does perfect or complete information (Robins, 1990).

Functions of Conflict
Conflict serves many functions in organizations.
(1) Conflict establishes identity: Through conflict, individuals and groups clearly establish their positions on issues (Kellet, 2007).
(2) Conflict serves as a safety value to hold the group together: Through conflict, individuals and groups let off steam which in turn enhances the communication processes leading to better understanding of the issues within the group (Locke, 2004).
(3) Conflict increases group cohesion: When there is a higher level of communication brought about by conflict, groups strengthens and become closer (Akinmayowa, 2005).
(4) Conflict tests the strength of individuals and groups: Power struggles are inevitable in an organizational setting. Through conflict, the question of who has the real power in an organization is resolved (Jones et al, 2004).
(5) Conflict spurs needed change: The commencement and resolution of conflict issues identify weak areas in an organization which then hastens resolution and elimination of those problems which might not have been considered if it were not for the conflict (Kellet, 2007).
(6) Conflict mobilizes energy: This concept adds credence to the old adage, “I work best under pressure”. When there is conflict in an organization, the pressure members feel causes them to work at greater efficiency and fervor (Locke, 2004).
(7) Conflict causes competition to improve performance: Conflict causes some organizations, groups, and individuals to try to outdo others or to demonstrate competence (Kellet, 2007).
(8) **Conflict enhances communication:** The communication process improves because of the higher level of information exchange brought about by conflict which in turn brings about a higher level of understanding (Armstrong, 2007).

(9) **Conflict ends non-productive associations:** When differences of opinion or ideals are not addressed or resolved, the resulting association is distant and useless to the organization. The unresolved situation actually causes the organization to be considerably less than its ultimate potential. Through conflict resolution, these issues are addressed to increase communication and understanding (Kellet, 2007).

**Conflict Management Strategies**
Conflict management strategies connotes what organization managers can adopt to ensure that conflicts are resolved in a functional manner on the individual members of the organization and the entire organization. Conflict resolution strategies that could be focused on individual members of the organization include, increasing awareness of the sources of conflict, increasing diversity awareness and skills, practicing job rotation, using permanent transfers or dismissal when necessary. On the other hand, conflict resolution strategies that could be focused on the entire organization include; changing organization’s culture or structure, and altering the source of the conflict (Jones, George & Hill, 2003).

**Individual Focused Strategies**
(a) **Increasing awareness of the sources of conflict:** This is recognizing the forces responsible for conflict and making individuals or team members aware of them so that they could avoid them (Dunnette & Hough, 1992).

(b) **Increasing diversity awareness and skills:** Organizations are made up of people from different ethnic groups and nationalities. Members have different skills by reason of differences in training and education. Therefore, managers should create this awareness so that members should learn to accept one another and work harmoniously together (Jones et al, op. cit).

(c) **Practicing Job Rotation:** Sometimes, conflict could arise because some individual organizational members simply do not have a good understanding of the work activities and demands that members from other units and department have. This lack of broad-base knowledge in the organization could be responsible for conflict among members. In situations such as this job rotation which could expand organizational members’ knowledge base and appreciation of their units and department can be a useful way of resolving conflict (Wall, 1995).

(d) **Using Permanent Transfers or Dismissals When Necessary:** Sometimes when other conflict resolution strategies do not work as expected, managers may need to take drastic steps, including permanent transfers or dismissals of the conflicting members (Shapiro, Tracktenberge & Landro, 1995).

**Strategies Focused on the Entire Organization**
(i) **Changing an organization’s structure or culture:** Incessant conflict can signal the need for changes in an organization’s structure or culture. Sometimes,
managers can effectively resolve conflict by changing the organizational structure they used to group people and tasks. (Lawrence, Barnes & Lorsch, 1976). On the other hand, managers may sometimes need to take steps to change an organization’s culture in order to resolve conflict. Norms and values in an organizational culture might inadvertently promote dysfunctional high levels of conflict that are difficult to resolve. In such cases, organizational culture may need to be changed to make conflict resolution easy (Bahar, 1995).

**(ii) Altering the source of conflict:** When conflict is due to overlapping authority, and status inconsistencies, managers can sometimes effectively resolve the conflict by directly altering the source of the conflict such as overlapping authority, evaluation or reward system, or status inconsistency (Jones et al op. cit).

**Conflict Resolution Techniques**

To reduce conflict down to an acceptable level, the following structural techniques can be used.

