

Prevalence of Conflicts in Organizations; Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Conflicts are part of human consciousness in all aspects of life. No individual can avoid consequences of institutional conflicts between work and home blurs and organizational disagreement. The complexity of conflict increase as an organization becomes more open and diverse. Organizational conflict also known as work place conflict, is described as the state of disagreement or misunderstandings by individuals or groups within the organization resulting from opposing needs, ideas values or goals. Conflict might escalate and lead to non-productivity, or conflict can be beneficially resolved and lead to quality final products. The main objective of this paper is to assess the prevalence of conflicts in organizations; challenges and prospects. This study adopted content analysis as it's methodology. Based on the content analysis, the major findings are that: conflict is not necessarily good or bad but an inevitable feature of organizational life and should be judged in terms of its effects on performance. Also, as organizational conflict persists, managers face serious challenge as there is low performance, low job satisfaction. From the content analysis it was concluded that it is quite evident that conflicts occur in organizations as a result of competition for supremacy incompatibilities arising from interests, personality issues, job tasks, values, beliefs, differences in background among others. Thus, early detection of conflict and paying attention to the parties in conflict is quite important. Negotiation between parties involved is the best alternative to resolve conflict. Arising from the findings and conclusion of this paper, the following recommendations are made; there should be clear vertical and horizontal communication between managers and employees as well as training and retraining employees regularly on conflict management and resolution procedure.

Keywords: *Prevalence, Conflicts, Organization Challenges and Conflict Resolution.*

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Background to the Study

Conflicts in organization is increasing and its prevalence in the working population is estimated to be 40% (Arends, Baer, Miranda, Pruiz and Singh, 2014). Understanding the prevalent challenges of workplace conflicts is therefore of ultimate importance and previous research points to causes, types of conflicts within the work environment. One potential explanation, which has so far attracted little attention, is the prevalence of organizational conflicts, challenges to managers and prospects. Studies of "conflicts" at work have traditionally focused on conflict management and not the prevalent conflicts and those studying conflict consequences have only focus on the role of conflict resolution for individual or group performance (Susan, Britt-lager and Elin, 2019). These studies suggest that different types of conflict affect team performance in different ways, however, the prevalence, challenges and prospects of organizational conflicts on employee well-being in particular, have been less studied. The lack of integration of research on prevalence, challenges, prospects on the one hand and employee wellbeing on the other hand is remarkable, given that not only is the relationship between conflicts and well-being is intuitively appealing, but also a good percentage of employees on job turnover intention attribute their condition to conflicts at work (Engers, 1995).

Conflict is inevitable among humans. When two or more come in contact with one another in attaining their objectives, the relationships may become incompatible or inconsistent. Relationships among such entities may become inconsistent when two or more of them desire a similar resource that is in short supply. When they have partially exclusive behavioural preferences regarding their joint action, or when they have different attitudes, values, beliefs and skills (Atzalur, 2001).

In the view of Thompson (1998, p4) "conflict is the perception of differences of interests among people". Conflict would also be a process of social interaction involving a struggle over claims to resources, power and status, beliefs and other preferences and desires. The aim of the parties in conflict may extend from simply attempting to gain acceptance of a preference, or securing a resource advantage, to the extremes of injuring or eliminating opponents, Bisno (as cited in Atzalur, 2001). The theme of conflict has been with us and has influenced our thinking from time immemorial.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study is to assess the prevalence of conflicts in organizations; challenges and prospects.

Specific objectives

The specific objectives of this study were:

1. To appraise the scholarly definitions of conflict
2. To identify the various sources of conflict
3. To examine the types of conflicts
4. To assess the Conflict Process
5. To evaluate the prevalence of organizational conflicts;

6. To suggest the various ways through which organizational conflict can be resolved

Review of Literature

Conflict

Conflict has existed with humans in time immemorial. Wilmot and Hocker (2001) and Patza, (2012) define conflict as an antagonistic state of opposition, disagreement or incompatibility between two or more parties. While Conrad (1991) opines that conflict happens as a result of interactions among interdependent people who perceive that their interests are incompatible, inconsistent or in tension. Lewis (1956) defines conflict as the clash of values and interests, the tension between that is and what some groups feel ought to be. In regards to this definition, conflict has systems, technologies, institutions. His contribution is that he determines the functional and dysfunctional roles that can be played by the conflict.

