BENEFITS OF CONTROLLABLE CONFLICTS AND STRATEGIES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Conflict is a process whereby one party perceives that another party negatively affects, or is about to negatively affects something that the first party wants. Conflicts, as disagreements, are, therefore, unavoidable especially in a democratic setting where arms of government (legislative, executive and judicial) are expected to exercise control over the affairs of government so as to ensure effective check and balance situation and fairness in running the state affairs. Conflicts are, therefore, not altogether bad as they have a lot of advantages, which would suggest that they should be provoked in the event that they appear absent in an organization or in a community. This paper, which is a library research output, discusses the benefits of controllable conflicts in the Nigerian democratic setting, and proposes ways of resolving any conflict amicably in the best interest of the present and future generations of Nigerians. The paper highlights sources of conflicts in this great country and how the rising conflicts should be diplomatically managed as the country derives the benefits of conflicts for achieving sustainable national development. Nigeria, a multi-cultural, multi-religious, muli-lingual (with more than 250 languages), and heavily populated with about 170 million people, deserves peaceful co-existence, and conflict resolution measures are instruments for ensuring the sustainable peace the country dearly needs to ensure sustainable national development.

Keywords: Conflicts, Conflict Resolution, Sustainable Development and Nigeria

Background to the study

Like many other management concepts and principles, conflict enjoys a wealth of literature and attention of academic and practitioners all over the world. It is a concept that has been defined differently by different writers. Ackermann (2003) sees conflict as a behavior by a person or a group that is purposely designed to inhibit the attainment of goals by another person or group. This purposeful inhibition may be active or passive. Conflict could also be defined as a process that begins when one party perceives that another party negatively affects, or is about to be negatively

affecting, something that it cares about (Rahim, 2001). It could also be described as opposition arising from disagreements about goals, thoughts or emotions within or among individuals, teams, departments or organisations (Rahim, 2001).

Conflicts are not altogether bad, especially in democratic dispensation where all the three arms of government (legislative, executive and judicial) are expected to exercise effective check and balance posture in the best interest of the country. Nigeria as a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual country (with more than 250 languages) and heavily populated country (with about 170 million people) cannot live without real and perceived conflicts to contain. Even before and immediately after independence in 1960, there were political conflicts either intra or inter regional; notable among them were conflicts between the north and south over period of attaining independence (1957 or 1960?) and the conflict between Awoists and Akintolas which degenerated and later led to the popular western region crisis of 1963.

However, Nigeria has bitterly experienced the consequences of socio-political conflict (Civil War for example) from 1967 to 1970, dragging the country into 30-month wasteful killings and destruction of properties and other resources. Not very far in Nigerian history, the country experienced the June 12, 1993 Saga (which almost cause the breakage of the country as a free and fair election led by Chief MKO Abiola was annulled by the General Ibrahim Babangida led military government), the Ogonisvs the Federal Government which led to killings and arson in Ogoni land and subsequently to the trial and hanging of nine MOSOP leaders, including Chief SaroWiwa in 1995.

All the above are examples of crisis that resulted from uncontrollable conflicts, out of which the expected benefits of conflict have not been enjoyed by the country. A disagreement between two parties or persons should be immediately managed before it is transformed from conflict to crisis, so that all the expected benefits of conflict could be derived. Conflicts control or resolution has been a long standing problem in Nigeria to the extent that commentators were finding it difficult to differentiate between conflict and crisis in the political, social and economic lives of Nigerians from independence to 1999, when the country returned to civilian rule.

Immediately after the coming of the present democratic dispensation in 1999 various economic, social, political conflicts lightened and reached crises levels in the history of Nigerian existence. There were prolonged and unprecedented crises; communal conflict as a result of dispute over farm lands or boundaries, conflict at governmental level over issues bordering on interpretation and violation of constitutional provisions, bloody religious conflicts over Shari'a and tribal conflict as a result of increasing tribal bigotry. At the level of the parliaments; at national, state and local levels so many conflicts have happened, with some extending to crises level. The concern here is to what extent have the conflicts been controlled to realize their benefits and to what extent have conflict resolution tools been used to achieve the desired results?

Sustainable development is defined by the World Business Commission on Sustainable Development (WCED) in 2002 as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generation. This definition suggests that any economic, social or political achievement whose benefit is restricted to the need of the present generation is contrary to the philosophy of sustainable development, and a serious government would be more concern about the needs of the future generations than those of the present generation. This concern defines the framework for this study.

