Conflict Management: Managerial Approach towards Improving Organizational Performance

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on managerial approach to conflict management in an organization. The objectives of this study is to ascertain what constitute conflict, sources of conflict, views of conflict, consequences of conflict in an organization and the strategies for dealing with organizational conflict etc. To effectively examine how conflict management will improve organizational performance, the study relies mainly on secondary data from textbook, internet, journals etc. The study reveals that conflict is endemic in human life's and cannot not totally be eradicated rather its effect can be minimized so as to ensure that it does not hinder the activities of the organization by way of reducing performance. The paper recommends amongst others that managers at all levels should acquaint themselves with potential causes of conflict in their organization and address them early enough to forestall activities that will hamper the smooth running of the organization.

Keywords: Conflict, organization, endemic, eradicate.

Introduction

Managers, irrespective of the level of management (Lower, Middle or Top) are bound to face conflict in as much they deal with human being. Politics in the organisation in most cases give rise to conflict as employee or group of employees influence the goal and decision making of an organisation to their own selfish interest, usually at the expense of some other employees within the organisation (Jennifer & Jones, 2007). Conflict in organization is a state of friction caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests between people working together. Conflict takes many forms in organizations. There is the foreseeable clash between formal authority and power and those individuals and groups affected. There are disputes over how revenues should be divided, how the work should be done and how long and hard people should work. There are jurisdictional disagreements among individuals, departments, and between unions and management. Hart (2000) asserted that, successful organization in the future must create the capability to absorb conflict during the

organization's life cycle. The capability here refers to conflict management mechanism in order to minimize the rate of conflict and improve performance. There are subtler forms of conflict involving rivalries, jealousies, personality clashes, role definitions, and struggles for power and favor. There is also conflict within individuals — between competing needs and demands — to which individuals respond in different ways. An organization exists to provide goods and services that people desire. These goods and services are the products of the behaviours of workers who occupy different level of the organizational structure. These people have different cultures, skills and educational background as well as different perceptions, roles, expectations and values. Conflict in an organization will depend on the degree with which the manpower is met with opposition in protecting their interest, values and goals. However, the establishment and continuous existence of organization through the realization of set goals and objectives requires the continuous and effective functioning of its material input with the human element being indispensable.

Azamoza (2004) argued that conflict can help strengthened the organisation and enable the organisation to improve its performance. This paper therefore, focuses on conflict in organisation and ways or strategies that managers can explore in order to resolve it before it hinders the organisation from reaching it goals and objectives.

The effective conflict management will lead to organizational performance, enhances productivity and improve the growth and sustainability of the organisation. Therefore, the objective of this study is to determine the effect of organisational conflict on organisational performance.

The research made use of several relevant literatures review and previous study materials. As an exploratory study, the methodological approach adopted here involves an analytical navigation of what constitute conflict, sources of conflict, views of conflict, consequences of conflict in an organisation and the strategies for dealing with organisational conflict.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This paper is anchored on Contemporary theory which asserted or recognizes that conflicts between human beings are unavoidable. They emerge as a natural result of change and can be beneficial to the organization, if managed efficiently. Kirchoff and Adams (1982) consider innovation as a mechanism for bringing together various ideas and viewpoints into a new and different fusion. An atmosphere of tension, and hence conflict, is thus essential in any organization committed to developing or working with new ideas. From the above theory, the proponents opined that conflicts within organisation is unavoidable and that it can be of immerse benefit to the organisation if the drivers (management) of such organization managed it properly. So the task of managing conflicts within the organisation is solely the responsibility of the leaders in such organisation, they should ensue that they are proactive and innovative in managing and resolving conflict so as to achieve higher employee performance in the organisation.

The Definition of Conflict & Conflict Management

Robbins and Judge (2009) defined conflict as "a process that begins where one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect something that the first party cares about". Darling and Walker (2007) linked this idea to the organization by stating that, even when conflict is a natural phenomenon in social relations (as natural as harmony), it can nevertheless be managed within organizations. Unugbro cited in Osemeke (2001) defined conflicts as people striving for their own preferred outcome, which, if attained, prevent others from achieving preferred outcome, resulting in hostility and breakdown in human relations. Jennifer and Jones (2007) see organizational conflict as the

struggle that arises when the goal-directed behaviour of one person or group blocks the goal-directed behaviour of another person or group. March and Simon (1958) consider conflict as a breakdown in the standard mechanisms of decision making, so that an individual or group experiences difficulty in selecting an alternative. This is a narrow conceptualization of conflict and is not very useful for research purposes. On the broad side, Pondy (1967) has argued that organizational conflict can best be understood as a dynamic process underlying organizational behavior. This is a very broad definition that excludes very little of anything transpiring in a group or individual.