In the same vein, Robbins (2005) defines 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. This definition emphasizes that, conflict is about perceptions, not necessarily real hard facts. Differences among individuals including ideas, goals, values and competition for resources can lead to conflict.

Conflict is now seen as having the potential for positive growth. Deetz and Stevenson (as cited in Bernard and Ashimi, 2014), list three assumptions that indicate that conflict can be positive. Their belief is that management of conflict serves as a more useful conception of the process of conflict resolution. Their assumptions are as follows:

- i. Conflict is natural.
- ii. Conflict is good and necessary; and most conflicts are based in real differences.

Conflict then, can be regarded as a reality of management and organizational behaviour and can be related to power and politics. This paper then interprets conflict as behaviour intended to obstruct the achievement of some other person's goals. It is based on the incompatibility of goals and arises from opposing behaviours. It can be viewed as the individual, group or organizational level.

Common definitions of conflict tend to be associated with negative features and situations which give rise to inefficiency, ineffectiveness or dysfunctional consequences (Mullins, 1999). Conflict is perceived as disruptive and unnatural and represents a form of deviant behaviour which should be controlled and changed. Clearly, extreme cases of conflict in organizations can have very upsetting, or even tragic consequences for some people and have adverse effects on organizational performance. Conflict situations can give rise to excessive emotional or physical stress (Mullins, 1999). Conflict has positive and negative outcomes;

Positive outcomes of conflict include:

- i. Better ideas produced.
- ii. People forced to search for new approaches
- iii. Long-standing problems brought to the surface and resolved

- iv. Clarification of individual views
- v. Stimulation of interest and creativity
- vi. A chance for people to test their capacities.

Negative outcomes include:

- i. Some people feel defeated and demeaned
- ii. The distance between people increases
- iii. A climate of mistrust and suspicious developed
- iv. Individuals and groups concentrate on their own narrow interest.
- v. Resistance develops rather than team work
- vi. An increase in employee turnover (Mullins, 1999 p817 - 818).

Conflict, is not necessarily good or bad but an inevitable feature of organizational life and should be judged in terms of its effects on performance. Even if organizations have taken great care to try and avoid conflict it will still occur. Conflict will continue to emerge despite attempts by management to suppress it.

Sources of Conflict

There are many potential sources of organizational conflict including the main ones summarized below according to Millins (1999),

- i. Differences in Perception:** We all see things in different ways. We have our own unique picture or image of how we see the "real" world. Differences in perception result in different people attaching different meanings to the same stimuli. As perceptions become a person's reality, value judgements can be a potential major source of conflict.
- ii. Limited Resources:** Most organizational resources are limited, and individuals and groups have to fight for their share. The greater the limitation of resources, then usually the greater the potential for conflict.
- iii. Departmentalization and Specialization:** Most organizations are divided into separate departments with specialized functions. Because of familiarity with the manner in which they undertake their activities, departments tend to turn inward and to concentrate on the achievements of their own particular goals. When departments need to co-operate with other, this is a frequent source of conflict. Differing goals and internal environments of departments are also potential source of conflict.
- iv. Nature of work Activities:** Where the task of one person is dependent upon the work of others there is potential for conflict. For example, if a worker is expected to complete the assembly of a given number of components in a week but the person forwarding the part-assembled components does not supply a sufficient number on time.
- v. Role Conflict:** A role is expected pattern of behaviour associated with members occupying a particular position within the structure of the organization. In practice, the manner in which people actually behave may not be consistent with their expected pattern of behavior. Problems of role incompatibility and role ambiguity arise from inadequate or inappropriate role definition and can be a significant source of conflict. Other sources of conflict are; inequitable treatment and violation of territory (819).

Types of Conflicts

It is quite evident to say that conflict is all good or bad is inappropriate.

Whether a conflict is good or bad depends on the type of conflict. Thus Robbins (2003) identifies two types of conflicts – functional or constructive and dysfunctional or destructive.

- i. **Functional Conflict-** is the conflict that supports the goals of the group and improves its (group's) performance. The argument is that if conflict leads to normal competition among groups and the groups work harder and produce more, it is advantageous to the group and the organization. It is viewed as a confrontation between two ideas goals and parties that improves employees and organizational performance. One of the main benefits of constructive conflict is that it gives its members a chance to identify the problems and see the opportunities (Bernard and Ashimi, 2014). Also, it can inspire to new ideas, learning and growth among individuals and groups (Kinicki and Kreitner, 2008).
- ii. **Dysfunctional/Destructive conflict-** is the conflict that hinder group performance. Although conflicts are inevitable and desirable in organizations, but when not, effectively handled conflict can tear relationships apart and; thus, interfere with exchange of ideas, information and resources in groups and between departments (Bernard and Ashimi, 2014).