Objective and scope of the study

This paper discusses the benefits of controllable conflicts to both the public and private sector organizations and the conflict resolution tools to be put to use with a view to managing/controlling conflicts to derive their benefits for ensuring sustainable development of developing nations, like Nigeria. The rest of the presentation is in 5 parts. Part 2 presents main types of conflicts in any setting; part 3 is about sources of conflict; part 4 discusses the benefits/advantages of controllable conflict; part 5 highlights the conflict resolution tools; while part 6 concludes the paper.

Methodology and source of data

Participant observation is the methodology adopted in this study. Mainly, secondary data is used in this study. These include journal articles, documentaries from government, executive reports and press release.

Empirical Literature

Conflicts, as disagreements, could be noted in organizations or country in different forms and arising at various levels in different dimensions. The main types of conflicts noticeable in private and public sector organizations or in a country, like Nigeria, are as follows:

1.   Personal conflict

This is a conflict within an individual, creating a lot of questions internally for an individual to answer to himself or herself (Antonioni, 1998). This situation arises when an individual is uncertain about what work or role he/she is expected to perform or what decision to take or when the individual is expected to do more than he thinks he is capable of doing. Personal conflict can also arise when a person has to choose between two or more desirable goals or alternatives ways of accomplishing a task. Nigerians as politicians, business people, civil servants, security agents, etc carry with them this type of conflict. This conflict is personal and is to be resolved personally. But where that is not possible, the person involved should make consultation with experts for suggestion as to how the conflict is to be resolved. Whether resolved personally or through consultation, the person involved should have derived some benefits from the ensuring conflict.

2.   Interpersonal conflict

This is the conflict between two or more individuals in an organization or community. It is a conflict that arises mainly out of the feeling of superiority complex in power acquisition or exertion of influence. It is often a consequence of personality difference, and it is actually resolvable when it is appreciated that individual differences exist between two or more persons. This type of conflict is all over the place in Nigeria and is not being well managed, so much so that Nigerians don't trust themselves and they don't serve as their brother's keepers! This conflict has the benefit of making the individuals involved to understand one another, to be creative enough in coming up with superior arguments, to contribute towards achieving the organizational goals as they compete in achieving better and superior result on their job and to be well trained and positioned for higher responsibility in the present organization or elsewhere. But where it is not well controlled, the likely benefits would be lost!

3.   Conflict between individuals and organization

This type of conflict often arises because of the way individual's deals with the pressure for conformity imposed on them by their organization (Cai and Fink, 2002). For example a football team coach may instruct his team as regards the style/system the players should adopt to win, but a team member or members may think an alternative style/system is better. It is expected that every member of a team or an organization would abide by the principle of teamwork, which demands dropping personal aspiration and adopting the team's or organization's aspiration for success to be achieved by the team or organization.

Where individuals insist on their personal goals and aspirations over the organization's goals/systems, then harmful conflict is eminent. What is expected is that the individuals having contrary policy to the adopted policy of the team/organization should try to convince the team to effect some changes so that better results could be obtained. If that is not possible, then they have to bear with the adopted position until they leave the organization. Unfortunately, this type of conflict is on the high side in Nigeria and its control level is too low, making loyalty to the country as a whole to be very weak. The conflict is so uncontrolled that Nigeria is rendered an orphan, since most Nigerians prioritize their religious, tribe, region and pockets to the country.

4.   Inter-group conflicts

These are conflicts that happen between one community and another, one country and another, one form and another or between employees union and management of an organization. They are conflicts that arise as a result of disagreement over some policies, regulations, ownership of some assets or rights or on way of life. This conflict is the cause of most crises and internal wars in multi-religious, multi-ethnical, multi-tribal and multi-cultural societies, like Nigeria. Too many unresolved conflicts between Southern and Northern Nigeria, between the six gio-political zones in the country, between the 36 states of the federation, etc.

A lot of benefits are derivable from these types of conflicts if well managed and utilized! The unfortunate thing is that they are allowed to easily metamorphose into crises, due mainly to the high level of poverty and ignorance in the country, which fuel the conflicts to look like crises to the extent that destruction of lives and properties would be the end result!

General Sources of Conflict

Many reasons or factors usually could be sources of conflict between individuals, groups, organizations or nations. These sources could be summarized as follows:

1.   Difference in Perception: People or groups see the same thing and yet attach different meanings to it, thus a potential for conflict (Kapusuzoglu, 2010). This source of conflict is very pronounced in Nigeria, at all levels.