Rahim (2002) opined that conflict management is the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict. The aim of conflict management is to enhance learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness or performance in organizational setting. Properly managed conflict can improve group outcomes (Alpert, Tjosvaldo, & Law, 2000).

Views of Conflict

Vijay (1998) in his work conflict management opined that three distinct views have evolved about conflict in organizations. The traditional view (dominant from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1940s) assumes that conflict is bad, always has a negative impact, and leads to declines in performance as the level of conflict increases. Conflict must therefore always be avoided. In this view conflict is closely associated with such terms as violence, destruction, and irrationality. The response to conflict in the traditional view is to reduce, suppress, or eliminate it. The manager was responsible for freeing the project of any conflict, often using an authoritarian approach. Although that approach worked sometimes, it was not generally effective; when they are suppressed, the root causes cannot be identified, and the potentially positive aspects of conflict cannot emerge. This traditional view of conflict is still widely held because industrial and business institutions that have a strong influence on our society concur with it. This negative view of conflict played a role in the development of labor unions. Violent or disruptive confrontations between workers and management led people to conclude that conflict was always detrimental and should therefore be avoided.

According to Vijay (1998) behavioral or contemporary view, also known as the human relations view, emerged in the late 1940s and held sway through the 1970s. It argues that conflict is natural and inevitable in all organizations and that it may have either a positive or a negative effect, depending on how the conflict is handled. Performance may increase with conflict, but only up to a certain level, and then decline if conflict is allowed to increase further or is left unresolved. This approach advocates acceptance of conflict and rationalizes its existence. Because of the potential benefits from conflict, project managers should focus on managing it effectively rather than suppressing or eliminating it.

The newest perspective, the interactionist view assumes that conflict is necessary to increase performance. While the behavioral approach accepts conflict, the interactionist view encourages conflict based on the belief that a harmonious, peaceful, tranquil, too-cooperative project organization is likely to become static, apathetic, stagnant, and unable to respond to change and innovation. This approach encourages managers to maintain an appropriate level of conflict—enough to keep projects self-critical, viable, creative, and innovative (Olakunle, 2008).

Sources of Organizational Conflict

Jennifer and Jones (2007) opined that conflict, both individuals and between groups, has many sources, and managers need to be aware of them so that when it occurs they can either control or resolve it. The major sources of interpersonal and intergroup conflict according to

them include differentiation, task relationships and scarcity of relationship. These they discusses as follows:

Differentiation – Differentiation implies the grouping of workers and tasks into functions and divisions to produce goods and services. Therefore, the grouping of workers and task within the organisation can cause conflict. Different functions commonly create different orientation towards the organization's major priorities, this is so because their views of what to be done to enhance the productivity and performance of the organisation differs as a result of differences in their task. The differences can cause conflict that does considerable harm because of it undermines group cohesiveness and functional integration and thus lowers the overall performance of the corporation. Again, some divisions within the organisation most times see themselves as vital as others and believe they have a higher status in the organisation, this also lead to conflict within the organisation.

Task Relationship – Task relationships generate conflict between people and groups because organisational tasks are interrelated and affect one another. Overlapping of authority, task independence, and incompatibility evaluation systems may stimulate conflict among functions and divisions. Overlapping authority emanate when two different functions or divisions claim authority for the same task, conflict may ensue. Such confusion often arises when a growing organisation has not yet fully worked out relationships between different groups.

Scarcity of Resources – Competition for scarce resources produce conflict. Conflict over the allocation of capital occurs among divisions and between divisions and corporate headquarters. Budget fights can be fierce when resources are scarce. Other organizational groups also have an interest in the way a company allocates scarce resources. Shareholders care about the size of the dividends. Employees want to maximize their salaries and benefits. Manager in competition for scarce resources may fight over who should get the biggest pay rise (Jennifer and Jones, 2007)