Dysfunctional conflict hinders and prevents organizational goals from being achieved. This conflict orientation is characterized by competing individual interests, overriding the overall interest of the organization. In such a situation, managers withhold information from one another. Employees sabotage others' work, either intentionally or through subtle, conflict-motivated disinterest in team work (Kinicki and Kreitner, 2008).

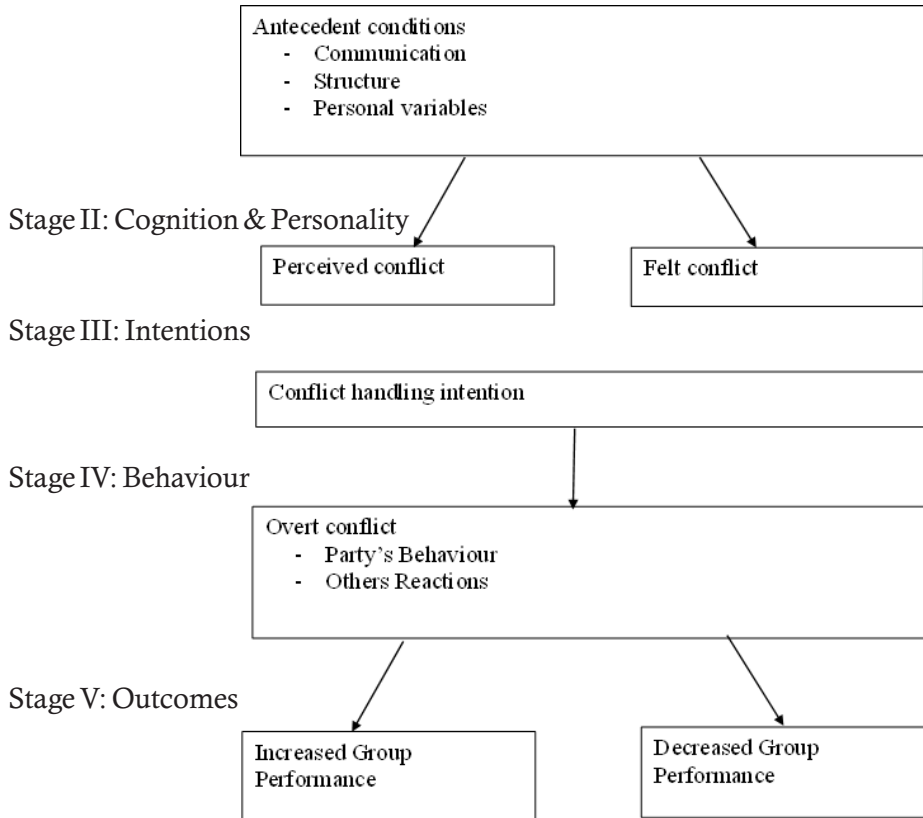
The Conflict Process

Conflict is a process in which one party suggests that its interests are being opposed by another part (Bernard and Ashimi, 2014). As a role, people see only the observable part of conflict angry words and actions of apposition. But this is only a small part of the conflict process (Mcshane and Glinow, 2008). The conflict process consists of five stages (see fig 1)

- i. Potential opposition or incompatibility
- ii. Cognition and personalization
- iii. Intentions
- iv. Behaviour and
- v. Outcome

Figure 1: The Conflict Process

Stage I: Potential opposition or incompatibility



Source: The Conflict Process (Robbins, 2005)