- Superordinate goals
- Reduce interdependence between units
- Expanding resources
- Mutual problem solving
- Appeal systems
- Formal authority
- Increasing interaction
- Organization-wide evaluation and reward systems
- Merging conflicting units (Robins, 1990).

**Superordinate goals:** Superordinate goal is a commonly desired goal by two or more groups or units the attainment of which is not possible by only one of the groups or units (Robins, 2004). Superordinate goals act to reduce conflict by requiring the disagreeing parties to work together in achieving those goals they mutually seek. When superordinate goals are used cumulatively, they have the ability of developing long term peacemaking potentials and reinforcing dependency and collaboration (Robins, 1990; 2004).

**Reduce interdependence between units:** A conflict situation where mutual and one-way interdependence causes conflicts, reduction of this lopsided interdependence should be considered in order to minimize the conflict (Jones et al).

**Expanding resources:** Where it is known that inadequate resources is the source of the conflict to the conflicting parties, a common solution to this, is by providing adequate resources that will make the parties mutually dependent (Muzafar, 2003).
Mutual problem solving: This technique requires that the conflicting parties come face to face together to resolve their points of differences. It also requires that the conflicting parties have the potential to achieve a better solution through collaboration (Robert, Herbet, & Jane, 2003).

Appeal systems: This is a situation where aggrieved employees or their union make appeal to management or a neutral body to help resolve their conflict (James, 2004).

Formal authority: This is a situation where the conflicting parties takes their grievances to their superior boss who have formal authority to mediate in their conflict. Here, the decision of the superior boss is normally binding on the conflicting parties (Robins, 1990; 2004).

Increasing Interaction: The assumption here is that the more organizational members interact with each other, the more likely they are to find common interest and bonds that can facilitate cooperation and help reduce conflict (Muzafer, op. cit).

Organization-wide evaluation criteria and reward systems: Where separate evaluation and reward systems creates conflicts, management should consider performance measures that evaluate and reward members for cooperation and performance on organization-wide basis (Robins, 1990; 2004).

Merging conflict units: By this technique, one of the conflicting parties expands its boundaries and absorb the properties of the conflicting opponent (Robins, 1990; 2004, op. cit).

Negotiation Strategies

To negotiate is to converse with a view to finding terms of agreement (Armstrong, 2003). In the same vein, negotiation is the process in which two or more parties exchange goods or services and attempt to agree on the exchange rate (Wall Jnr. 2004). Furthermore, negotiation is the process where mandated representatives of groups in a conflict situation meet together in order to resolve their differences and to reach agreement. It is a deliberate process, conducted by representatives of groups, designed to reconcile differences and to reach agreement by consensus (ETU, 2009). The result of negotiation is often dependent on the power relationship between the groups. In work places, unions and management representatives sometimes use negotiation to resolve their conflict.

Negotiation Process

According to Lewicki (1981), Robins and Timothy (2007), the negotiation process consist of five steps viz; preparation and planning, definition of ground rules, clarification and justification, bargaining and problem solving, closure and implementation.

Preparation and planning: Negotiation takes place in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Neither knows how strong the other opponent’s position is, nor what they really wants and will be prepared to accept. They do not also know how much the other party will be prepared to concede. Therefore, both parties should be prepared to determine the target they would like to
achieve, the minimum or maximum they believe will be most likely to help achieve the set target (Armstrong, 2003).

**Definition of ground rules:** Issues here include; where will the negotiation takes place? Who will do the negotiation? What time constraints if any will apply? To what issues will the negotiation be limited to? Will there be a specific procedure to follow if an impasse is reached? At this stage, the parties to the conflict will also exchange their initial proposals or demands (Robins & Timothy, 20007).

**Clarification and justification:** Here, the initial proposals or demands which have been exchanged among the conflicting parties are further explained, amplified, clarified, bolstered, and justified. This provides opportunity for both sides to educate one another on how they arrived on their proposals or demands (Lewicki, 1981).

**Bargaining and Problem Solving:** Here, the issues in dispute are looked into: there is give and take with a goal to find a common ground for agreement.

**Closure and Implementation:** At this final stage of the negotiation process, the parties to the negotiation formalize the agreement reached, and develop appropriate procedures that are necessary for implementation and monitoring.