Pondy's Model of Organizational Conflict

One of the most widely accepted models of organizational conflict was developed by Louis Pondy cited in Jennifer and Jones (2007) which viewed conflict as a dynamic process that consists of five sequential stage.
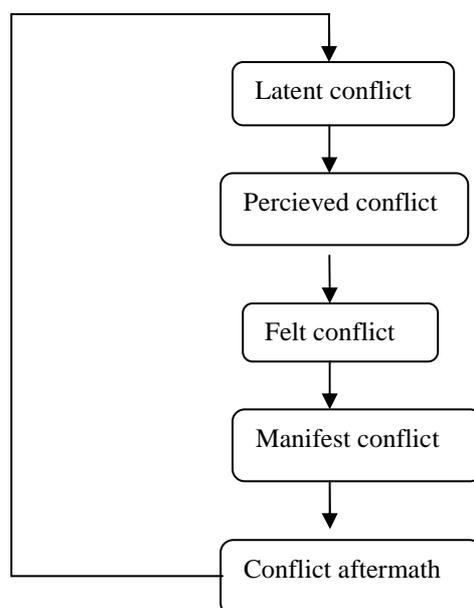
Source: Jennifer & Gareth (2007), Understanding and managing organizational behavior, McGraw-Hill/Irwin.

Latent Conflict – According to Jennifer and Jones (2007), at this stage there is actually no conflict. But the potential to cause conflict is present though hidden.

Perceived Conflict – This is the stage were one party becomes aware that conflict exist as a result of the awareness of the fact that its goals are been thwarted by the action of another party. At this point in time, each party begins to search for the origin and the cause of the conflict, analyze the event that led to the occurrence of the conflict and able to state clearly that conflict exist.

Felt Conflict – At this stage, each party to the conflict develop a negative and hostile feeling against the other party. They develop this attitude of us- versus- them and begin to blame the other group as the cause of the conflict. Now as the party to the conflict argue out their view, it is usually blown out of proportion and conflict ensue.

Manifest Conflict – At the stage haven't felt the existence of conflict, one party decides to react and map out ways of dealing with the party whom they feel is the cause of the conflict. Also, both parties begin to hurt one another and thwart each other goals. Manifest conflict can take the form of open aggressiveness or even violence between people and group may occur.

Aftermath of Conflict – the conflict sooner or later in one way or the other someone get fired and serve as a scarp goat, the organisation reorganize and even fail as a result of the conflict. Every conflict episode leaves a conflict aftermath that affects the way both parties perceive and respond to a future conflict episode. If conflict can be resolve by compromise or collaboration before it reaches the manifest stage, the conflict aftermath will promote good future working relationship. If conflict process is not resolve early enough that will lead to a conflict aftermath that sour the relationship in the organisation and makes people believe that the working culture in the organisation is uncooperative.

Consequences of Organizational Conflict

Conflict in the organization should be either resolved or used beneficially at the interest of the organization. Conflicts can have positive or negative consequences for the organization, depending upon the situation created by the manager as he or she manages and regulates the conflict situation.

Positive Effects of Conflicts

Mgbekem (2004) posited that some conflict positively affect the goal of the group of the organisation and improve its performance. Some of the positive effects of conflict situations are below:

i. Stimulation of a Search for New Facts or Resolutions: When two parties who respect each other face a conflict situation, the conflict resolution process may help in clarifying the facts and stimulating a search for mutually acceptable solutions.

ii. Increase in Group Cohesion and Performance: When two or more parties are in conflict, the performance and cohesion of each party is likely to improve. In a conflict situation, an opponent's position is evaluated negatively, and group allegiance is strongly reinforced, leading to increased group effort and cohesion.

iii. Diffusion of More Serious Conflicts: Games can be used to moderate the attitudes of people by providing a competitive situation which can liberate tension in the conflicting parties, as well as having some entertainment value. In organizations where members participate in decision making, disputes are usually minor and not acute as the closeness of members moderates belligerent and assertive behaviour into minor disagreements, which minimizes the likelihood of major fights.

iv. Assessment of Power or Ability: In a conflict situation, the relative ability or power of the parties involved can be identified and measured.

Negative Effects of Conflicts

Destructive effects of conflicts include: i. impediments to smooth working ii diminishing output iii. obstructions in the decision making process, and iv. formation of competing affiliations within the organization. The total implication of such negative effects is to reduce employees' commitment to organizational goals and organizational efficiency (Kirchoff & Adams, 1982).