Prevalence of Organizational Conflicts

- i. At least in organizations, there have been repeated reports of organizational conflicts arising from personality, process conflict, task conflict among others. These findings and reports suggest that this context may be particularly prone to developing organizational conflicts which makes it important to examine the prevalence of organizational conflicts.
- ii. There are many types of conflicts in the organization. However, personality conflict by far are likely to be the most challenging.
- iii. **Inter dependent conflict:** In this conflict, a person relies on another else's co-operation, output or input in order for them to get their job done. For instance, a sales person is constantly late in putting the monthly sales figures which causes the accountant to be late with his/ her report.
- iv. **Differences in style:** People's preferred way of completing a job can differ. For example, one person may just want to get work done quickly (task oriented) while another is more concerned about making sure that everyone has a say in how the work gets done (people oriented). When you understand people's differences in style you

can hose down a lot of potential conflict

- v. **Differences in background/gender:** Conflict can arise between people because of differences in educational background, personal experiences, ethnic heritage, gender and political preferences when people learn to accept these differences, be tolerant, understanding and mindful of them, this type of conflict will never arise.
- vi. **Differences in leadership:** Leaders have different styles, employees who change from one leader to another can become confused and irritated by the different leadership styles. For example, one leader may be more open and inclusive whilst another may be more directive.
- vii. **Personality clashes:** These types of conflicts in organization are fueled by emotions and perceptions about somebody else's motives and character. For example, a team leader jumps on someone for being late because he/she shows the team member as being lazy and disrespectful. The team member sees the team leader as out to get him because he is not one of the favoured children.

Other types of conflict that are common in organizations are, task conflict, relationship conflict, and value conflict. Although open communication collaboration and respect will go a long way toward conflict management, the three types of conflict can also benefit from targeted conflict resolution skills.

Task Conflict often involves concrete issues related to employee's work assignment, and can include disputes about how to divide up resources, differences of opinion on procedures and policies, managing expectations at work and judgement and interpretation of facts. Task conflict often turns out to have deeper roots and more complexity than it appears to have at first glance (Millins, 1999). For example, co-worker who are arguing about which one of them should go to and out of town conference may have deeper conflict based on a sense of rivalry.

Relationship Conflict arises from differences in personality, style, matters of taste, and even conflict styles. In organizations, people who would not ordinarily meet in real life are often thrown together and must try to get along. It is no surprise, then, that relationship conflict can be common in organizations.

Value Conflicts can arise from fundamental differences in identities and values, which can include differences in politics, religions, ethnics, norms, and other deep held beliefs. Although discussion of politics and religion is often taboo in organizations, dispute about values can arise in the context of work decisions and policies such as whether to implement an affirmative action programme or whether to take a client with ties to corrupt government.

Dispute involving values tends to heighten defensiveness, distrust and alienation. Parties can feel so strongly about standing by their value that they reject trades that would satisfy other interest they might have. Organizational conflict is a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interest between formal authority and power and those individuals and groups affected (Wikipedia, 2021). There are disputes over how revenues should be divided and how long and hard people should work.

In other words, organizational conflict or workplace conflict is the state of disagreement or misunderstanding resulting from the actual or perceived dissent of needs, beliefs, resources and relationship between the member of the organization

Organizational Conflict Resolution

- i. Task conflict often benefit from the intervention of an organizations` leaders, servings as de facto mediators, managers can focus on identifying the deeper interest underlying parties` positions. This can be done through active listening, which involves asking questions, repeating back what you hear to confirm your understanding, and asking even deeper concerns. Try to engage the parties in a collaborative problem-solving process in which they brain storm possible solutions. When parties develop solutions together, rather than having an outcome imposed on them, they are more likely to abide by the agreement and get along better in future.
- ii. Relationship conflict can be resolved when each employee discovers things they have in common- whether a tie to the same city, children the same age, or shared concern about problems in their organization- may help bring them together. Once they feel comfortable, bring up the source of the tension and focus on listening to the other person's point of view, resist the urge to argue or defend your position. When you demonstrate empathy and interest, he/she is likely to reciprocate. If the conflict persists or worsens, enlist the help or a manager in resolving your differences.
- iii. Value conflict could be resolved by moving beyond demonization towards mutual understanding and respect through dialogue. Aim for a cognitive understanding in which you and your coworker reach an accurate conceptualization of one another's point of view. This type of understanding does not require sympathy or emotional connection, only a "value – neutral" ability to describe accurately what someone else believes about the situation.

In addition, you may be able to reframe a values-based dispute "by appealing to other values that you and your counterpart share", including universal belief. Such equal rights or nonviolence" rather than focusing on the differences in beliefs that precipitate dispute.

Challenges of Organizational Conflict

As organizational conflict persists, managers face serious challenge as there is low performance, low job satisfaction. For instance, managers may be quite undecided about how to deal with conflict (with workers, union). That is likely to result in work stoppage and loss of productivity. The under listed over behavior by employees may pose serious challenges to managers.