2.   Departmentalization and Specialization: Works in organizations are divided into separate departments with specialized functions. Departments, therefore, concentrate inwardly on their own goals. The need for departments to cooperate with each other leads to conflict. For example, the concept of separation of powers in democracy and/or committees in the parliament provides for the separation and independent role and functions of units and committees. This source of conflict is adopted in the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria, which emphasizes the need for check and balance among the three arms of government (executive, legislative and judicial arms).

3.   Limited Resources: Human needs are unlimited but the resources to satisfy them are limited. Limited resources make individuals, groups, and committees struggle to maximize their share of limited resources for themselves or their constituencies, this leads to conflict. The more limited the resources, the greater the potential for conflict. In Nigeria, budgeting process is not actually serving as means of managing scarcity and ultimately controlling conflicts.

4.   Overlapping Authority: If two different members, committees, or divisions claim authority for the same task, conflict may develop (Rahim, Magner and Shapiro, 2000). Leaders should be meticulous and vigilant over members' responsibilities and the way they discharge them. In Nigeria, conflicts arise among the three arms of government and among the three-tiers of government (federal, state and local government), apart from the conflicts arising from the disagreements among some authoritative commissions, agencies, committees, etc.

5.   Inequitable Treatment: There will be conflict when a member perceives unjust treatment in polices, reward and punishment in the operations of the organization. This source is a very prominent source of conflicts in Nigeria, as injustice appears on the high side in various sectors of the Nigerian economy.

6.   Communication Problem: According to Cupach and Canary (1997) competence is needed in communication for avoidance of uncontrollable conflict and for resolving conflict. Poor or lack of communication between members or committees can breed suspicion, mistrust and, therefore, create conflict. Means/channels of communication are limited in some organizations in Nigeria, thereby encouraging gossips, rumor-mongering, back-stabbing etc. Communication gap is a cause of most organizational crisis in Nigeria.

Benefits Derivable from Controllable Conflict
It is important to note that conflicts are often linked to some negative signs which suggest that conflicts are always bad. The fact is that only dysfunctional or uncontrollable conflicts are bad and, so, undesirable. Leaders in any society, firm or nation are expected to take control measures that would immediately ensure the non-occurrence of the following negative signs as a result of the existence of any of the four types of conflicts discussed above:

1.   The distance between parties is increased. Controllable conflict should assist in closing ranks among individuals and parties in an organization or country.
2.   Some people feel defeated and demeaned. Controllable conflict should lead to a win-win situation after trashing out disagreement intellectually or professionally.
3.   A climate of mistrust and suspicion is developed. Controllable conflict should amount to better understanding and trust among the individuals and groups involved.
4.   Individuals and groups concentrate on their own interests. Controllable conflict would ensure sacrifice of personal goal and aspiration and adoption of the organizational goals and aspiration, which would ultimately aid the achievement of personal aspiration.
5.   Resistance develops rather than teamwork. Controllable conflict would lead to solid teamwork and respect for one another.
6.   An increase in employee turnover. Controllable conflict would make employees to feel that they would be losing and missing a lot if they leave the organization from where they enjoy high degree of job satisfaction. This would make employee turnover to be very low.

Specifically, the positive outcomes expected from controllable conflicts are as follows:
A.   Better ideas are produced: As disagreements are brought to discussion table and trashed out, the conflicting individuals or parties would put forward some powerful arguments to support their positions, and through these discussions a lot of useable ideas could be generated in the best interest of the organization or country. What is required is

for the viewpoint of every individual or group involved to be appreciated, but the superior point is to be declared the humble winner and the less superior point the gallant loser.

B.   Long-standing problems brought to the surface and resolved: As disagreements are discussed, problems among the individuals and groups involved would be brought to the surface and solutions to them found collectively. As problems are solved, enmity, hatred and jealousy would be dealt with or minimized, thereby creating peaceful co-existence in the organization of country.

C.   People are forced to search for new approaches: As conflicts are deliberated on, every party involved has to search for new approaches of doing things so as to justify why it is disagreeing with the exiting approaches. If you disagree with option A, then you have to propose option B and justify why it is better than option A!

D.   Stimulating interest and creativity: Conflicts as mainly products of disagreements should lead to creativity as issues are argued out and interests are defended. Parties and individuals involved must be creative thinkers and interests defenders for them to win the ensuring dialogues or debates that are to be initiated with a view to successfully controlling the conflicts.