Strategies for Managing Conflicts

According to Tosi, Rizzo, and Carroll (1986) there are four ways of managing conflicts, namely:
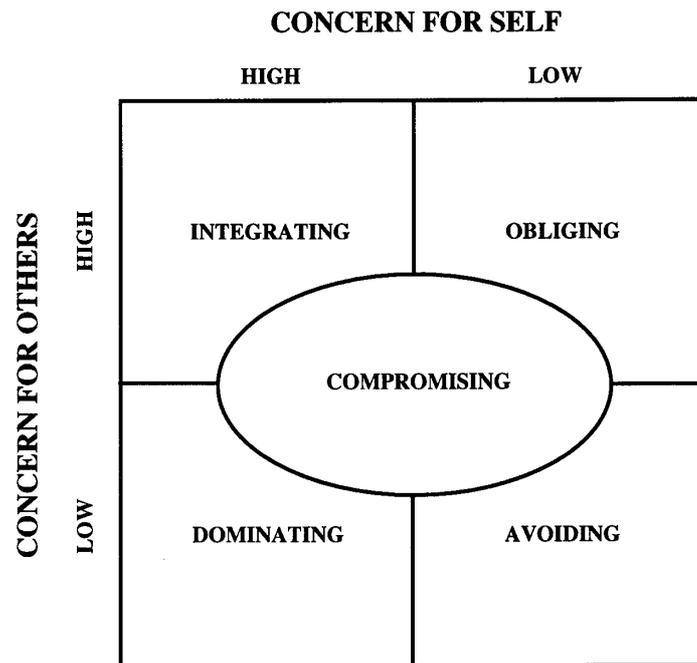
i. Styles: Conflict handling behaviour styles (such as competition, collaboration, compromise, avoidance or accommodation) may be suitably encouraged, depending upon the situation.

ii. Improving Organizational Practices: After identifying the reason for the conflict situation, suitable organizational practices can be used to resolve conflicts, including: establishing super ordinate goals, reducing vagueness, minimizing authority- and domain-related disputes, improving policies, procedures and rules, re-apportioning existing resources or adding new, altering communications, movement of personnel, and changing reward systems.

iii. Special Roles and Structure: *A* manager has to initiate structural changes needed, including re-location or merging of specialized units, shoulder liaison functions, and act as an integrator to resolve conflicts.

iv. Confrontation Techniques: Confrontation techniques aim at finding a mutually acceptable and enduring solution through collaboration and compromise. It is done in the hope that conflicting parties are ready to face each other amicably, and entails intercession, bargaining, negotiation, mediation, attribution and application of the integrative decision method, which is a collaborative style based on the premise that there is a solution which can be accepted by both parties. It involves a process of defining the problem, searching for alternatives and their evaluation, and deciding by consensus.

However, Rahim & Bonoma, (1979) presented a two-dimensional model of the styles of resolving organisation conflict below.

CONCERN FOR SELF

HIGH   LOW

INTEGRATING   OBLIGING

COMPROMISING

DOMINATING   AVOIDING

CONCERN FOR OTHERS

HIGH   LOW

Source: Rahim & Bonoma (1979). Managing organizational conflict: A model diagnosi and intervention, Psychological Reports.

The styles of handling organizational conflict are described as follows:

i. Integrating Style: This style have a high concern for self and others. This style is also known as problem solving. It involves cooperation between the parties (i.e., frankness, exchange of information, and examination of differences to reach an acceptable solution between the two parties. Gray (1989) describes integrating style as collaborating "a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible". Confrontation involves open communication, clearing up misunderstanding, and analyzing the underlying causes of conflict. This is a prerequisite for problem solving, which involves identification of, and solution to, the real problem(s) to provide maximum satisfaction of concerns of both parties.

ii. Obliging Style: This style reveals an element of self-sacrifice. The style indicates low concern for self and high concern for other, which is also known as accommodating. This style is associated with attempting to play down the differences and emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. It may take the form of selfless generosity, charity, or obedience to another party's order. An obliging person neglects his or her own concern to satisfy the concern of the other party. Such an individual is like a "conflict absorber," that is, a "person whose reaction to a perceived hostile act on the part of another has low hostility or even positive friendliness".

iii. Dominating Style: This style indicates high concern for self and low concern for others. This is also known as competing. This style has been identified with a win–lose orientation or with forcing behavior to win one's position. A dominating or competing person goes all out to win his or her objective and, as a result, often ignores the needs and expectations of the other party. Dominating may mean standing up for one's rights and/or defending a position that the party believes to be correct. Sometimes a dominating person wants to win at any cost. A dominating supervisor is likely to use his or her position power to impose his or her will on

the subordinates and command their obedience. A person who does not possess formal position power may wield power by deceit, bluff, bringing in superiors, and so on.

iv. Avoiding Style: This style indicates low concern for self and others. This is also known as suppression. It has been associated with withdrawal, buck-passing, sidestepping, or "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" situations. It may take the form of postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation. An avoiding person fails to satisfy his or her own concern as well as the concern of the other party. This style is often characterized as an unconcerned attitude toward the issues or parties involved in conflict. Such a person may refuse to acknowledge in public that there is a conflict that should be dealt with.