- I. Psychological responses
 - a. inattentiveness to other things
 - b. Lack of interest in work
 - c. Job dissatisfaction
 - d. Work anxiety
 - e. Depression
 - f. Work related stress

- II. Behavioral resources
 - a. Excessive smoking
 - b. Alcoholism
 - c. Under eating or over eating
 - d. Aggression toward others to work sabotage
 - e. Lack of interest in communication
 - f. Desisting influence attempts
- III. Physiological responses- these are sometimes ignored or unnoticed
 - a. Peptic ulcers
 - b. Respiratory problem such as asthma
 - c. Hypertension
 - d. Headaches
 - e. Coronary problems

It should therefore be understood that conflict not only challenge an individual's performance, but the organization's productivity. It is worth of note that challenges faced by some managers is lack of training and skill in resolving organizational conflicts. Most of these managers rise to the position because of long years of service not the expertise in handling conflict issues. Again, some managers assume their offices because of the flowering curriculum vitae or having excelled in the interview (Branson, 2004). This, therefore, suggest that managers in organizations should understand the source, strategies and the expertise that can assist them and reducing conflict in the work place.

Prospects of Conflicts

Conflict is good and necessary, conflict at the desired level can inspire creativity when handling issues and resolving conflict. Thus, conflict can be positive in work environments, but whenever a critical or major conflict occurs it should be resolved as the undesired level of conflict can be harmful and dysfunctional for the organization (Leung, 2010).

Conflict may benefit a group`s performance (Robbins, 2005). Dispute happens from time to time and it is not wise to put too much effort in avoiding or preventing conflict. Resolving conflicts means challenging normal processes and procedures in an effort to improve individual productivity or introduce innovative system (Robins, 2003). Constructive conflict gives its members a chance to identify the problems and see opportunities. It can also inspire new ideas, learning, and growth among individuals and groups (Kinicki and kreitner, 2008). With the introduction/establishment of counselling unit in organizations, it is expected that professionally qualified counselors will assist with their skills, strategies and techniques in helping employee resolve conflicts in their organizations.

Findings

Based on content analysis, the major findings are that:

1. Conflict is not necessarily good or bad but an inevitable feature of organizational life and should be judged in terms of its effects on performance.

2. Clearly, extreme cases of conflict in organizations can have very upsetting, or even tragic consequences for some people and have adverse effects on organizational performance.
3. Conflict situations can give rise to excessive emotional or physical stress.
4. As organizational conflict persists, managers face serious challenge as there is low performance, low job satisfaction.

Conclusion

From the content analysis thus far, it is quite evident that conflicts occur in organizations as a result of competition for supremacy incompatibilities arising from interests, personality issues, job tasks, values, beliefs, differences in background, inadequate resources among others. Typically, conflict ensued at College of Health Technology, Calabar-Nigeria in 2017 between the school management and the students: students complained severally about haphazard water and electricity supply in the hostel for over six months. The inability of the school management to yield to their plight made the students to barricade the institutional premises for days. The management in turn ordered for the suspension of all the students with the final year students being asked to leave the hostel forthwith. As a measure to curb the crisis, with the intervention of parents and the school Governing Council the students were requested by the management to write an undertaking respectively never to embark on rampage; on the other hand, the school management provided those amenities that led to the conflict, making it a win-win situation.

Thus, early detection of conflict and paying attention to the parties in conflict is quite important. Negotiation between parties involved is the best alternative to resolve conflict. Though it is impossible to eliminate conflict completely in organizations, managers should try to reduce to the barest minimum and those who strive to manage conflict will typically experience good working experiences, team work, less work stress and benefit from both personal and work satisfaction.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings and conclusion of this paper, the following recommendations are made;

- i. There should be clear vertical and horizontal communication between managers and employees.
- ii. Adequate provision should be made for decision making process.
- iii. Training and retraining of employees should be regularly carried out on conflict management and resolution procedure.
- iv. Participatory, rather than autocratic leadership style should be adopted by managers.
- v. Organizations should evolve right channels of information and communication to avoid rumour mongering in the work place.
- vi. Employee welfare should be a priority for managers.
- vii. Interactions during dialogue should be adhered to during conflict resolution, as decisions imposed on parties in conflict without addressing the issues do not work effectively.

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