E.   Clarification of individual views: Conflict control or management gives room/opportunity for individuals to clarify their views, which might have been misunderstood before the opportunity. Instead of individuals or parties holding grudges against others, these grudges should be expressed and explained. With tis a better understand would be ensured among the individuals or parties involved.

F.   A chance for people to show their capacities: Conflicts creates the opportunity for people to show the talents in them and the capacity for them to bring about some positive results if given the right opportunity. As disagreements are dialogued or discussed commentators would be easily noted in respect of what they could do to move the organization or country forward. Constitutional conferences, national conferences, Oputa panel, and other conflict resolution dialogues in Nigeria have exposed the capabilities of some Nigerians who later were assigned responsibilities based on their identified talents.

Conflict Resolution Strategies

Conflict handling techniques are many, some of which are discussed below:

i.   Compromise: Compromise usually involves bargaining and negotiation between parties in the conflict to reach a solution that is acceptable to both (Baron, 1994; Agha and Robert, 2002). It is an attempt to arrive at consensus. Each party achieves some results/ends and at the same time sacrifices some other results/ends. It is a win/win strategy.

ii.   Collaboration: Sometimes the parties in conflict use collaboration to find a solution. Here each party aims to satisfy not only his/her own goals but also the goals of the other party. Collaboration can benefit an organization because the parties work together to find a solution that leaves them both better off. In collaboration the behavior of the parties is aimed at solving the problem, at clarifying the differences rather than accommodating various points of view. Because the solution sought is advantageous to all parties, collaboration is often thought of as win/win approach, a sort of strategic alliance.

iii.   Accommodation: This is a style of handling conflict in which one party simply allows the other to achieve his/her goals (Zhenzhong, 2007). This technique is usually resorted to by the weaker party in the conflict situation. Usually the weaker party allows the conflict to die down at his/her own disadvantage for things to return to normalcy. In other words, the weaker party places his/her opponent interest over and above his/her own interest, and in the long run the weaker party would realize some benefits.

iv.   Avoidance: In avoidance strategy parties refuse to recognize the real source of the problem and behave as if there was no problem. In other words, the parties smooth over the conflict. Again, avoidance could occur when a party to conflict avoids any contact or interaction with the other party. For example, this could be achieved through separation of the parties involved through transfer or change of department.

v.   Competition: Competition is a vehicle to efficiency and effectiveness. In competition, each party is looking out for his/her own interests without taking the other's needs into account. It involves the outright use of influence, position power or any power base to make the other party to give in. This technique creates a win-lose situation where the loser is forced to give way to the stronger party (Agha, and Robert, 2002).

Policy Implications

The implications of the use of the above strategies are many. In an attempt to resolve conflict the parties involved should note that all the techniques are good depending on the situation. There is no one best strategy of resolving or managing conflict at all situations and times, especially in the democratic Nigeria. However, when a conflict is handled competitively, or when accommodation is typically a style of handling conflict, one implication is obvious: the conflict can escalates or probably resurface shortly after resolving it. Therefore, the choice of an appropriate conflict handling method should be dependent on the prevailing circumstances.

Some important tips for effective resolution or management of conflict in Nigerian organizations should be noted. According to Gross and Guerrero (2000); Cetin and Hacifazlioglu (2004); and Ramarajan, Bezrukova, Jehn, Euwema and Kop (2004), the following issues are to be borne in mind while resolving conflicts:

a   commitment and concern for peace and progress must be shown by all the parties involved;

b   effective leadership (leaders, followers, tasks and situations) is needed for true conflict resolution;

c   listening, assertion, negotiation, and mediation are approaches to be emphasized as dialogues are held to resolve conflicts in Nigeria;

d   clear definition of roles and responsibilities of all the parties involved must be made;

e   effective communication among members, closing all gaps that might create misunderstanding;

f   spirit of teamwork and ownership among members; and

g   due process and rule of law to be respected in the course of resolving the conflict.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conflict is part of all human associations, and therefore, one should not dream of a conflict-free organization. In fact where it appears non-existence, conflict should be provoked. The job of leaders in public and private sector organizations is to prevent conflicts from going beyond certain limits (moderate levels); they should not be allowed to metamorphose into crises or wars which could lead to destruction of lives and properties. Thus conflict should be seen as a way to improve all decision making and resource allocation to increase efficiency and effectiveness in delivering high quality services to beneficiaries. For Nigeria to make any headway and achieve sustainable development, the country's sources of conflicts should be clearly identified, appropriate conflict resolutions tools applied to solve all identified conflicts and all the benefits of conflict derived and put to effective use in running the national affairs.

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