v. Compromising Style: This style indicates intermediate concern for self and others. It involves give - and- take or sharing whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision. It may mean splitting the difference, exchanging concession, or seeking a quick, middle-ground position. A compromising party gives up more than a dominating party but less than an obliging party. Likewise, such a party addresses an issue more directly than an avoiding party but does not explore it in as much depth as an integrating party. Additional insights may be gained by reclassifying the five styles of handling interpersonal conflict according to the terminologies of game theory. Integrating style can be reclassified to a positive-sum on nonzero-sum (win–win) style, compromising to a mixed (no-win/no-lose) style, and obliging, dominating, and avoiding to zero-sum or negative-sum (lose–win, win–lose, and lose–lose, respectively) styles.

Organisational Conflict and Organisational Performance

Hefferman and Flood (2006) stated that as a concept in modern management, organisational performance suffered from problems of conceptual clarity in a number of areas. The first was the area of definition while the second was that of measurement. The term performance was sometimes confused with productivity. Productivity was a ratio depicting the volume of work completed in a given amount of time. Performance was a broader indicator that could include productivity as well as quality, consistency and other factors.

Organisation performance has been the most vital issues for every organisation either profit or non-profit organisation. It is expedient for mangers to know the factors that affect the performance. According to Rivers (2005), the hidden costs of unresolved conflict in organizations are enormous and finding effective ways to manage and resolve organizational conflicts can have a significant impact on productivity and hence organisational performance. However, it is quite difficult in actual sense to measure performance, but in this context performance is taken to be the productivity i.e the relationship between input and output.

Richardo and Wade (2010) argued that performance measures could include result-oriented behaviour (criterion-based) and relative (normative) measures, education and training, concepts and instruments, including management development and leadership training which were the necessary building skills and attitudes of performance management. Hence, from the above, the term 'performance' should be broader based on which include effectiveness, efficiency, economy, consistency behaviour and normative measures (Richardo and Wade, 2010). It is the managers responsibility to identify what could be the possible cause(s) of conflict and resolving them early enough to avoid interference with the performance of individual in the organisation. Performance of an organisation is one of the major indicator which informs stakeholders in any business that the business is doing well and as a result their investment is secured. conflict or unresolved conflict among employees that is not well managed by the manager can affect the organisational performance negatively and the achievement of the goals and objectives of the enterprise. This is in agreement with

Mgbekem (2004) that negative effect of conflict can cause individuals or groups to become hostile and can cause them to withhold information and resources. Henry (2009) posited in his research that positive effect of conflict can improve the quality of decisions, stimulate involvement in discussion and building group cohesion. However, when conflict is not properly managed organisation will not reap the above mentioned advantages of conflict. From the foregoing, it is established that conflict has beneficial effects when managed properly and has negative effects when it is not properly resolved especially among employees. Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in any organisation system and it can come in different forms and it is the duty of the manager to handle it properly.

Conclusion

A manager should manage conflicts successfully rather than restrain or avoid them. For the organization's management team to manage conflict, they need to know the causes of the conflict and the parties involved in other to get to the root of the problem. In the process of manager resolving conflicts, many problems can be identified and solved by removing obstacles and creating a new environment of individual growth. If conflicts are not managed properly, they can be damaging, as they waste a lot of energy and time, and invoke tension, which reduces the productivity and creativity of those involved. On the other hand, when the conflicts are properly managed it can lead to a stronger relationship within the organisation as well as mutual respect for one another. Managers on their part having resolved the conflict efficiently can use the techniques or the approaches adopted to resolve further conflict which might ensue the future.

Recommendation

The paper makes the following recommendations:

i.   Those managers should see conflict as an integral part of human life, hence organizations are made up of human being, conflict situation must be anticipated.
ii.   Manager should not only see conflict as having negative effects on the organization, rather they should know that conflict can also help to strengthen the working relationship in the organization when resolved amicably.
iii.   Managers should identify at all time parties to a conflict and the cause of the conflict before initiating settlement.
iv.   Managers should clearly define the role of each job to prevent overlapping of functions in the organization as this has been found to be the cause of most conflict in recent time.
v.   Managers should face the conflict head longed to resolving it as it is popularly say "he who fight and run away needs to fight another day". That is to say, what they fail to prevent now in the organization can lead to a bigger problem in the future.

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