**Third Party Negotiation**

When parties in a conflict are unable to resolve their differences in a conflict through direct negotiation, they may resort to a third party negotiation to help them find solution to the conflict. There are four basic third party roles; mediator, arbitrator, conciliator and consultant (Wall, Jnr, and Blum, 1991).

**Mediator:** When direct negotiation fail, parties in a conflict often call in an independent mediator. This person or group of persons will try to facilitate the settlement of the conflict. The mediator plays an active part in the process, advises both parties, act as intermediary and suggests possible solution. Mediators acts only in an advisory capacity, they have no decision making powers and cannot impose settlement on the conflicting parties (ETU, 2009).

**Arbitrator:** This is an independent person who acts as an adjudicator in a conflict to decide on the terms of settlement. Both parties in the conflict have to agree on who the arbitrator should be, and that the decision of the arbitrator will be binding on them all.

**Conciliator:** A conciliator is a trusted third party who provide an informal communication link between the negotiator and the opponent. In practice, conciliators act as mere communication conduits. They also engage in fact finding, interpreting messages, and persuading disputants to develop agreement (Robins and Timothy, 2007).
Consultant: The consultants’ role is not to settle conflict, but to improve relations between the conflicting parties so that they can reach settlement among themselves. This approach is to build new and positive perceptions and attitudes between the conflicting parties (Lewicki, 1981).

Collective Bargaining
Collective bargaining is a social process that continually turns disagreements into agreements in an orderly fashion (Flanders, 1970). Collective bargaining provides the framework, often in the form of a collective agreement within which the views of management and unions about disputed matters that could lead to industrial disorder can be considered with the aim of eliminating the causes of the conflict (Armstrong, 2003). Furthermore, collective bargaining can also be seen as a political relationship in which trade unions share industrial sovereignty or power over those who are governed, the employees. The sovereignty is held jointly by management and unions in the collective bargaining process (Chamberlain & Kuhn, 1965).

Bargaining Power
Bargaining power can be defined as the ability to induce the other party to make a decision that it would otherwise not make (Armstrong, 2003). Power is the crucial variable which determines the outcomes of collective bargaining (Fox and Flanders, 1969). Bargaining power is inherent in any situation where differences have to be reconciled. It is however, not an end in itself and negotiations must not rely solely on bargaining power. One side may have enormous bargaining power, but use it to the point where the other side feels that it is impossible to deal with such a party is to defeat the purpose of negotiations (Singh, 1989).

Furthermore, Atkinson (1989) is of the view that what creates bargaining power can be appraised in terms of subjective assessment by individuals involved in the bargaining process, each side can guess the bargaining preferences and bargaining power of the other party; and that there are normally a number of elements creating bargaining power.

Forms of Collective Bargaining
According to Chamberlain and Kuhn (1965), there are two basic forms of collective bargaining viz; conjunctive bargaining and cooperative bargaining.

Conjunctive bargaining: This arises from the absolute requirements that any agreement be reached so that the operations on which both parties are dependent may continue, and results in a working relationship in which each party agrees explicitly or implicitly to provide certain requisite services, to recognize certain seats of authority and to accept certain responsibilities in respect of each other.

Cooperative bargaining: This is the one that recognize that each party is dependent on the other and achieve its objectives more effectively if it wins the support of the other.

In the same vein, Walton and Mckersie (1965) are of the opinion that there are two forms of collective bargaining viz:- distributive bargaining and integrative bargaining.
Distributive bargaining: This is the complex system of activities instrumental to the attainment of one party’s goals when they are in conflict with those of the other party.

Integrative bargaining: This is the system of activities which are not in fundamental conflict with those of the other party which can be integrated to some degree. Such objectives are said to define an area of common concern for both parties.

In summary, collective bargaining enables conflicting parties to find common ground for agreement.

Conclusion
Conflict is a common phenomenon, when people come together to pursue common goal. Although the concept “conflict” sound negative, it has its uses to the conflicting parties. There are many conflict resolution strategies and techniques in management literature that organizational managers can rely upon to effectively manage conflict. In addition to these strategies and techniques, they can also put into use their wealth of experience, training, morality, ethics, fairness and equity in dealing with peculiar problems and situations as they arise.

Although conflict in organizations cannot be eliminated altogether, management should put some mechanisms in place that will help minimize the level of conflict situations in their organizations. Indeed, no meaningful productive activities can take place in an atmosphere where the conflict level is allowed to degenerate into a state of anarchy and insecurity. “A stitch in time, saves nine” says an old adage.

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